



DECEMBER, 2020

Murder she wrote

Vogue Australia, National



VOGUE CULTURE

BOOK

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South African-born Ceridwen Dovey grew up in Australia before moving to Boston to study at Harvard, which set her on a path to becoming an award-winning author and essayist. Her latest release, *Life After Truth*, is a page-turning mystery inspired by her time studying alongside Jared Kushner and actor Natalie Portman at the Ivy League college.

STYLING KAILA MATTHEWS
 PHOTOGRAPH ISAAC BROWN

VOGUE AUSTRALIA: In 1998, as you were finishing high school in Sydney, you were awarded a scholarship to Harvard. How did that come about?

CERIDWEN DOVEY: "It was quite random, actually. I'm South African originally but my family had moved back and forth. We'd been in Melbourne in the early 80s, gone back to South Africa, and then ended up in Sydney when I was in year nine. My sister, Lindiwe, who is older than me, had an American friend who was applying to US colleges, and she was quite intrigued by that. Lindiwe got a four-year full scholarship and went off on her own with her one suitcase, having never been to America or knowing how the American college system worked. When it came time, I was just monkey see, monkey do."

VA: What did you study?

CD: "Liberal arts, which is this idea of classical education where you learn a little bit about a lot of things but you don't specialise too soon. I loved living on campus, being ensconced in this dormitory for four years with your peers and eating all your meals in the dining halls. I found that just so wonderful."

VA: Did you always want to be a writer?

CD: "I always loved reading. My →



Ceridwen Dovey wears a Christopher Esber dress, \$800, from Harrolds. Paspaley necklace, \$18,360. Scanlan Theodore shoes, \$600.

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mum was a literary critic, so my whole life I grew up inhaling books and doing little bits of writing and poetry. When I got to Harvard, I discovered social anthropology. I fell in love with this idea that you could do fieldwork among people who are foreign to you and lurk on the outside of a culture as a participant observant. I ended up spending a lot of my American summers in South Africa making ethnographic films, no narration and fly-on-the-wall. Very cinéma vérité. That's what I thought I was going to do.

"After I finished, I had one year where I could legally work in America, so I moved to New York and I worked for PBS. There was a journalist called Bill Moyers, who was a well-known investigative journalist with a show called *Now with Bill Moyers* and I worked as a researcher for him for a year. Then I upped and moved to Cape Town. I knew no one and had a really tough time. I was so desperate to express myself but couldn't get work in film, I ended up doing random stuff like tutoring high-school kids. I started writing a novel and didn't even really admit to myself what I was doing at the time. It ended up getting published."

VA: That was *Blood Kin* (2007), which was selected for the US National Book Foundation's prestigious '5 under 35' honours list. *Life After Truth* is your fourth novel and you've finally given yourself permission to write about the banality of everyday life. Why?

CD: "It feels like a really interesting time. I turned 40 recently and it was this chance to look at midlife. We think of midlife crises only as a negative thing and the tropes around how it's talked about in the culture, all about people blowing up their lives and making terrible decisions. And, look – there's a lot of that, the temptation to do that is strong! But I found it really interesting to also use it as a time to try and understand what it could be. I'm interested in what an intellectual midlife crisis looks like."

VA: The book was inspired by your experiences from your 15-year reunion at Harvard. How so?

CD: "The reunions, like in the book, take place over a whole long weekend and you can actually go and stay in the dormitories. I think that's where the novel came from. I hadn't been back to America for almost 10 years at that point, so for me, it was like travelling back in time. The campus smells the same and then you're staying in these dormitories that you used to live in when you were like 18, 19 – it was like time travel. As a writer, I was in heaven. The emotions were rolling within me. I was so nostalgic but so excited and so overstimulated about the past and the present. I loved hearing people's stories and they were very open and honest. I had people I barely remembered from college tell me really difficult things they had gone through. The anthropologist in me and the writer in me were lit up by these stories.

"I got back to Sydney and I hadn't intended to write a novel about the experience at all, but I sat down one day and it started pouring out. It was lovely, because then I could invent all of these characters from scratch. It's the first time I've ever experienced this fabled sense that writers sometimes talk about where the characters start to tell you what they need to do next."

VA: Both actor Natalie Portman and Jared Kushner, who was senior advisor to former President Trump, were part of your graduating class at Harvard. How were they as classmates? And why did you choose to loosely base characters on them?

CD: "Yes, certainly the structuring of the narrative – that the friendship groups all come back and that there are these two poles of celebrity, dark and light ... that's where I got the idea for them. So Jared Kushner is the dark force, or the Fred character is the

"It's the first time I've ever experienced this fabled sense that writers sometimes talk about where the characters tell you what they need to do next"

dark force, and then the Jules character – Natalie Portman – is the light force. I suppose [they are] poles of fame that then become lightning rods for the other characters' assumptions and grief. You never hear from those characters themselves, but it's interesting to see people come back over time and process that.

"In terms of Jared, it's a funny thing, but he was a very polite guy. I wish I could say he was a monster. In the encounters I had with him, he was polite and didn't act like a dickhead at the time. And his father hadn't yet had his fall from grace. I think it was after we graduated that his father was arrested [for illegal campaign contributions, tax evasion and witness tampering]. So it's a funny thing that my only memories of him are his shiny, boyish face and politeness."

VA: Would you ever have expected him to become a senior advisor to the President of the United States?

CD: "I honestly never really thought much about him or his future. Maybe I should've. Because everybody is living in the same dorm rooms and eating the same food, your backgrounds are a little bit invisible. I do remember the shock sometimes of suddenly realising that a friend whose parents came to campus took the whole group out to this insane dinner at a Four Seasons hotel. There were these little glimpses of extreme wealth and I guess I was aware there would be people in our class who were super ambitious and going to go on to do things that involved power and a public profile. But I had no idea it would be him."

VA: Your book covers themes of fame, power and politics and was released around the same time as the US election. Were you conscious of that timing? How does that feel for you?

CD: "Well, I feel less bad about killing off the Jared Kushner character! It was actually a total coincidence [with the timing]. It was really interesting in 2018 to go back to that country when they were already two years into Trump's presidency and see how people were losing faith and losing hope."

VA: If this book is ever adapted for screen, do you think Natalie Portman would be up for playing Juliet?

CD: "Oh god, that would be so awkward! She is so lovely though, I have to say. The one thing I did use for Jules's personality from Natalie is just that she's a warm, intelligent, kind person."

Life After Truth (\$32.99, Penguin) by Ceridwen Dovey, is out now.