

Two *become* one



Husband-and-wife team Nicci French talk to Piers Ford about their new tense psychological thriller *Losing You* ahead of Essex Book Festival

Imagine that you're a piano wire, tightened (or so you think) to breaking point. But just as you're convinced you're about to snap, the tuner turns the key another fraction and the suspense scales an almost unbearable height.

This is what it's like to be Nina Landry, the main character in Nicci French's latest psychological thriller, *Losing You*. And as the story is told entirely by Nina – in real time, without any narrative tricks or pauses – the reader suffers every second with her. When her teenage daughter Charlie doesn't return from a night out, she immediately and instinctively senses that something is wrong. The ensuing eight hours unfold in a nightmarish sequence of events and revelations, as Nina realises that her only ally in this race against time is herself. One by one, a lifetime of assumptions – including a faith in authority, and the parental certainty that she knows her own

child better than anyone – shatter as she attempts to track Charlie down across the bleak landscape of the island on the Essex coast, where she has brought her family to live.

The plot is a triumph of pace, gradually paring away unwanted intrusions, false leads and the plodding orthodoxy of the police – hardly stirred by the idea of a teenager who has only been 'missing' for an hour or two – who must do everything by the book, until all that remains is to share Nina's sharpening focus on what she has to do, and to hell with the consequences.

Nicci French is, of course, the pseudonym for the writing partnership of Nicci Gerrard and Sean French – also married to each other – and audiences will have a chance to hear them talking about the creative process behind *Losing You* and their other novels at Felsted School, where they will

appear as part of the Essex Book Festival on March 1st.

"One of the things that's always interested us is how, when things go terribly wrong in people's lives, they find they're alone," says Sean. "With *Losing You*, we were interested in the idea that when a child goes missing, you get this kind of escalating suspense as you move through the process from them being a bit late home, to worse and worse, in a continual crescendo.

"From that came the logic of telling the story in real time – so the book would take the same amount of time to read as the events take to happen – because when a child vanishes, exponentially time becomes more and more precious. We follow Nina and feel everything she feels through the whole purpose."

The police don't emerge from the novel with a great deal of credit, but as Sean points out, this is partly because their