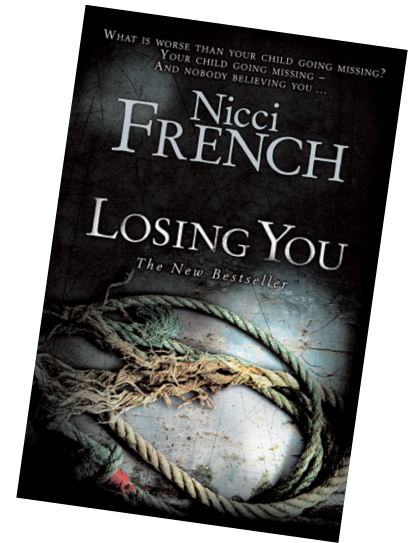




'Nicci French has made a big difference to our lives, of course. We're seeing the world together because we're married, and that's partly what relationships are about. And we're also exploring it through writing together'



actions – and inactions – are observed through Nina's eyes; and right or wrong, she is always several steps ahead of them. "This isn't a political point, it's not our case against the police," he says. "But over the years of writing our books together, we've learned a lot about police procedures. If you follow many real cases, the incompetence and mistakes, the obvious clues missed, the destruction of obvious evidence, the not going to see the obvious witness, are all quite unbelievable. It isn't so much about portraying the police as idiots, as normal people. Like most of us, they aren't very good at their job. And in all human activity, things are fouled up by chaos.

"In a situation like this, you have to rely on yourself, and people have said that's a recurring theme in our novels," Nicci says. "Perhaps it's because we're tired of novels in which there is a genius expert, an absolute, implacable authority figure. Mostly in real life, there's no lover who rushes in and saves you. You have to do it yourself."

Sean says they both become passionately

engaged with their characters, and the way they cope with the difficulties the plot imposes on them. "A lot of our books emerge from us discussing how we react when terrible things happen," he says. "Most of us are never really tested and you hope you'll never have to discover how you would react in an emergency. Nina will do anything because of what's emerging. She's a fantasy of what I'd like to be in that situation, but in reality I think I'd give up!"

Nicci envies Nina's steadiness. "She's someone who behaves well in her life," she adds. "She's decent, reliable, competent, calm, unflappable. But when this happens, she has to behave improperly. She's rude, she does terrible things, she plunders her daughter's life and rummages through all her secrets."

And, says Nicci, aside from the suspense, there is another crucial thread running through the book: coping with your children as they grow away from you. She and Sean have four teenage children living at home in Suffolk, and writing *Losing You* exposes some of parenthood's cruellest realities. "Nina thinks she knows her daughter, and she kind of does. But there are lots of things, secret parts, that she doesn't, which are forbidden territory. And we're terribly conscious of that in our family! You never do know, as a parent, but you have to fumble your way through, working out which secrets are good or bad, and when to intervene. One by one our children are leaving us, and we were partly writing about that."

Would she know, in the way that Nina does, if anything was wrong? "I don't know, but I hope so! One of the things we've often talked about when researching books, is that you just don't know how you're going to behave. In a way, when we're thinking about writing Nicci French books, it's partly about living an ordinary life in which an extraordinary thing happens, and it becomes a watershed. You discover things in your internal landscape that you never knew."

The landscape is essential in *Losing You*. It is, as Sean explains, a disguised version of Mersea Island, slightly shrunk and depopulated. And it becomes a metaphor for Nina's inner revelations as she ranges across it. The writers spent the same December day on the island as that on which the action takes place, researching the location. "It was important for us to convey the feeling of what it's like at that time of year," he says.

"Then there's the transition from day to night, when you're getting close to the shortest day, so we wanted to get that feeling of light changing and gradually being lost. There's a wonderful bleakness on the east coast, the feeling that it's half in the sea already."

Nicci and Sean say that writing 'together' (not literally, they write their own segments and then confer) has given them a different insight into their work as individuals – they are both successful authors and journalists in their own right.

Sean finds writing as Nicci French liberating – although the joint process, "like being mountaineers strapped together," can be intense and difficult. Nicci says the writing and publication of a Nicci French book is 'kinder' because they are in it together. "I can feel more robust about it because we've done it together," she says.

"Nicci French has made a big difference to our lives, of course. We're seeing the world together because we're married, and that's partly what relationships are about. And we're also exploring it through writing together. The books are about how we live now, in various ways – what it's like to be lonely, abandoned, angry, jealous, scared, getting older. And we're thinking about that together. In that sense it's been very wonderful. Although I have to say it can be quite tense, too. It isn't a cosy process!"

■ See Nicci French at Felsted School, March 1st. Box Office 01371 822635