

What makes a person disappear from society and destroy their identity? How do they think they will get away with pretending they are dead?

Author Wendy Lewis's latest book *Playing Dead* explores the famous, the crazy and the just plain dumb ways people disappear in the modern world and how they are discovered.

"I write true crime and the last book I wrote (*The Australian Book of Family Murders*) was about domestic murders, which was pretty full on," Wendy says from her Sydney base.

"It was quite confronting, so I was looking for something not quite so gruesome."

Wendy got the idea for *Playing Dead*, however, from her gruesome topic, as she had researched and discovered murderers,

who appeared to be nice people until the moment they committed their crime.

For *Playing Dead*, she discovered plenty of charming players, who had no compunction about leaving their spouses, their working lives, and even their children, to start a new life in a different part of the world.

Most of them were men.

The only women Wendy found were those who conspired with men to disappear for insurance payouts.

"I think probably there were many people who fake their deaths for financial reasons, who may have been cooking the books," Wendy says.

"It is often men who are the risk takers, who are wheeling and dealing, and end up in that situation.

"Men also seem to be able to leave their wives and children and have the capacity to say, 'that was my life then, and I'm not

thinking about it', and they are able to make a fresh start."

Not only do they start new lives but they are astonished when they get caught.

"They have this confidence that they won't get caught; that they are invincible," Wendy says.

"Usually then it's a big shock when they are caught and their whole world falls down."

John Darwin disappeared one day in a red canoe and was reported missing by his wife but within five years he turned up at a police station claiming he didn't know what had happened.

He was found with his wife in someone's holiday photographs in Panama.

The couple had kept up the lie to their two sons that he was dead.

confessing," Wendy says.

Then there was murderer John Allen who escaped conviction for 25 years until his ex lover wrote a book and revealed details of when his wife and children were killed that hadn't been told to the police.

"It took a while to whittle down the stories, particularly in the UK, where there seemed to be a lot of middle-aged men who disappear," Wendy says.

"There are the famous stories of high-profile barristers who go somewhere else to grow daffodils.

"They seem unable to communicate and think it's better for everyone if they left, and they like to do it in a big way.

"They think, if I'm dead, I can start again – they can't take the pressures of modern life and they don't want to offend."

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There's Olivia Newton John's ex-partner, Patrick McDermott, a missing person thought lost at sea, over which there is still controversy as there have been many supposed sightings of him and there are hits on a website from Mexico, which Wendy believes may be him.

"It is an unsolved case," Wendy says.

Some of the tales are really quite bizarre and the minds creating the schemes not too bright.

"There is a story about Clayton and Molly Daniels, who dug up a body of an 80-year-old woman, and set it on fire, and pushed it off a cliff," Wendy says.

The idea was to say the body was Clayton's.

"They thought they got away with it and even the autopsy got it wrong, saying it was likely a Caucasian male, but in another study of the body parts, it was found to be a woman," Wendy says.

In 70 per cent of all missing person cases, the person reported missing returns home after three days.

Wendy says it's very unusual for people to go through with going missing for life, and then only the ones who are caught are known about.

Clearly, the successful ones are not.

When they are caught, it is rarely directly because they are being traced, but more often than not because of something minor that leads to the revelation.

Bennie Wint, for example, was presumed drowned, but was pulled over by police because of his car brake lights. When he couldn't produce identification he was arrested.

"They wouldn't let him out until he could prove who he was, and so he was in a dilemma, and he ended up

Wendy's favourite case is one about a couple from Louisiana; Milton and Sheila Harris, because of the effort they put into a disappearance.

"He wanted to move because he was afraid of a nuclear holocaust so he went on a family holiday to New Zealand, and then he came to Australia," Wendy says.

"He was going to catch a ferry to Kangaroo Island and he had hired a motorbike, so he drove off the gangplank of the ferry into the water."

Concealed in his backpack was an oxygen tank, which he had planned to use after the ferry left, but unluckily for him "a feisty 70 year old" jumped into the water to rescue the hapless fraudster.

Three days later he tried the same thing in New Zealand and this time it worked and his wife in Louisiana received the insurance money.

She was, however, supposed to share it with him.

"It was sadly comical because the agreement was that she was supposed to send him money, but she started spending it," Wendy says.

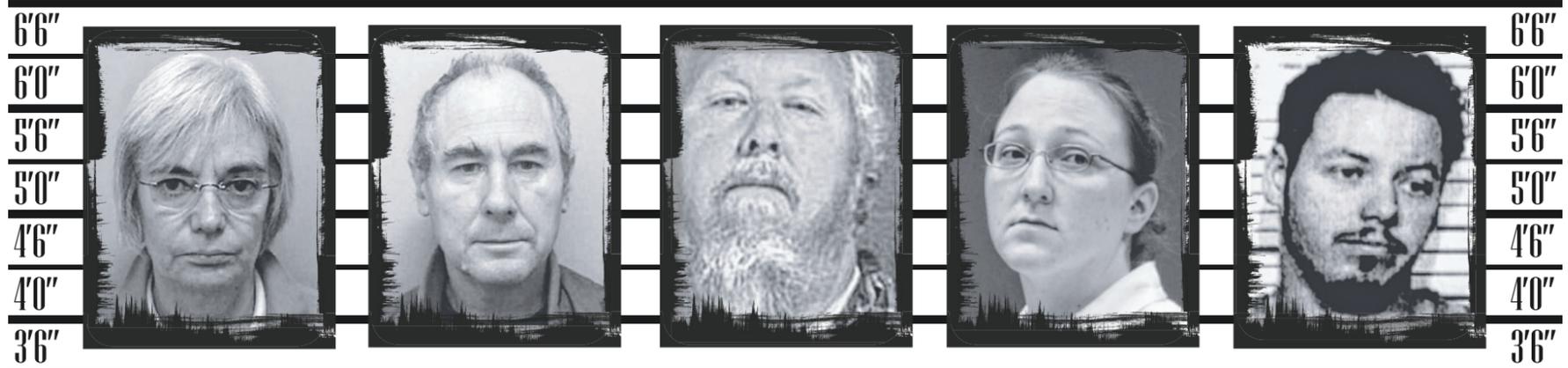
"He became involved with another woman and they had a baby, but he couldn't get work.

"He spent about a decade without being tracked down but then when his partner had a new baby, he was arrested for trying to shoplift booties."

■ *Playing Dead - True Tales of Fake Suicides* by Wendy Lewis is available from all good book stores and from www.fivemile.com.au.

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Wendy Lewis's latest book examines those who have faked their own deaths (and their partners in crime) including (left to right) Anne and John Darwin, Bennie Wint, Molly and Jake Daniels.