

Tara June  
WINCH

# Losing my rock

Australian author Tara June Winch was putting the finishing touches to her long-awaited, mesmerising new novel when tragedy struck the very heart of her family, she tells **Juliet Rieden**.

**T**here's a rock outside a house in Woonona, Wollongong, NSW, that author Tara June Winch visits when she wants to connect with the old days. It used to sit outside the house where she grew up and while bricks and mortar have since been rebuilt into a fancy home she barely recognises, the rock remains. "Dad put it there when we were kids, this massive sandstone rock."

It's been a long time since any of her family lived here but this monumental chunk of Aussie sand and quartz witnessed Tara's childhood, the happy times and the struggles. And it is here she found herself recently when suddenly, completely out of the blue, her brother, Billy, died, aged just 39.

Tara, 35, is the youngest of four children raised by "English-Irish" Michelle and proud Wiradjuri man Matthew. "I was at the bottom of the rung looking up, trying to catch up. The youngest who annoys everyone. They say 'it's ridiculous that she's a writer' and all those kinds of things," she says with a gentle smile.

Tara's debut novel *Swallow the Air* catapulted this deeply intuitive and inquisitive writer to international literary fame when she was a single mum and just 22. She won a slew of awards and the book, a poetic and important tale of two siblings and a search for Aboriginal identity in contemporary Australia, has been on the HSC syllabus since 2009.

Although Tara now lives in France with her daughter, Lila, and French husband Arnaud, an IT manager, her second novel, which has taken some 10 years to write, is all about Australia, reclaiming roots and specifically native Indigenous language. It's another mesmerising tour de force, throwing a spotlight on Australia's broken heart, and as we talk, it's clear Tara's heart is also broken.

Billy was the sibling Tara was closest to and the loss of him, a matter of months ago, is tearing her apart. "My other two siblings are my blood cousins on my dad's side. They were taken in by my parents. Tania is much older than me and Andrew was the same age as Billy, but he had paranoid schizophrenia when he was 15 – I would have been 10 or 11 when it happened – and so I felt like I lost Andrew in a lot of ways. But Billy was so important to me."

We are having breakfast in a smart cafe in the heart of Sydney's CBD. Tara is on a fleeting visit from her home outside Nantes in France, and as she cups her hands around a steaming coffee, she takes me back to the neighbourhood where she and Billy ran around as children, and to that rock.

"It was a really strange street," she explains. "On one side there were big double storey houses with nice driveways, like a really posh housing estate; on the other side were million-dollar

**"Billy was so important to me ... his heart just stopped"**

beachfront houses; and then there was this little strip of Housing Commission where we grew up. When I was a teenager, I was so angry that we didn't stay in that house and for a long time I would go back there and

throw rocks in the window."

Woonona Beach is where Tara and Billy would spend hours running around, swimming and playing. "So much of our childhood was all along that coastline," she says, lost for a moment in the memory. "A few days after Billy passed, we were going from beach to beach to write his name in the sand and all the flowers that were being sent to us, we were putting the petals on the beach with his name and just sitting. Then I just disappeared. Mum knew a little space was required. Mum's partner said, 'Where is she?' and Mum knew I would go back to the old house."

"I knocked on the door. This young guy answered. He looked like someone who would be friends with my brother – this happy, healthy guy, who had his shirt off and his daughter came running into his arms. I said, 'I grew up in this house; can I sit on the rock out the front?'"

Billy, a carpenter and father of three, died from a heart attack while he was a volunteer working for the NSW State Emergency Services helping out following a storm in Wollongong. "It was his dream to be in the army and cadets but he'd never passed his

medical and he'd just got into the SES not long before, which was like a dream come true. He wanted to give so much to the community but he also wanted to serve. A tree had fallen on a house and he was with a crew and then his heart just stopped. He fell to the ground." →



Clockwise from top: Tara working on her novel at the Booranga Writers' Centre; Billy was happy and healthy; Billy, Andrew and Tara celebrate their dad's birthday; Tara and Arnaud with Lila at their wedding.



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## Exclusive

In *Swallow the Air* there is a character called Billy who, like Tara's brother, was born with a hole in his heart. "I wrote about that delicate element of Billy because he was so strong and powerful and competent and this archetypal man, but we were always aware that his heart was this fragile thing inside this muscular body. He had a big scar down his chest from where he had open heart surgery when he was a baby. Later he had a pacemaker fitted to regulate his heartbeat. But he never smoked or drank, and was so healthy and active and positive. Everyone really loved Billy."

In her new novel, *The Yield*, there is a real sense of family and of the culture she and Billy had deep inside them, a culture Tara senses is in danger of disappearing. Her central character, August Gondiwindi, returns home for the burial of 'Poppy' Albert. Then, in Prosperous on Massacre Plains, August discovers that her town is about to be handed over to a mining company, and as she joins the battle to save her ancestral land she discovers the stories of her people written in his native language by Poppy.

"It's a sort of clarion call to recognise Indigenous language in Australia. I would like *The Yield* to have a home with all readers, as a novel foremost, a story of the love of the family and the power of language – Indigenous language, colonial language, racist language, bigoted language, religious language – and how the oppressed and exploited of the earth can self-determine their future through connection to culture and country. It's a decolonising book, my Wiradjuri characters get to reclaim themselves, literally in their own words, and that's important. It would be amazing if Indigenous languages were taught in all Australian schools, that would be the ultimate goal of this book."

Tara would love her daughter Lila, who is fluent in French and English, to learn the Wiradjuri language and connect more with her heritage. Tara's own parents split up when she was nine and her father, Matthew, recently decided to return to live quietly alone



**“It would be amazing if Indigenous languages were taught.”**

on the land. "The character of Albert is a mix of my grandfather on mum's side, who passed away a couple of years ago; and he's got elements of my dad," says Tara, who explains her father is currently camping with a caravan and his dog.

"I talked to him just yesterday. He's completely happy and he always wanted that. He always wanted to be in the bush. He loves going in the bush. When we were kids we went camping all the time and bushwalking. In *The Yield*, that element of nature and the land is a sense of my huge respect and awe and reverence for the landscape. That came easily because my dad instilled that, for sure. He loves

Australia, he loves the land, he would never leave the country, he's never been overseas before."

I sense that elemental passion for her country in Tara also and, while she enjoys her life in the French countryside, the author admits that she hopes to return to live in Australia at some point in the future. "I ring my nanna pretty much every day just to talk about the weather, what she's been up to, or the flowers, how the garden's going. I'm always wanting to still feel like I'm there, that I'm just down the road giving her a call. I really miss Australia, I love Australia, and it's such a yearning."

First though I suspect she needs to persuade her husband, Arnaud. "He wants to stay in France," she laughs. "He loves Australia and he's Australian in a lot of ways, he's really outdoorsy and sporty, he's a lot like Billy, actually." **AWW**



*The Yield* by Tara June Winch, published by Hamish Hamilton, is on sale from July 2.