

If I Should Lose You

Natasha Lester

About the Book

If I Should Lose You is the story of Camille, a nurse who counsels families of the recently deceased to give up organs to save the lives of others.

Camille's mother is Alix, a brilliant heart-transplant surgeon, who dies when Camille is a young child. Her father is Dan, a successful and talented sculptor, who dies before Camille is born.

The legacy of Alix's love for her husband ripples through Camille's life as she, like her mother before her, struggles to find a balance between a professional life and motherhood.

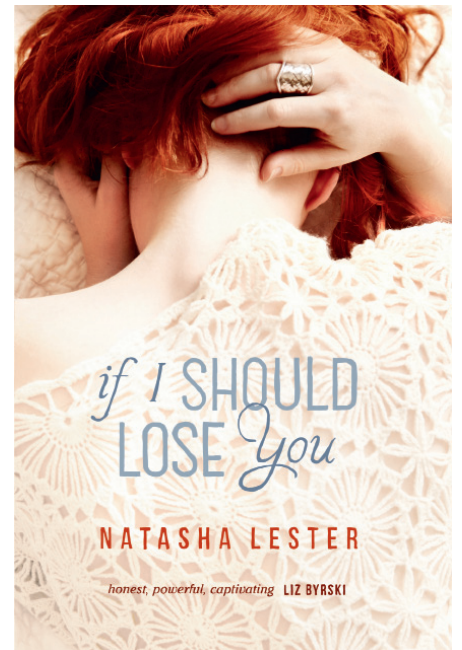
Some things appear to have come more easily to Alix than they do now to her daughter Camille. Alix's love for Dan, and later the artist Jack Darcy, appears to have been one of high romance lived in an elevated, artistic sphere, whereas Camille's love for her own husband Paul has become submerged in the minutiae of domesticity. But it is difficult for Camille to tend to her own faltering marriage, or her unresolved feelings about a mother long gone, when her three year old daughter Addie is gravely ill, and requires a liver transplant if she is to survive.

By way of escape, Camille agrees to curate a retrospective exhibition of artistic representations of her mother by Dan and by the sculptor Jack Darcy. This point of refuge leads to some painful truths and, invariably, a new way of seeing.

If I Should Lose You is a delicate, heart-rending book set in difficult moral terrain. Told with a true storyteller's lightness of touch, it weighs the subtleties and dichotomies of love and science, children and careers, and the clear-sightedness demanded of the medical professional versus the desperate blindness of one's heart's desire.

About the Author

Natasha Lester's debut novel *What is Left Over, After* was longlisted for *The Australian/Vogel's* Literary Award, was a finalist in the Maj Monologues Competition and won the T.A.G. Hungerford Award for Fiction. Her short stories and poems have been published in collections including *The Kid on the Karaoke Stage*, and in journals such as *Wet Ink* and *Overland*. Natasha divides her time between writing novels, raising three children and teaching creative writing. Natasha was recipient of an Allen & Unwin Varuna Publisher Fellowship in 2010. *If I Should Lose You* is her second novel.



From the Author

If I Should Lose You is a book about organ donation and about ways in which we might relate to art. It is also a book about storytelling and the meaning of love. Did you begin by intending to write about each of these things, or did some of these elements evolve as you wrote your story down?

It began by being a book about organ donation, and the other themes evolved as the characters developed. I read a newspaper article about organ donation and began to think about heart transplantation in particular – we so strongly link hearts to love but what might it be like to take a heart, the symbol of love, out of one body and place it into another? And how might you view love if that was your job?

Given that such a strong focus of the book was on bodies and what the body represents, the art theme was obvious. Sculpture gave me another way to look at the symbolism of the body and its parts.

And I wanted to write a love story. When I look at my favourite books, they all have a love story as a central element. But I wanted it to be more than a romantic, idealistic love story. So I used the different kinds of love that Alix and Camille find in their lives to develop a more complex idea of what love is or might be. And Camille's relationship with her daughter is yet another kind of love and I wanted to see how maternal love and romantic love might be the same, and might be different.

Have you any medical background? If not, how difficult was it to get the medical lexicon and lifestyle to the front of your mind? And what research did you do to achieve such a seamless result?

I have no medical background. I have a marketing degree and a creative writing degree and we studied very little medicine in those degrees!

I flew to Sydney and met with doctors and nurses at St Vincent's Hospital for my research and gave them a copy of my first book in exchange for information – I'm not sure it was a very fair exchange; I think I probably got more out of it than they did.

I was a little nervous doing the research at first because I wondered whether people who spent their time saving lives would be at all interested in talking to an author. But they were, and they were very generous with their time and the information they shared.

I was especially lucky to meet a female heart transplant surgeon – there are only six in Australia – and I was able to talk to her about not just the details of her job, but also how she managed her life when she worked with such intense focus for such long and demanding hours. She has two children and whenever I complain about balancing writing with the needs of my children I think about her and what an amazing job she does.

Did you have particular or strong views on organ donation before you wrote this book? Did writing the book change these?

