

"A gripping thriller. Delivers suspense, twists, and sharp writing."

—LISA JEWELL, author of *I Found You*

The perfect brother. The perfect boyfriend. The perfect lie.

THE GIRL- FRIEND

A NOVEL

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READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Mags and Jody are starkly different characters. Which point of view did you most enjoy reading?
2. Few believe Jody when she comes forward after being raped. What do you think this says about mental illness and our current rape culture? How was Jody victim-shamed?
3. Do you think Jody is an unreliable narrator? How do we learn the truth through her story?
4. What role does Daniel play in Mags's life? Do you think they are a good match? Why does she continually push him away?
5. What do you make of the tenants of St. Jerome's? If you had to, would you live in a building like that?
6. Why do you think Jody fails to come forward with the real story of Abe's fall? Do you think she holds some responsibility for his death?

The Girlfriend

7. Why do you think Jody is drawn to Abe in the first place?
8. What role does Mira play in this? Do you think she is in the wrong for keeping quiet?
9. Compare and contrast Mags's and Jody's childhoods. How were they affected by their dark pasts? How are these characters similar? Different?
10. At the end of the story, we see Felix take the stand and apologize to Jody for what he had done as a child. Do you think he should be forgiven?
11. Do you think, in the end, Mags and Jody's revenge was justified? Why or why not?
12. Imagine you were Mags. Would you seek revenge, or would the truth be enough?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

Where did the idea for *The Girlfriend* come from?

I had just read an excellent thriller with a famous twist (fortunately, I didn't know it was famous at the time) that sent me scrabbling back to the beginning to try to work out how the author did it. This got me thinking about a plot that takes you one way, only to completely confound your expectations. Thrillers frequently use first person points of view, and so this naturally led to the idea of an unreliable narrator (or three). The device works so brilliantly in psychological thrillers to unsettle the reader, and so, without wishing to give away too many spoilers, I thought I'd have a go at a twist with an unreliable narrator—to see how many readers I could fool and for how long.

We move between Jody's and Mags's points of view throughout most of the story. Which character was the easiest to write? The most challenging? Why?

Mags was easiest because she articulates the selfish, ambitious, and ruthless aspects of my own nature. Most adults, when they have families of their own, suppress these parts of themselves, so it was a great pleasure to temporarily inhabit someone who,

because of the baggage she carries, entirely ignores the needs of others and makes her choices entirely for herself.

I thought that Mira would be difficult because of her ethnicity and religion, but actually, the universal truths of being a woman gave me plenty of reference points: her relationship with the important men and women in her life, her need to be loved, the surface fragility of her self-esteem, and the core of strength that only emerged when she had someone to protect. I liked Mira a great deal.

Jody was tricky. I didn't want her to come across as someone of very low intelligence, and I didn't want her to be contemptible, at least not as the book progresses. Her retreat into fantasy had to be convincing. The passages of backstory helped me get a handle on her, and I hope that, in the end, she comes across as a survivor—clinging to a fragile raft of reality, yes, but still alive and still swimming.

Jody has a very tragic and dark childhood, which is shown through flashbacks throughout the novel. Was it difficult to write about such a horrific subject? How did you get in and out of that headspace?

I was very aware while writing the book that, never having personally experienced anything so dreadful, I needed to be cautious. I didn't want to misrepresent, trivialize, or offend, but equally, I felt that such stories should be told and that victims shouldn't only be portrayed as one-dimensional figures of pity and horror. My intention at the end was to hint at a brighter future for Jody.

From a personal point of view, I took my time with the backstory elements, dipping in and out when I felt like it, and sometimes avoiding those sections for months. The scene where Jody runs away from school made me cry as I wrote it.

Which character did you connect with the most?

Weirdly, though I wasn't expecting it, Mira. I think she's the bravest of all of them. Though London is an incredibly ethnically and religiously diverse city, sometimes our lives don't intersect much, but writing is an act of walking in someone else's shoes, and that's always enlightening. I enjoyed writing about her family and imagining an idyllic childhood for her in Albania. Of all the characters—and I know this is an annoying writer cliché—Mira sort of wrote herself.

Was there any research involved to further understand Jody's mental state? Do you think she is an unreliable narrator?

Absolutely! But then, aren't we all? Jody lives in a fantasy world she has built to protect herself from the grim reality of her life. We all do this to some extent—constructing narratives around ourselves that make us the hero or the victim but always in the right—though we don't all doctor the facts quite so wholeheartedly.

In terms of research, I read enough about dissociative disorders and the way abuse survivors can slip into a fantasy world to reassure myself that Jody's response to her situation was plausible. When it came to the construction of the fantasies themselves, I was already an expert. As a child, I lived most of my life in a semidreamland (often featuring Adam Ant), and it wouldn't have taken much for me to step through the looking glass.

What draws you to the thriller genre?

My tastes are pretty eclectic actually, and until I started *The Girlfriend*, I'd only really read the big name psychological thrillers like *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*. Reading more widely in the genre showed me that the best of these are as good as any more traditionally "literary" novel. But unlike these less commercial books, thrillers are a proper visceral experience—your heart pounds and your pulse races as you flip those pages with hungry zeal. I can see why people get addicted.

There are a lot of really great twists throughout *The Girlfriend*. Do you have any advice for aspiring writers hoping to keep readers on their toes?

I remember talking to my editor just after experiencing the blinding revelation that every thriller needs a good twist. She looked at me very hard and said, “*A twist? We need one for every chapter.*” Initially, this seemed incredibly daunting, but like every creative constraint, it was actually rather liberating, and soon, I was capering like Rumpelstiltskin, gleefully tossing them around like sweets. The same thing applies to some degree in every genre. Every chapter, every scene needs if not a twist, then a shift. If everything’s great at the beginning, it must be terrible by the end. That’s how to keep people gripped, whatever the genre.