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Maiden flight with fiction

Life as a Queensland pilot has inspired a high-flying debut novel, 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.

And first-time author Helene Young should know. She has been a pilot for 20 years, including 12 based in Cairns and decided to write her book after her experiences and 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 with lead character Morgan finding a murder victim on a Cairns beach while on her daily jog.

In 2003, Young found a dead body while walking along the beach. A father had died while 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 needed more action so I decided to start it with a guy getting killed on the beach."

Young, who lives on the fringe 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 into 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."

Despite the idyllic setting, Young knew there was enough high-level espionage and illegal immigration activity in north Queensland to be moulded into a viable action story. She regularly flies with former pilots of Surveillance Australia, which holds the contract for the Australian Customs Service's Coastwatch program. Those pilots often entertain her with tales of their exciting adventures.

"There is so much that goes on that never makes the media."

There is a veil of secrecy," Young says. "People forget how close our northern neighbours are. They are only a boat journey away. Indonesia is just over the horizon."

Young was also 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.

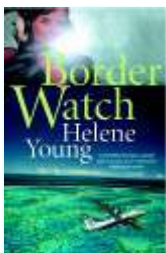
Young also wanted to give recognition to the dedicated staff at Australian Customs Service's Coastwatch program who are "up in the air every day" trying to protect Australia's vast coastline.

Border Watch is the first in Young's north Queensland-based romance-action trilogy. She has started writing the second book, which will focus on sex slaves, human trafficking and navy patrols and will feature Lauren, a colourful pilot 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 and her flying schedule around the Whitsunday Islands allowed her more free time.

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

She always dreamed about writing for iconic romance publisher Mills and Boon but could not adhere to their strict formula and, as a fan of John le Carre's spy books, liked to write about action. "I wanted to take people to somewhere they've never necessarily been before," she says.



Border Watch
Helene Young
 Hatchette,
 \$29.99



SET FOR TAKE-OFF: Pilot and first-time author Helene Young at her day job.