

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

Clare Mackintosh



HOSTAGE

Sophia's attachment struggles are a poignant thread throughout the book. How did you learn about the adoption process? How did that compare to your research process for airlines and flights?

I have a number of friends who have adopted children, and who were generous enough to speak openly to me about their lives. Some families encounter no significant issues as their adoptive children settle in and grow up, but several of my friends have found it a challenging – although no less rewarding – experience. My time in the police had exposed me to the long-lasting impact of childhood trauma, and I wanted to explore this area. I was particularly struck by one friend's account of how her daughter, adopted at birth, had asked for a hug for the very first time at the age of ten. Attachment disorder is deep-rooted and long-lasting, and I wanted to write about the impact of this on a relationship.

Researching the aviation side of the book was equally interesting. I based the layout of my fictional aircraft on a combination of real-life planes, and quickly fell down a rabbit warren of online resources. Flight attendants are extraordinarily indiscreet on message boards, and there is a surprising amount of information about how to deal with a hostage situation. I spent hours on the brilliant NATS.aero website, where their 'Plane Talking' site enables you to listen to Air Traffic Controllers guide a real flight into London Heathrow.

Adam and Mina anchor the majority of the narrative, but there are plenty of other points of view. Did you have a favorite character to write? Did anyone capture your attention more than you expected?

*I usually have the most fun writing the 'baddies' in my books, and I very much enjoyed those sections in *HOSTAGE*, but it was Sophia who really came alive for me. I have a particular soft spot for children with big vocabularies and questioning minds, and I loved giving her a voice and agency in the story.*

The terrorists in this book come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Do you think that everyone is susceptible to radicalization on some level? What do we miss when we define terrorism narrowly?

Radicalization is manipulation, and all manipulation is based on identifying the target's weak spots and offering a solution to them. It could be financial security or a roof over someone's head; it could be a father figure or a friend with a listening ear. Everybody needs something, which means everyone has the potential to be manipulated...

The word 'terrorist' immediately makes us think of religious extremists, but a terrorist is someone who uses violence or intimidation in the pursuit of political aims. Such a broad definition encompasses so much more than religion, and although I've chosen to highlight environmental extremism in this novel, the cause could have been any one of a number. Throughout 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic devastated the world, I was horrified by the number of 'Covid deniers' I came across on social media. I watched as they blocked people who held opposite views to their own, creating an echo chamber that would strengthen their beliefs. The internet has made it very easy to find one's tribe.

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You point out that fundamentalist activists are rarely sympathetic. When you worked as a protest liaison officer, what strategies were most effective in gaining public sympathy and support for a cause?

No one is without flaws, and few of us have no redeeming features. I was fascinated by the workings of extremists, and had a reluctant respect for their passion and single-mindedness. The most successful causes play on the emotions of their targets. Think about the times you've given money to a good cause: nine times out of ten it's because a photograph, story or statistic has made its way to your heart. For the organization hoping to secure sympathy, research is the key. They have to know their audience and understand how to push their buttons. A demonstration held by a right wing organization gathered huge support in an area with high unemployment, by sowing the seed that unwanted immigration was responsible. We all have a responsibility, I think, to do our own research, and to ensure we are not being swayed by someone else's agenda.

In general, does your background in police work change the way you write?

Absolutely. I am fascinated by the grey area between good and bad, and firmly believe we are all capable of committing terrible crimes, if the circumstances were right. I explore this in much of what I write, which means you can never really trust any of my characters...

How often do you come up with new ideas for a book? How many of those ideas would you estimate make it to a full manuscript?

*I'm constantly thinking of 'what if?' questions, or extraordinary situations in which I might drop ordinary people to see how they cope. A fraction of those are right for a novel, and I have several half-finished books behind me, where the idea simply wasn't enough to continue. *HOSTAGE* is one of the rare times when I had the idea and knew almost immediately what would happen, and how it would end. It made it a hugely enjoyable book to write, and – I hope – to read.*

As a writer, at times you've challenged yourself to step outside crime fiction and suspense. How does genre affect the way your stories develop? Do you think your suspense generally and *HOSTAGE* specifically have benefitted from writing other types of books?

*I am a firm believer that story is what matters, not genre, and I always think it is a shame when a reader staunchly refuses to read a particular type of book. Some of my favorite writers segue between – say – crime and literary fiction, and some of my favorite novels are a hybrid of two genres. My fourth novel, *AFTER THE END*, is a family drama, not a thriller, but it is every bit as suspenseful as a crime novel. The only difference I found, in writing it, was that the story was led more by the characters than by the plot. This pushed me to spend more time considering who the protagonists were, and why they made the choices they did. As I came to write *HOSTAGE* I found myself naturally spending more time on the backstory for Adam and Mina, and I think the novel is richer for it.*

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How has your writing process changed since your first novel? Do you have any advice for new writers?

Sometimes, at a literary event or writing workshop, I read a section from my debut psychological thriller, I LET YOU GO. I remain exceptionally proud of that novel, which is published now in more than forty countries, but that doesn't stop me wincing at some of the prose... Ten years of writing full-time has taught me a great deal, and I hope the next ten will teach me even more. Just as my prose – and plotting – has developed, so my process has changed. I am more analytical, more commercially aware, and quicker to abandon something I can see isn't working.

I have two bits of advice for new writers: the first general, and the second very specific and practical. Firstly, read everything. Read the bestsellers, read books your friends rave about, or your librarian recommends. Read non-fiction, crime novels, sci-fi and historical romance, regardless of the shelf on which you see your own work sitting. Understand why these books make you want to turn the page – or why you can't wait to put them down. Read, analyze, re-read. A good writer is a good reader.

When I started writing, I was still working full-time, and most new writers will know how difficult it can be to find time. Many authors are insistent that writing every day – no matter how few words – is the only way to be productive, but if that doesn't work for you (it didn't for me – I was too exhausted at the end of a police shift to string a sentence together) my second tip might be helpful. When you finish a writing session, don't finish at the end of a chapter. Stop in the midst of a scene – halfway through a piece of dialogue, even – and jot down a few bullet-points for what follows. When you next sit at your keyboard, or pick up your notebook, whether that's the next day or a week later, you can plunge straight into your manuscript and make the most of your precious writing time with no fear of the blank page.

