



Know the author:

PAULA WESTON



INTERVIEWED by LEONIE TYLE

Paula Weston took the reading world by storm when her first novel **Shadows** was published in 2012. It was the first of four in the contemporary **The Rephaim** series which quickly went on to be one of Australia's bestselling and most loved paranormal narratives. It added a uniquely Australian flavour to the popular angel genre. Readers have fallen deeply for Paula's protagonists Gaby and Rafa who are snappy, sexy and real. The series has been widely sold throughout the world.

Paula Weston lives in Brisbane and balances work, writing and home with chaotic success. A journalist by trade and after years in the corporate world she made the brave move to start her own communication and media business. When she's not madly writing books for pleasure or writing copy for deadlines, she loves to unwind with her husband and their adopted retired greyhound who she walks twice a day. As well she loves *hanging out with my husband and watching our favourite TV shows and AFL (although our Brisbane Lions have not given us much joy for many years now). I enjoy cooking, so we entertain friends regularly. Oh, and I love good espresso and pinot noir.*

Chris Bongers, another Brisbane author, who launched Paula's latest book **The Undercurrent** had this to say about Paula's work.

I discovered Paula's Rephaim series in 2013, read Shadows [the first book] and Haze [the second] in rapid succession. I remember thinking wow, who is this Paula Weston, she just keeps getting better! Rephaim was the best angel series I'd read, and to be honest, the only one I'd wanted to finish. It combined a high concept premise with great writing and I was hooked. When Book Three came out, Shimmer's cliff-hanger ending threw me into a sulk at the thought of having to wait another year to find out what hap-

pened next, but I dutifully lined up at the launch of Book Four in 2015 to finally meet Paula Weston and get my hands on a copy of Burn hot off the presses.

While Paula appears to have had overnight success she's had a long apprenticeship. Her voice has an authenticity which has made this series so successful. Voice is what makes a novel unique and true. It is the heart of the work. I asked her how she found that voice.

Mostly through writing manuscripts that never saw the light of day! I wrote five other full-length manuscripts before I was offered my first publishing contract. It was essentially my apprenticeship and I found my voice along the way. Interestingly, the work that got me over the line was the first I'd written in first person, present tense (Shadows). Gaby's voice came surprisingly easily, like she'd been waiting for me.

To be a good writer you need to be a good reader. Reading gives us the building blocks to create compelling stories and to make sense of the world we inhabit. I asked Paula what are the three books which profoundly touched her, making her laugh and cry.

That's a tough one. There are so many books I love and remember, for varying reasons. In terms of three that I keep returning to, I'll go with The Book Thief by Markus Zusak, The Arrival by Shaun Tan and On the Jellicoe Road by Melina Marchetta. (Notable mention to Friday Brown by Vikki Wakefield: I cried and hugged that book when I finished it.)

Writing is a personal pursuit. It's solitary and isolating. So how does Paula approach her writing and how does it affect her family life?

I try to write daily, but because of other work commitments I can't always fit it in every day. I always manage to write for reasonable chunks of time most week-ends. I've recently moved to part-time work with my day job in the hope of freeing up more time to write. Writing has been such a part of our lives for so many years, it's now a given that I'll spend most of the weekend on my laptop. Although I have a study, I write out in the kitchen/living area so I don't spend too much time away from the action (and food).

When rewriting **Shadows** after it's structural edit her editor at the time suggested Paula read Anne Lamott's brilliant book on writing, **Bird by Bird**: one paragraph stood out above all the rest for her, *E.L. Doctorow said once that writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way. You don't have to see where you're going, you don't have to see your destination or everything you will pass along the way. You just have to see two or three feet ahead of you. This is right up there with the best advice on writing, or life, I have ever heard.* This has inspired and shaped the way she approaches the writing process.

The **Rephaim** series has a very strong sense of place. The setting on the South East Queensland coast is a character in itself. It makes the series quintessentially Australian and sets it apart from other angel series. As the genre is over crowded with choice, I asked Paula why she chose to write in such a competitive field.

In truth, I wasn't looking to create a series about angels when I started writing Gaby's story. I had a scene in my head involving a girl and a guy who have a shared history that only he remembers

— and he knows if he takes advantage of the attraction between them, and she gets her memory back, he'll be in serious trouble.

I knew there were supernatural elements to how she lost her memory, and that they were both part of a fractured society and had ended up on opposite sides. It was only when I was developing the broader world in which they existed that I realised an angel-based lore could work. I came across the story of Semyaza and The Two Hundred — warrior angels cast from heaven because of lust for human women — in the Book of Enoch and the Book of Jubilees, which are both ancient apocryphal texts. I wasn't particularly interested in the story of the 'fall', rather in exploring the fate of any children produced. It gave me a light bulb moment, which led to the idea of the Rephaim society.

For me, what makes my series a little different — aside from the fact it's set predominantly in Australia — is that, while there are demons that need defeating (literally), the biggest challenge for Gaby, Rafa and the rest of the Rephaim, is dealing with the fractures within their own society. It's what makes them human that causes the divisions, more so than what makes them supernatural.