I generally believed organ donation to be a positive thing but I knew very little about it. Writing the book made me see how important it is to let your family know what your wishes are so that they can be followed if anything unexpected happens. It is the nurses in the ICU who have to compassionately manage grieving families, while at the same time trying to help those who might benefit from donated organs, whose jobs we make easier if we let people know how we feel about organ donation.

Some aspects of the novel will be confronting to the reader, particularly for mothers/parents, especially in its exploration of the moral dilemmas surrounding the lengths one might go to in order to save the life of one's child (though I think you handle this sensitively and well!). Has motherhood altered your perspective on life, and on the things you write about now?

It has altered both my perspective on life and the things I write about. Becoming a mother has taught me more about being selfless than any other experience has. I think that the feelings a mother has for her children are some of the strongest feelings that exist and I like to explore those feelings in my writing.

I think that when children are frightened or ill they cling to their mothers more and this can be both a demanding and a lovely thing. I also think that, at those times, feelings of love can be pushed to their very extreme edge and it is these intensities of emotion that I try to unravel in the book – to see how someone might behave in relation to someone they love when they are pushed to their emotional limits.

Both here and in your first novel, What is Left Over, After, storytelling itself is a conscious process, and the assembling of stories integral to your plot. What do you see as the role of storytelling in the way we make sense of the world?

Storytelling is something we encounter when we are very young, when we curl up in our mother's lap and hear her voice and see the pictures on the pages that she turns for us. So I think it's a really important part of who we are and how we think.

Storytelling helps us to imagine – to explore in our minds other experiences, other lives, other possibilities, and this is something that all of the characters in *If I Should Lose You* do at some point. The ability to imagine and to tell stories about our lives helps us to understand the things that happen to us – it also helps us to work out where our limits are. I think Camille recognises this but perhaps Alix becomes lost in the stories she creates for herself about her life and her loves. So it can be both a blessing and a burden – it can help us make sense of our lives or it can, if taken too far, take over our lives.

Are the visual arts something you have a special interest in? Can you discuss this?

My mother will assure you that I am in no way artistic – although my children very kindly tell me that I do beautiful drawings! I love art though and there is nothing better than a quiet walk through a gallery looking at pieces that stretch the imagination in the same way that a good book can.

I suppose I just like the way that art can approach some of the themes I look at in my writing in a different way. In *What is Left Over, After*, photography was an important part of the story because it helped to provide a metaphorical context for the way Gaele, the main character, viewed her life and the people in her life.

In *If I Should Lose You*, where the idea of what the soul might be is a key part of the book, I could have just focused on the physical body and whether a spiritual body is a part of that. But using sculpture and painting allowed me to dig a bit deeper with that idea, to show how art can be a spiritual thing, as well as help define our idea of what love is.

As a mother of three young children with a successful career as a writer and an academic, how do you manage the work–life balance?

I have written a whole blog post on exactly that question as I am asked it a lot. Essentially I write while my children are asleep – they have a two-hour nap every day and I have become very good at writing as much as I can in those two hours. It means my house is probably a little messier than it should be but I love my writing and I love my kids – I don't love vacuuming – so they take priority.

My blog post is at: <http://whilethekidsaresleeping.wordpress.com/2012/07/15/the-work-child-juggle>

Questions for Discussion

- *But to be nothing except a mother and Paul's wife is to be nothing at all.* (p. 25) How does this novel handle the everyday struggle of working mothers (even compounded as it is in Camille's case)?
- *I depend upon dead people. In my line of work, someone has to die so that someone else can live. But it was not supposed to be Dan.* (p. 63) What are the distinctions both Alix and Camille draw (and need to draw) between the dead people they work with, and those they love and seek to keep alive?
- In the course of the novel, what does Camille learn about herself and the lengths she might go to save the life of her child? What boundaries or limitations does she discover in herself, if any?
- *The months that followed were romantic, sentimental, passionate; a fabrication, a falsehood. Because romance belonged to imagination, to art, to a week in a life. Not to the sustained longevity of the everyday. Not for Alix anyway.* (p. 252) Does this observation belong to Camille or Alix? What does it mean?
- What is the function of Camille's 'Notes on an exhibition' in the book? Why has the author included them?
- There are references through the novel to artists and writers, and to works of art and literature: Rodin, Rilke, Shakespeare, *The Lady of Shalott*, Camille Claudel, to name a few. In this novel, what is the relationship between art and romance, and art and life? Can these things coexist? Does Alix exhibit a 'kind of madness' because she wants 'the artifice over the real'?
- What are the differences in the mother–daughter relationships of Alix/Camille and Camille/Addie/Rosie?
- What kind of a mother is Alix?
- What kind of a mother is Camille?
- What is the role of Louisa in Camille's life? How does it counteract or counterbalance the role of Alix?
- What are the differences between Alix's love for Dan and Camille's love for Paul?
- In what ways might love be cruel?

- Is it possible to live ‘happily ever after’?
- Does Camille reject her mother’s notions of the importance of art, or does Camille also need art to make sense of life?
- What does it take for Camille and Paul to fully recognise each other again at the novel’s end?
- Addie’s critical illness is the frightening and unavoidable reality that drives this story on. What do you make of the ending: of Paul’s gift, of the understanding he reaches with Camille?
- What do you make of the final lines of the novel?