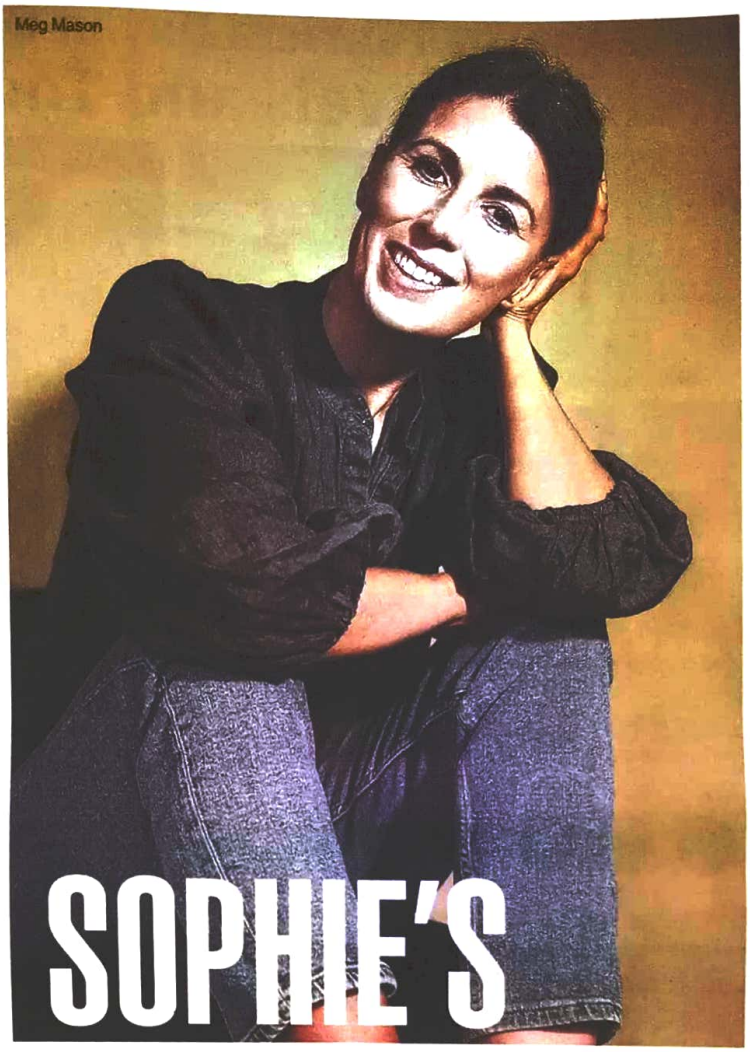

Meg Mason

SOPHIE'S VOICE

Author **Meg Mason** opens up about her new contemporary novel, *Sophie, Standing There*

It's the opening setting of Meg Mason's *Sophie, Standing There* that formed the introductory pull for us. Chances are you will also be drawn to it as a regular literary festival enthusiast whose attention drifts momentarily from the author on the stage to someone standing at the wing's edge and managing it all. However, the New Zealand-born author, who has worked as a freelance journalist, holds onto your attention with Sophie, who is relatable, believable, and could be anyone you know — struggling on the personal front, managing challenges at work, and yet surviving.

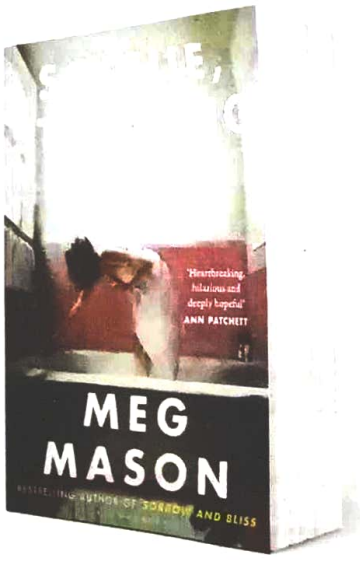
It is survival and hope that anchor our lives, and it is the same case with Meg's extremely contemporary novel that chronicles somewhat similar territory to her 2020 novel *Sorrow and Bliss*, which won the British Book Awards Fiction Book of the Year in 2022. It was also shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2022 and the Australian Book Industry Awards Fiction Book of the Year in 2021.

Meg, who started her literary career with a memoir, *Say It Again in a Nice Voice*, started off by talking about the switch from journalism to authorship and how it all came to her as a big surprise, because she had never planned it. "It's all like how one of Ernest Hemingway's famous quotes goes: 'gradually, and then suddenly'. The scope of change shook me," said the Sydney-based author.

Giving a little background to her surprise, she shared: "When I look back at my childhood and my 20s, I can see that it was something I didn't know even about myself, because I wasn't a reader. We lived in a tiny, tiny, small town in New Zealand, and I don't even remember there being a library. There definitely wasn't a bookshop. I didn't meet an author until I was probably interviewing as a journalist, maybe like at the age of 35. So, before *Sorrow and Bliss*, I'd never had a social conversation with an author before. It feels like it's come out of nowhere. But in the other sense, you know, when you look back, you realise your subconscious was driving you towards something the entire time."