Rephaim explores a number of universal truths which help us to understand the world in which we live. I asked Paula to explain the underlying themes.

*The series gave me the opportunity to explore what it means to take responsibility for your actions, and how decisions made on behalf of others — no matter how well intended — can have unforeseen consequences. In **The Rephaim** series, these consequences occur on a personal, community and ideological level. One particular theme, that becomes stronger through the series, is that of an authority figure creating rules and regulations based on their own interpretation of 'signs'.*

*Identity is also a significant issue for Gaby: early on in **Shadows** she discovers she's not who she thinks she is, and then, when she starts to learn about her past, she isn't sure she wants to be who she was either. She also doesn't remember the things she and her brother have been accused of doing, so when all the pieces finally come together for her in **Burn**, she has to decide what to do with them — and who she wants to be. Gaby wants to be judged on who she is now, not who she was in the past. That's something that resonates strongly with me.*

The Undercurrent is Paula's latest novel released in August this year. It is a radical shift from **The Rephaim** series and written in a completely different genre — speculative thriller. Set in the near future it depicts a world we could very easily be in, in 15 years. I'm always curious to understand how writers get inspiration for their stories.

The Undercurrent was borne from two, very separate inspirations. The first was an idea for a scene involving a guy and girl trapped in a lift: he's there as a potential threat, but when they get trapped, her instinct is to protect him because she suspects that whatever is going on is about her. (That scene became a pivotal chapter early on in the book.) The other inspiration was a recurring theme I was reading in newspapers about our government positioning Australia to be the 'food bowl' of Asia. I started thinking about how that might happen, and what that would mean for our farmers.

I also wanted to explore what Australia might look like 10 to 15 years down the track if our economy continued to decline: what decisions would our government make, and what would that mean for major industries like the military and energy sector?

And of course, I wanted Jules to have something about her that put her in danger. (I love a speculative element in my stories!) I spent a lot of time figuring out how all those ideas could come together cohesively.

The Undercurrent is a book where science underpins every twist and turn within the plot. Maintaining pace and tension while the narrative is steeped in science is a tricky thing to pull off successfully. Jules is the product of her father's experimental genetic modification secretly undertaken while he was a serviceman in the Middle East.

*There were certainly challenges in making sure I had the basics right, so that the speculative elements were grounded in science, and might be possible at some point in the future. I researched how electricity works, as well as having to refresh my memory on mitochondria and cellular structure (high school biology was a long time ago!). I also watched a documentary called *Twisting the Dragon's Tail* about uranium and nuclear processes.*

Keeping tight control on the story and where it is going can be quite complex. I was fascinated by Paula's control of the plot.

*I tend to think of plot strands as exactly that — strands that I need to keep a hold on. I write chronologically, and with **The***

Undercurrent, it was mostly by feel in terms of which strand needed to be woven in at which point. The drafting and revision process played an important part as well. *That's when I could step back and (with help from my editor) see if there were places where the pace lagged. I also kept copious notes, and frequently had to remind myself about who knew what, when. It was important to me that everything in the story ultimately had meaning and relevance, so I was constantly looking for ways to bring those strands together.*

I often wonder how a writer knows when a book is a series or if it's a stand-alone book. Paula was quite clear on the writing process for **The Undercurrent**.

*I realised early on that I would only need one book to tell the story I wanted to in **The Undercurrent**, so the challenge then was to write a tight, complex novel that took the characters on a journey I had planned, and also provided enough closure to work as a stand-alone. In one sense it was easier than writing a series, because I had to plot out **The Rephaim** books in advance so I could plant seeds for things I wanted to reveal in later books. From **Shadows** onwards, each book was written after the previous had been published, so I couldn't go back and add in things I'd missed. I did a lot more 'pantsing' with **The Undercurrent**, figuring it out as I went, which I'll admit made me a little nervous at times.*

A good writer offers the reader the ability to make their own decisions about moral dilemmas. In **The Undercurrent** Paula explores a number of moral and ethical questions including genetic modification and biochemical manipulation. She handles these with skill without ever ramming it down the reader's throat.

I definitely have my own opinions about GMO food, but I wanted to make sure that both sides of that argument were shown, so that readers can form their own opinions.

Bio-engineering is an area I didn't really know a lot about before I started writing the book (and I'm far from an expert now), but once I started researching that technology, I realised how normalised it's already become in many sectors. And, given the direction the world is heading, it's not beyond the realm of possibility there might be interest in how that science could be applied in the military.

The nuclear/radioactive waste element of the story was also an interesting one

for me. Because Angie is such a force of nature as an investigative journalist, I needed to give her issues to be passionate about that were relevant to the plot. I researched a number of 'big issue' topics, including nuclear energy and radioactive waste storage. I'll admit I was surprised to discover that we, as a planet, still haven't figured out what to do with radioactive waste, and yet we keep producing it.

