

Praise for *Face Value*

“A fun and fantastic romp through the world of glamour as only a true insider can know. And only a true insider with the intelligence and empathy of Kathleen Baird-Murray could so entertainingly deal with the question we have been dying to ask . . . Has the world gone mad? Read it and see. I loved it.”

—Poppy King, creator of *Lipstick Queen*

“A fascinating subject for a novel . . . It really is rare for popular fiction to handle such an incendiary, controversial subject so well.”

—Marian Keyes, international bestselling author of

Anybody Out There?

face value

a novel

Kathleen Baird-Murray



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In memory of Maureen Baird-Murray, 1933–2005

And for Olly, Armand, and Emmanuelle Daniaud

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author's note

“Write about what you know,” they say, and so I have drawn in part on my experiences traveling around the world interviewing plastic surgeons, working on magazines, even growing up in Maidstone. But I have nothing but respect for all the people I have met, and would like to state categorically that none of the characters in this book is meant to be a representation of anyone; it remains a work of fiction through and through.

*Many people tell you that they're your friend ...
Make sure that you're receiving the signals they send ...
Better watch out for the skin deep.*

—“Skin Deep,” The Stranglers

maidstone

beauty note:

Model wears faded khaki green hipster boot-cuts by Topshop, two-inch muffin-top compulsory. Cord jacket by Oxfam, Fair Trade coffee stain optional. *Eyes:* Clogged mascara, worn around eyes and not on lashes, by Rimmel (possibly Revlon, label indecipherable, worn away with time). *Lips:* Special cracked lip effect due to dehydration and loss of Chapstick, model's own. *Fragrance:* Sure Anti-Perspirant & Deodorant Roll-On, Unscented, three for two at Boots.

one

Kate Miller had a theory about celebrities. Assuming the twenty-first century survived long enough not to be wasted by global warming and global cooling (and she was one of the few who genuinely knew the difference), Kate figured it would be remembered for its obsession with the rich, famous, and wannabe rich and famous. Her best friend, Lise, and her mum, Darleen, were prime examples of a generation of women who aspired to strange badges of personal merit, which historians of the future would no doubt find themselves unable to rationalize: a haircut with the name of an actor's girlfriend, or a large bottom that no one in the Northern Hemisphere would have desired five months previously.

Kate didn't know or care about any of these so-called celebrity must-haves. At thirty-two years old, she wasn't what you might call a looker, yet neither did she have any features ugly enough to make her interesting. Her dishwasher brown hair could have

been the “before” model for an antifriz hair serum, but at least it was compensated for by her clear skin and shining brown eyes. Her skinny lips were balanced by a rounded, button nose; her cheekbones, so flat they were practically concave, almost begged to have a little fat transferred from her square-but-round bottom, which in turn was neither flat enough to be impressively androgynous nor brazen enough to be an object of desire. It was topped by a midriff that peeked out a little too bravely over her low-cut jeans and didn’t seem to match her too-thin stick legs. Yet even though she was blissfully unaware of her physical flaws and plus-points (beyond knowing that she wasn’t going to ride on the looks ticket to get her through life), there were mysterious things at work that made her more attractive than the sum of her parts. She didn’t know it but her smile opened more doors for her than she gave it credit. Was it the gap between her teeth that had never been fixed, or the dimples that defied the not-there cheekbones as if saying, “Go on! Give it a go! *Jut* a little!”? Kate didn’t care. As long as she could roll out, day after day, in her foreign correspondent–inspired uniform of khaki green hipster boot-legs and what could have been a smart-but-casual cord jacket had she ever deigned to take it to the dry cleaner’s, and get on with the more important things in life, it was as if she was vaccinated against vanity. Instead she prided herself on being an anomaly in a sea of dunderheads for remaining defiantly immune to the mutual celeb-fan infatuation. But she knew, professionally speaking, that if the world was prepared to make fools of their sycophantic selves, fawning at the feet of the morally dispossessed, pandering to the lowest of the low, and worshipping at the altar of this cult of *celebrity*, then as the senior reporter for *Maidstone Bazaar* (there was no junior reporter, due to staff cuts, but they’d given her the title to make her feel better), then she would have to as well. She would have to fawn, and then write, so they could read.

And now she'd fawned, and she'd written, and they were reading, and the biggest surprise of all? It felt good. Damn good. Kate Miller stuck her feet up on her desk, leaned back in her chair, inhaled a postcelebrity cigarette, and allowed her face to stretch out in a wide, self-satisfied grin, safe in the knowledge that with the others down at the pub for lunch she was alone to indulge, to relive, reread, uninterrupted, her moment of glory, lying just a few feet away under her desk. A couple more puffs, and she sat up again, reaching down under the desk with one hand, rooting around in the recyclable carrier bag at her ankles. As she blindly negotiated her way between last month's *Green Issues* magazine and a foil-wrapped cheese sandwich her mum had made her, trying to find that day's copy she'd rolled up expressly for this moment, she could picture the blue one-hundred-and-forty-point typeface:

MAIDSTONE WEEKLY NEWS

See the image of Trisha Hillmory in the puff panel in the right-hand corner (in a red swimsuit). Delight in the right cross-ref she knew by heart: TRISHA'S BEAUTY SECRETS, MAIDSTONE BAZAAR EXCLUSIVE, SEE MAGAZINE. She retrieved the newspaper, put it on the desk in front of her, smoothing out the creases with her hands, and stared at those three magic words again: BY KATE MILLER. Her first front-page byline. Her first celebrity story.

