

Glasshopper by Isabel Ashdown

Reader Q & A



Did you find it easier to write Jake or Mary's voice?

I enjoyed them equally, partly because they allowed me to draw on my own experiences at different points in life — both as a teenager in the 1980s, and now, as a mother and wife watching my children grow. Both voices felt entirely natural.

Why did you decide to write from both of their points of view?

At the outset, I didn't plan Mary's narrative at all. But about a quarter of the way into writing Jake's story it became clear that Mary must have a voice or risk being portrayed as a monster — which is far from the truth. I tried writing a chapter from Mary's point of view, and immediately knew that the telling of her story was vital.

Did you find it easy alternating between the two voices?

Once I'd written that first chapter of Mary, I set her aside and continued with Jake's narrative strand. I wasn't comfortable with switching between voices during the writing process, as I need to feel firmly in the skin of just one character in order to see, feel and think like they do. Once I'd completed Jake's part (which represents two thirds of the book), I moved on to Mary, and at the very end, I plotted the two pieces together like a complex jigsaw, until I was happy with the way the structure worked for the characters and the story.

How important was it to set Jake's childhood in the eighties?

In a way, Jake chose the era. As soon as I started writing, he slipped effortlessly into that period, and I simply went with it. And like Jake, the eighties were my teen years, so I knew I could portray the inner workings of a child in that time.

Did you know how the book would end when you began it?

Not at all. But some way into the book, another short story I'd written kept nudging away at me, and whilst walking the dog in the Downs one afternoon, I suddenly realised that this short story contained the ending. It was a eureka moment.

Why did you choose this ending — did you ever have an alternative in mind?

There was never an alternative ending; once I discovered how this would end, I knew there could be no other outcome.

How much do you think Bill is to blame for what happens in the novel?

Alcoholism is a many-headed beast, and it's an illness that wants to attribute blame. The children feel blame because their parent doesn't love them enough to stop drinking. The partner feels responsible for not being able to help them out of it, or for feeling driven away. The alcoholic feels blame for their weakness and bad behaviour. I don't think Bill's to blame. At his core, he's a good, kind man — but he's also a man who avoids conflict, and who can't look the reality of the situation square in the eye. Hence his response at the climax of the book: when he can't cope with his anguish, he skirts around it, almost as if he hopes it might go away.

Do you feel any sympathy for Mary?

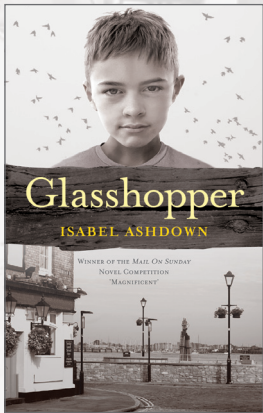
Of course. I'm very attached to Mary. She adores her boys, and she adores Billy. Theirs was a true love story, but then life took over, with its many interruptions and challenges. On the one hand I see Mary as a fragile, needy person, but on the other I see the strength of her convictions, for example against her parents' snobbish views or her mother-in-law's cold disapproval. She could be any one of us, and I hope that she comes across to the reader as a sympathetic character.

Do you think anything could have been done to change Mary and the outcome of her story?

Who knows? There's something inherently self-destructive and unpredictable about Mary's character, and it's impossible to know if things could have been different for her, or if she could ever have been 'fixed'. Perhaps not.

Are you tempted to write a sequel?

I'm often asked this question, usually because readers want to know about Jake, and what happens to him. 'Is he going to be OK?' one concerned reader asked me at a recent book festival. But I don't think a sequel would be right, at least not for now. However, I am tempted to write about one of the other characters, perhaps Matthew, or Gypsy. I think they'd make for a fascinating read. And as far as Jake's concerned I'm glad to say I feel pretty optimistic for him; Jake's a good lad — he'll be OK.



Isabel Ashdown's first novel, *Glasshopper*, was published to critical acclaim in 2009 and an extract from the novel won the *Mail on Sunday* