

Prize-winning writer has led a life more

# Stalked, beaten, raped and bribed ...but I know the thin line between fact and fantasy



**The Caroline Phillips**

*Interview*

**Lisa St Aubin de Teran**  
NOVELIST

**I**F YOU encountered her as a character in a novel, you'd find her barely credible. "I've been stalked, battered, raped, bribed, attacked, kicked and threatened," the prize-winning author Lisa St Aubin de Teran mentions casually. "My children have also been subjected to a number of violent attacks. Iseult (her 24-year-old daughter) has been the victim of three attempted rapes, the first of which happened when she was 10."

Lisa has just published *The Palace*, which is said in the blurb to be her first major novel for five years and is a love story set in Garibaldi's Italy. "It's the best novel I've written, my great work. Although I suppose I shouldn't say that myself," says Lisa, who has written some marvellous books and won the Somerset Maugham Award. In fact the plot is a little thin, but some of the descriptions are magical.

She hadn't worked for a while because she was ill with tuberculosis and kidney complaints. "I've had kidney infections since I was little, including a couple of kidney failures. So I wasn't able to concentrate." Nothing as mundane as writer's block or lack of discipline for Lisa, then.

Lisa, 43, has reinvented herself. She's known for wearing velvet floor-sweeping coats, intricately embroidered antique jackets and travelling in a Victorian tartan dress with a flowing train. But today she's dressed in a boyish, clean way in a white shirt and men's black trousers. "I started making an anti-dress statement because I can't bear things being expected of me."

She looks exotic (her father was from Guyana in Latin America) with her handsome big features, chestnut eyes, cascading auburn hair and sympathetic face which is as brown as a basket of berries. But her voice surprises. It is stringy, girlish and sometimes hard-edged. I'd expected her to have a deep, sensual voice from the look of her.

Lisa's life is well documented. She was raised in an all-female



**FAMILY WAY:** Husband Robbie Duff-Scott and daughter Florence

household, with three half-sisters. "We didn't have any real idea what marriage or men were about," she reveals. An unnaturally shy child, she retreated into writing to express herself. She went to school in Dulwich where she became a "habitual truanter", sloping off on her own to travel on trains — "usually to Brighton" — from the age of seven.

Aged 16, she married a schizophrenic nobleman bank robber, went to his avocado and sugar plantation in Venezuela and suffered from loneliness and his cruelty. Seven years later she kidnapped their daughter, returned to England and found herself absent-mindedly engaged to three men simultaneously. (Hardly a train journey goes by without her being proposed to by a dagger-wielding Transylvanian aristocrat or some such.)

Next she married a poet she met at a poetry salon, lived in a castle in Norfolk, had a nervous breakdown,

then wed a painter who dresses like a Gainsborough portrait and lives with him (still) in a 42-room palazzo in Umbria, Italy, where initially bats flew in the windows and there were no doors or electricity.

The question that keeps popping into my head is: Is Lisa kosher? Is most of what she says fantasy? How do I know what to believe? Certainly things seem to happen to her on a bigger scale than to most of us. There's a captivating drama in nearly every sentence she utters. But I have this hunch that reality and fantasy are intertwined impenetrably in her life — with the truth lost in the myths and shrouds of time. But then who cares if it makes a good story?

The normally passive Lisa responds sharply to this line of questioning. "I see the division between fact and fantasy very clearly," she says briskly. "I'm a daydreamer, but I'm very practical. I know exactly where fantasy starts. I've always steered clear of madness." She hunches up, bringing her knees up to her chin, curling herself foetally.

There is insanity in her family. Lisa's maternal grandmother was "completely bonkers", prone to shouting things such as "I've been cursed with you, you feed on blood" at her daughter, Joanna. Then there was Lisa's father, a professor, who met Lisa's mother whilst both were patients in a mental hospital. "That's where they fell in love. I think I was conceived there," explains Lisa. They were released on grounds of sanity when they married.

**E**VEN Jaime (pronounced Hi-me) Teran, to whom Lisa was first married, was deranged. He came from a family of eccentrics, one of whom lived in total darkness, another who'd been building an aeroplane in his backyard out of powdered milk tins for 20 years. "Jaime was a stranger I married after I met him in the street and he started following me obsessively," she says. "He slept 24 hours a day and I thought he was lazy. But he was schizophrenic."

He would fly into rages in which he could kill. One day he strangled their pet ram, another time he threw an entire pack of beagles out of an upstairs window. Sometimes he was suicidal and planned to take his family with him.

Even Lisa had a breakdown, which she attributes to the death of

## incredible than any fictional character

**DRAMA QUEEN:** Lisa has attracted crises and adventure throughout her turbulent life

her mother ("she had this incredibly rare blood disease that only about eight people in England have"), the traumatic birth of her son Alexander, now 15, and the break-up of her marriage to George MacBeth. She thinks it was triggered in hospital in Great Yarmouth where she went to give birth.

"I'd just received lots of media coverage for *The Slow Train To Milan* and the hospital sister said, 'Don't think you're any better than us, we know all about you and we're going to show you'," explains Lisa, with the menacing quality of some of her writing. "I don't give birth, I can't go into labour. But my medical notes were in Venezuela and the doctor didn't believe me. So they induced 10 hours of contractions two minutes apart.

"While I was on the drug, I felt I was losing my marbles and thought they were going to kill my child. Eventually they did a Caesarean and the surgeon blundered, cutting through an artery. Afterwards I lay as if crucified, with blood transfusions and drips in my arms. They put my almost dead baby on my chest and left the room. I thought he was going to roll off the very high bed and die.

"I discharged myself because I thought they were going to murder me. They made me change my own dressings. When I left, I'd look at a window and it would come towards me and the pavement would rise to

meet my face. I felt an evil force was out to get my child, so I travelled obsessively in Europe, living on trains, unable to stay anywhere. When I saw myself in photographs, I found it extremely disturbing. I didn't see myself, I saw somebody else. I had the sensation of not being there."

We talk then about her elder daughter, Iseult. Her relationship

**'I discharged myself from the hospital because I thought they were going to murder me'**

with this gazelle-like creature, today in an off-the-shoulder black T-shirt, has been close. When Lisa conceived it was a miracle because she'd been told she was sterile. "I'd had glandular TB aged nine. They said, 'You won't ever have children and it's better that you know at this age so you can get used to it,'" she says. "Iseult was my passport to acceptance on the hacienda in Venezuela because nobody would speak to me until I became blood linked."

Lisa doesn't even mind her cur-

rent husband Robbie Duff-Scott painting her daughter in various stages of dress and undress. Isn't that disquieting? "Not at all," says Lisa quietly.

Iseult followed her mother's pattern and — when she was just 17 — married Michael Radford, 45, director of *White Mischief*. (They have just divorced.) Then six years ago, strangely, mother and daughter became pregnant together. "We were already very close and suddenly we were having babies together. Felix and Florence are just seven months apart."

**L**ISA is an extraordinary woman. In the same period that she wrote *The Palace*, she wrote *The Hacienda*, an autobiography about her days in Venezuela. "I always write from memory," she says. "I don't make notes. I carry the entire structure and dialogue in my head from start to finish before I begin."

By contrast, I tape everything. Listening to her afterwards, I found myself liking her more than I did in the flesh. Feeling less worried about ascertaining the truth of what she said. Warming to the vulnerability hidden beneath the defence of fantasy.

We never got around to talking about her being stalked, raped, attacked, kicked, battered, threatened and bribed. But if you encountered her as a character in a novel, you'd want to read on.