It was hardly surprising the editor, Brian Palmers, had been so thrilled. Trisha Hillmory, BBC national newscaster, was indeed a rare and beautiful thing. A Maidstone A-lister. Celebrities had spread from international cities (London, New York, Los Angeles) to large regional towns (Newcastle, Liverpool, Manchester) thanks to football and its trappings, namely the footballer's wife. Even some northern, hitherto unnoteworthy

towns (Nottingham, Shrewsbury, Blackpool) had a smattering thanks to the return visit of migrating soap stars deigning to open a cinema, appear in a play, or scratch a donkey's nose on the beach for a photo op. But strangely, Maidstone, county town of Kent, adult population 138,959 (census 2001 statistics), had not attracted them just yet, even though it had once boasted Europe's first drive-in cinema (opened by Diana Dors, no less, now sadly closed due to lack of interest) and was the home to Kimberly-Clark, one of Britain's biggest toilet paper manufacturers. And as everyone, even celebrities, needed toilet paper, that should have been enough to put the town on the map, shouldn't it?

Kate had known she was on to a winner the moment Trisha Hillmory's front door had opened that rainy afternoon ten days ago. The orange-colored manager man came out—the same one she'd seen that morning at the swimming pool opening where she'd first met Trisha. Only this time, instead of welcoming her, or facilitating the interview as she presumed was the reason for his presence, Donald Truckell—she had Googled him—flounced out of the door and brushed past her without so much as a backward glance. His face was flushed florid. He gave a petulant stamp to his feet before fandangoing his way like Rumpelstiltskin with a fake tan down Trisha's redbrick path.

"Off. Get her off," he muttered into his lapels, shaking his jacket with panicky, jerky movements, as if a tick had just landed on it. She thought she saw his hair move, slide toward his shoulder as if to give it a cheer-up pat. He clamped his flabby hand to his hair, slid it back up, and strode on, crown intact.

It left Kate in the unsatisfactory position of not really knowing what to do. With the front door still open, she had considered calling Trisha from her mobile, offering to postpone the interview. Something had happened. The interviewee needed time to reflect. To compose herself. She considered it for about two seconds, that is.

A brown court shoe with a bow at the front came hurling through the air at full force, grazing her cheek.

“Ow!” said Kate. “That was me you hit!”

“Who’s that?” The voice that came from somewhere upstairs was different from the one belonging to the Trisha Kate had met before. At the Larkfield Leisure Centre pool reopening she’d been magnanimous Trisha, generous toward this scruffy local reporter who still dressed like a student. She had laughed gaily at childhood reminiscences of Larkfield Leisure Centre before the lottery money makeover. She had promised Kate an interview later that same day, all to benefit her favorite local charity, just as soon as she’d thought of one.

And now here she was. Happy, confident Trisha the newscaster was crumpled in a ball at the top of the stairs, her hair a tangled mess, her mascara making smoky trickles down her face.

There was no way Kate was going to postpone this. No way! First rule of journalism: The early bird catches the worm. And if it wriggles away, run after it. She’d made that last bit up, but it seemed apt given the circumstances.

“Oh. It’s you. The local journalist.” Trisha dabbed at her eyes with the back of her sleeve, then sniffed noisily. “Did I . . . ?”

“It’s okay. Really, it didn’t hurt.”

BBC TRISHA ATTACKS LOCAL REPORTER.

Trisha stared at her with misty eyes. “I . . . we . . . just had, you know, a row. Lovers’ tiff. Silly really, isn’t it?” She stood up. Her pink suit was creased. The once-jaunty split of her skirt hung limp and puckered like a pair of curtains whose lining had shrunk in the wash.

What was silly? The tiff? Or the fact that Orange Man was her lover? Kate had cautiously stepped into the house, her war wounds entitling her to an all-access pass. On the wall alongside the stairs, light green wallpaper with a fleur-de-lis pattern

embossed on it was broken up by four wood-framed prints of nineteenth-century women taking walks in long white skirts on deserted beaches. The frames had fake antique woodworm marks in them. She reached for her notebook to start writing notes, details, the kind of woodworm trivia her readers would lap up, then pulled back. Writing notes perhaps wasn't the most sensitive of things to do in times of crisis. There it was again, the sensitive side of her.

BBC TRISHA THROWS OUT LOVE-RAT!

"How about a cup of tea?" said Trisha, stifling a sobbing noise in an effort to regain control of the situation. "I know I'm ready for one!" Fake laughter. "I'm sorry about the, er . . . shoe thing." She limped down the stairs, thickly carpeted in cream, and sat on the bottom step, sticking her left foot out expectantly.

"Oh! I'm sorry. Your shoe!" said Kate, proffering it to her.

Over several cups of tea, perching uncomfortably on a spinning breakfast-bar chair with a shallow back and such an oversensitive axis that Kate had to balance herself every time she took a sip from her mug or risk splashing Trisha with the hot liquid, Trisha explained the cause of the shoe-throwing incident. It was the stuff a young reporter's dreams were made of. Or even a thirty-two-year-old senior reporter's dreams were made of.

Trisha had been in a deeply unhappy relationship with her manager, a svengali figure whom she'd met while still at university (she'd studied classics at Oxford, which surprised Kate as she'd always thought of Trisha as one of those new generation newscasters who looked pretty but was only just clever enough to throw in the odd impromptu question to an interview subject, the Minister of Agriculture in Mali, say). Orange Man had propelled her rapidly forward in her career, thanks mainly to his impeccable contacts and Trisha's own talent, but theirs quickly became a platonic relationship as her work took

off. Things had finally come to a fore when he found out she'd been having an affair with her personal trainer, a former dancer from the Ballet Rambert she'd met while doing an obituary piece on a Royal Ballet legend. Now Trisha had finally plucked up the courage to ditch Orange Man once and for all, and he hadn't taken it well.

SEX-MAD TRISH IN LOVE TRIANGLE.

It was a winner.

It seemed hideously unfair that a woman in this day and age would have to short-circuit her way to the top by having sexual relations with a man with a toupee. But then, did she really have to? Why couldn't she have done what every other self-respecting young reporter did and sit it out in the suburbs until she was ready to make her transition to a national? Kate knew the answer to that one already. They might be the same age, but you wouldn't catch Trisha putting up with stories like "Maidstone Mum Moonlights as Pole Dancer." Lame, lame, lame. But now it was Kate's turn. This story was her break—her sex with her own Orange Man. Her short-circuit to a national paper, or even a long, convoluted, meandering, scenic route to a national. Sure, she'd have to get a few more Trisha Hillmorys first, but write this story and doors would open. Promotion. The making of her career. Today Maidstone. Tomorrow London. After that, who knew?

Just as she was working out what percentage pay rise she could negotiate, Trisha dropped the bomb.

"Of course," she said, clicking two Splenda into her bone-china mug, "you can't write about any of this, you do know that, don't you?" The tears had dried up, but her face was still streaked with mascara. It did nothing to dispel the steely narrowing of her eyes as she stirred her tea, the spoon hitting the sides of the cup in a steady, even rhythm. "I always sue . . . always."

Kate slipped off the spinning chair, slopping her tea onto her lap.

“You do? . . . You sue?” She couldn’t let this story go, just couldn’t. “But of course you know you can trust me, I mean, I’d never—”

“Never write about me in anything but a sympathetic style? Oh, sure. I know. Give me copy approval. Give me two weeks in the bleeding Bahamas. Give me a new Balenciaga. Anything. Just so long as you can break the story. . . .” She reached for her handbag, a bulging, dark brown leather thing with buckles and clasps all over, and pulled out a compact. It clicked open, extra loudly now that Kate’s cozy companionship was vanquished, leaving in its place a void of bittersweet professional distance. Trisha examined her face in the mirror, dusting powder over the smudges where the tears had been, pressing it determinedly with an expert hand.

“The thing is, you might be like that, Kate, and you seem like a nice person so I suppose I could trust you. But those others . . . They’ll be dreaming up the headlines the moment you tell them about all this. . . . I can see it now . . . ‘Sex-Mad Trish in Love Triangle!’”

“Oh, no, you don’t think . . . of course we wouldn’t . . . they wouldn’t . . . I mean, you really don’t think that . . .” She felt her face and neck burning up, hot and red with guilt and embarrassment.

Trisha stood up squarely in front of Kate, who began swinging her chair from side to side. She stared. Kate shivered.

“Of course, there is the small matter of the graze,” she said, patting a little powder onto Kate’s cheek. The flesh-colored dust stung as it settled in the contours of the reddened scratch.

“Ouch!”

“So, I’ll give you a different story,” continued Trisha, ignoring

her complaint. "It'll be positive. An 'at home with Trisha' type of thing. Plug the charity. Talk about my favorite moisturizer. And all right, you can have the end of my affair," she continued, "but we'll do it my way, okay? No shoe throwing. And I'm not seeing anyone else, you understand? Not yet, anyway. Now do we have a deal?"

AT HOME WITH TRISHA. BBC STAR REVEALS HER BEAUTY SECRETS.

It might just work.

"One more thing. Trisha Hillmory has never had Botox. Do you understand? Never ever."

She snapped the compact shut.