Ultimately, **The Undercurrent** is intended as a gripping read and the issues included in the book are there for pace, plot and intrigue. But if **The Undercurrent** also sparks conversations about where we are heading as a nation in terms of agriculture, military and energy solutions, that's a good thing!

The Undercurrent is told from multiple viewpoints which is a difficult literary structure to keep the momentum and perspective for each character while maintaining a pace necessary for the thriller genre. I asked Paula how she managed so successfully to achieve this.

I tend to be quite adept at switching — and compartmentalising — focus in my own life, so I suspect that being able to switch perspectives when writing is an extension of that. I put a great deal of thought into each viewpoint, to make sure I fully understood their perspective and motivations. Again, the revision process really helped hone their voices. The choice of when to bring in which perspective was based on what I thought the reader needed to know/would be most interested in at that point. It's certainly a balancing act to get it right. I'm glad you think I succeeded in keeping momentum.

I was actually quite amazed by Paula's knowledge of military procedure and protocol. I almost wondered if she had ever been in the military.

I spent a lot of time researching the military aspects. At the launch, Christine Bongers (who led my Q&A) asked if I'd been in a Hercules aircraft, because she had, and she said that scene felt particularly authentic. I hadn't (I'd watched a LOT of YouTube videos shot by soldiers), so I took that as a huge compliment. My nephew also spent a decade in the Australian Army, so over the years, I've picked up bits and pieces of army protocol.

After spending many hours and years developing a work most authors come to cherish their work as children. I asked Paula what she loved most about **The Undercurrent**?

I wrote this book during a very challenging time in my life. My father

passed away not long after I started writing, and my mother, who then had early stages of dementia, moved in with us. I love that this book came together at all. And I love that it is complex and fast-paced, but that at its heart are real people with real flaws and real challenges.

I am always curious about the author/editor relationship and wondered about Paula's experience with the editing process. I asked her if any of her favourite scenes had been discarded and left on the editing room floor?

Revision is actually my favourite part of the writing process. It's really only then that I start to believe the book might be okay. First drafts are a hard slog for me. My editor's feedback at structural edit stage always challenges me. I almost always have a moment of, 'How am I going to do that?' And then I figure it out, and it's incredibly rewarding.

*There was only one scene cut from **The Undercurrent** that I was attached to, in which Jules and Ryan play darts at the army house in Adelaide. The aim was to show the changing dynamic between them, but the scene slowed the pace and I could show that elsewhere, so it had to go — and the book is better for it.*

Some writers love the research process almost as much as the writing process. I asked Paula how her research process differed.

*For **The Rephaim** series, I undertook a wide range of research from biblical and secular angel/demon lore as to how to use a rocket launcher. Much of it was around ideas and inspiration (e.g. **Dante's Inferno** helped me work out how demons could enter our realm), while other research was about getting the facts right (a building doesn't explode just because you fire a rocket into it). I took elements from the apocryphal Book of Enoch and Book of Jubilees as a starting point for the mythology, as well as traditional Judeo-Christian and Islamic concepts. I also looked at a range of other angel/demon mythology and theology, from **Dante's Inferno** to New Age approaches that have nothing to do with traditional religion. I found it interesting that a lot of our contemporary imaginings about angels and demons come from sources other than the biblical canon. I took bits and pieces of what I thought would work best for my characters and their story and made up the rest. **The Rephaim** society is completely fictitious. For **The Undercurrent**, it was everything from how radioactive waste is transported, to the sale price of designer shoes. Because of*

the science underpinning key elements in the book, my research was more meticulous this time around.

Music prominently features in Paula's writing. Reading her books I could hear a play list constantly running in the background. I asked her if she was listening to music while writing.

*I don't listen to music as I write, but there are definitely songs that help put me in the mindset of particular characters, which I'll listen to while driving and daydreaming about them. Music is important in both **The Rephaim** series and **The Undercurrent**. In **The Rephaim** series, Jude's taste in music, especially his love for the Foo Fighters, is significant, so there was a lot of Foo Fighters being played in those years (also a personal favourite of mine). In **The Undercurrent**, Ryan plays drums, so music is a large part of his life. I have a playlist of songs that feature in the book, from what's playing in the car when he and Jules drive north, to the songs he and Tommy's band play in the shed at home. Again, I would play these in between writing sessions, to keep those characters in my head.*

It is obvious that Paula Weston is a passionate advocate for many contemporary issues. I asked her to name a few.

So many things! Ethical food production, accountable government, capacity for forgiveness, respectful dialogue between opposing views, the right for all humans to be treated with dignity, the importance of literacy — and diversity in literacy — protecting our Australian publishing industry ... it's a long list.

With so many fans waiting on her next book I naturally asked her what she's working on.

I'm working on another stand-alone book. It's very new, so I'm not quite ready to give it a label yet. Yes, it's something different again — but, of course, it has a speculative twist. I'm hoping to have a first draft ready by the middle of next year.

Paula Weston is a much admired contemporary Australian author who promises to continue to write stories that will challenge and entertain readers for a long time to come.