



Tales from the frontier

A pilot turned writer bases her heroines on the tough, smart women she works with, writes **Fiona Purdon**

GLAMOROUS female pilots, national security threats and terrorist agents in tropical North Queensland — this scenario may seem far-fetched but new novel *Border Watch* is anchored in reality.

Debut author Helene Young should know — she has been a pilot for 20 years, including 12 years based in Cairns and was inspired to write her book after hearing colleagues' stories.

Young, 46, says women make up 10 per cent of pilots at Qantaslink in Cairns and there "are plenty of young and capable female pilots" that she used as models for her romantic heroine, Captain Morgan Pentland.

"They exist, I work with them, they are wonderful, young and amazing women. They are all beautiful," Young says.

"These days it is easier for women to get into aviation but early on, it was not an easy road, and it was only the determined young women who kept going in a male-dominated area."

Border Watch opens when Morgan finds a murder victim on a Cairns' beach.

In 2003, Young found a body on her local beach. A father had died trying to save his son in a boating accident.

"I was walking along the beach and there he was," she says. "It was nothing other than a tragedy.

"It took me a long while to write about it. It was still a bit raw for a long time. I realised the book (*Border Watch*) needed more action so I decided to start

it with a guy getting killed on the beach."

Young, who lives on the edge of the Great Barrier Reef in Cairns, feels privileged to have such a breathtaking work environment — from Hamilton Island to the top of Cape York peninsula and across to Weipa in northwest Queensland.

"I flew in to Hamilton Island yesterday, it was gorgeous," she says. "I'm very lucky that someone pays me to have

fun every day. The North Queensland environment is such an integral part of life up here . . . it's a larger than life environment."

But despite the idyllic setting, Young knew there was enough high-level espionage, security and illegal immigration activity in North Queensland to be moulded into a viable action story.

Young regularly flies with ex-Surveillance Australia pilots who entertain her during flights with their exciting adventures.

"So much goes on that never makes the media; there is a veil of secrecy," Young says. "People in Sydney and Melbourne forget how close our northern neighbours are, they are only a boat journey away. Indonesia is just over the horizon."

Young was keen to develop the back story of illegal immigrants in her novel. She still vividly remembers an incident 12 years ago when a small Indonesian fishing boat remained unsighted until arriving on a northern Cairns beach.

It was only when the boat's crew hailed a taxi driver, who became suspicious of

the poorly dressed men who spoke little English, that they were discovered.

Young also wanted to give recognition to the dedicated staff at Australian Customs Service's Surveillance Coastwatch program who "are up in the air every day" trying to protect Australia's vast coastline.

Border Watch is the first in Young's North Queensland-based romance-action trilogy featuring strong and heroic female pilots.

She has started writing the second book, which will concentrate on sex slaves, human trafficking and navy patrols and will feature Lauren, a colourful colleague of Morgan's in *Border Watch*. The third book will be about bushfires.

Young says she didn't start writing until she moved to Cairns 12 years ago and her flying schedule around the Whitsunday Islands allowed her more free time.

Border Watch is her fifth book but "the first book I've got to a standard that publishers could look at".

She always dreamed about writing for Mills and Boon but could never adhere to their strict formula, and, as a fan of John le Carre's spy books, always liked to write about action. "I wanted to write the sort of books I love to read, books that have a bit of action and romance," she says. "I wanted to take people to somewhere they've never necessarily been before."

***Border Watch* by Helene Young, Hachette, \$30.**



Helene Young's novel is the first of a trilogy set in steamy FNQ

Mark Cranitch