Though things weren't planned, Meg refuses to let luck take all the credit. She clearly distinguishes between luck and fortune and attributes her success to hard work. She also believes that not giving credit to oneself is something that women do and urges womenfolk to relinquish the habit. "I think it's a female thing to put any success down to good luck and just to say, oh, I was really lucky. And that's the one thing that I won't do because I've been very fortunate. I don't know if there's much of a true distinction between lucky and fortunate, but for me, fortunate means meeting the right people who could help me, like a good editor or a resourceful person. There are ways in which I'm really fortunate, but I don't see it as the product of good luck. If you're in the right place at the right time, it's because you've put yourself there. If I wasn't there because I'd quit the million times that I wanted to quit, no good luck would have come my way. I hope it never sounds arrogant because I know I've been helped along the way, but it is that thing I think women are always in: to be humble all the time."

Meg has written on a variety of subjects and has worked for different publications, including *Vogue, Lawyers Weekly* magazine and a kids' magazine, over the years. While journalism taught her discipline and economy of language, it also helped her take a plunge into the world of fiction.



"I think that as a journalist, you learn absolute economy of language. You don't have time to be florid and descriptive. You're only as good as your last piece. You have no choice but to meet that deadline, and that's real. It's not shifting for you. So, there's extreme discipline that goes into it. There's a hundred thousand words difference between journalism and writing fiction. Also, people often ask a freelancer: 'How do you find the discipline?' All I say is there's no luxury to it in that regard. It's really hard work, except you apply for a job like four times a week instead of once every 10 years. But it trained me in doing my best fiction. I'm being my least performative; I'm being as plain as possible in my language. And even though Sophie is different, it's just plain in a different way," said Meg, whose latest read examines loneliness, views life from a contemporary lens and uses humour to strip its maroon tone.

She also shares how the longevity of a story in fiction, as compared to journalism, gives her a sense of purpose. "Most of the stuff that I've written doesn't even exist online, which is fine. You write it, and the next day it's gone. Whereas this (books) does. You write a book, and it exists for as long as books will ever exist. And long after the book is written, when it is released somewhere else or when we discuss that book or the character again, it starts a new life. And that amazes me," said Meg, who took five years to write *Sophie, Standing There*, a novel about a freelance sound technician for literary festivals, who is recovering from a bad divorce and attracted to an author.

WHEN I LOOK BACK AT MY CHILDHOOD AND MY 20S, I CAN SEE THAT IT WAS SOMETHING I DIDN'T KNOW EVEN ABOUT MYSELF, BECAUSE I WASN'T A READER. WE LIVED IN A TINY, TINY, SMALL TOWN IN NEW ZEALAND, AND I DON'T EVEN REMEMBER THERE BEING A LIBRARY. THERE DEFINITELY WASN'T A BOOKSHOP. I DIDN'T MEET AN AUTHOR UNTIL I WAS PROBABLY INTERVIEWING AS A JOURNALIST, MAYBE LIKE AT THE AGE OF 35

The plot and the character have been a relatable hook for readers in the UK and, describing her experience with *Sorrow and Bliss*, she shares: "I was amazed not just by how many people remembered it, but some people read it more than once or that they read it whenever they break up with someone or when they fight with their siblings. It's incredible to me that people haven't just read it, but that it's become something that's a little bit of a touchstone for them in a way that I could never reach people in journalism that way."

Meg moves to throw more light on Sophie, who is a culmination of a lot of people she has met as an author. Sophie also shares a few traits of Meg, and elaborating on her protagonist, she said: "Sophie is people that I've observed and got to meet as an author. And Sophie was kind of there — adjusting my mic or telling me where to stand on stage or getting me ready in some way. She's all of those people. But she's also me in some sense. She's a latecomer to reading and she had a very strict religious upbringing. Those are all things that I sort of put in there for myself."

Meg also informs that Sophie was a reaction to her previous novel. "The character in my previous novel was a complicated, dry, sometimes spiky, quite obedient, formally educated woman. Sophie's the opposite of that. She's kind, lovely, and she's just trying to be happy and trying to help other people be happy," said Meg, who enjoys the time when she is out promoting a book and meeting her readers as much as when she is writing.

Meg is excited for her India tour, during the literary meet festivals starting in January, and to meet a new readership. "I'm just thrilled because I had literally no idea, as a product of not being on social media, that there was an audience for *Sorrow and Bliss* in India. But now that I have met some lovely people who've read it, I can't wait. The idea that my work is kind of advanced so much beyond my own world is an amazing feeling," signed off Meg.

— Farah Khatoon