



Five-star floozies

Lee Tulloch is fascinated by women who hang around hotel lobbies hoping for rich pickings, writes **NICOLE ROSE**.



‘Mistress of a wealthy man – I’m fascinated by that choice.’



In a Parisian hotel some years ago, a young journalist on her first overseas assignment for *Vogue Australia* was invited to accompany a man she had never met for a weekend in Capri.

The journalist was Lee Tulloch and had she accepted that invitation her latest novel, *The Woman In The Lobby*, could well have turned into a memoir.

"Right away, I thought there's no way I'm going to do that," Tulloch says. "The thought of going off with a wealthy gentleman I didn't know was just abhorrent.

"I was very middle class and always a good girl. But there would be a kind of woman who'd say 'OK, I'm interested in other things - in wealth - and I'm prepared to take a risk'."

On countless visits overseas, Tulloch observed the kind of woman who would say yes.

In some of the world's most luxurious hotels, beautiful young women discreetly work the lobbies in search of rich men. The women are paid companions and along with the odd male gigolo, accept gifts like designer clothes, jewellery, first-class airline tickets, resort-style hotel accommodation and even a penthouse apartment in exchange for sex.

You can always pick them out in a crowded lobby - she's the woman carrying the most expensive handbag, Tulloch says. "Quite often these girls pull up in incredibly good cars and they go straight up to a hotel room and [concierges] don't stop them because the guests want them."

However, the joke can be on the concierge. The lobbies of hotels like the Mayflower in Washington DC are often overrun with sex workers and identifying which women are on corporate business can be as difficult as remembering whether a guest is accompanied by their wife or mistress.

Tulloch's novel opens during cocktail hour in a hotel lobby: it's the devil's hour when gentlemen are known to stray from their intended paths.

Her protagonist, Violet Armengard, is a middle-class, 30-year-old from Melbourne, abandoned by her husband and later picked up by a

handsome Ukrainian tennis star for one night of uninhibited sex. She follows him to Paris only to find herself abandoned yet again and drifts into a world where women are paid to accompany rich men.

"I know an Australian who became the mistress of a very wealthy American man she met by a pool in Greece," Tulloch recalls. "He would send her tickets and she would meet him somewhere in the world.

"It wasn't necessarily a mercenary thing and she wasn't necessarily selling herself, but she accepted that kind of life - mistress of a wealthy man. I've been fascinated by that choice."

Far from a happy hooker tale, Tulloch explores the question of what it means to be "bought". Violet is seduced by the material luxuries afforded by her work. Tulloch reserves any moral judgment, but she uses the character of Violet to take a swipe at our wayward impulses.

"I see a lot of people who are kind of empty shells of consumerism," she

says. "When it's raining what do we do? We go to the shopping mall.

"So of course, someone like Violet in having all those pleasurable things given to her, having done the deal, in the end it's not what she wants at all. And that's where a lot of people end up."

And while paid companions like to distance themselves from those who work the streets, beneath the polished packaging the transactions are fundamentally the same.

After New York Governor Eliot Spitzer was caught with a call girl, *The New York Times* published a story containing interviews with sex workers. One spoke about her rise from the streets earning \$50 an hour and how after joining a high class escort agency, her fee rose to \$1500. She turned exactly the same tricks, but the men treated her with more respect.

"In the end it's just about marketing," Tulloch says. "There's no particular mystique.

"There are questions I ask about, 'what is selling yourself?' And if you do make that transaction for a relationship, is it necessarily

a bad thing? There are some women who are able to say 'well, this is what I want from a relationship and this is how I'm going to go about getting it.'"

For others, the line between respectable courtesan and common trollop is so fine they invariably fail to shake off accusations of entrapping wealthy men through sex.

Heather Mills was publicly vilified after claims emerged alleging she had worked as an escort.

Whatever the untold details of her marriage to Sir Paul McCartney, Tulloch believes Mills copped a bad wrap.

"It appears as though she's a gold digger supreme," she says. "The interesting thing is that everyone immediately went 'poor Paul, he's been vulnerable to this voracious female who's just gone after him for his money.'

"That may very well be true, but it's like businessmen who complain when they take a hooker to their hotel room and she's ripped them off. There's an element of risk. He can't have been that naive."

With each chapter of *The Woman In The Lobby*, Violet flits from one hotel to the next. It was a deliberate device that allowed Tulloch to indulge her own passion for hotels.

The author, who lived in New York for 10 years and later Paris, recalls regular excursions to hotel lobbies: "Sometimes if I was bored at home and didn't want to go shopping, I'd go and sit in a hotel lobby because in a way you're getting a glamorous environment for free."

Among her favourites are the Regina Hotel in Paris, the Windsor in Melbourne and the Peninsula in Hong Kong.

Tulloch took three years to write *The Woman In The Lobby* and like her previous novels, including *Fabulous Nobodies* (now being optioned for the cinema), it is essentially about identity.

"I'm very interested in how we reinvent ourselves," she says.

"This book is really about how through sex we do invent ourselves and how self-conscious we are about something like that and that maybe we shouldn't be."

The Woman In The Lobby is published by Penguin, \$32.95.

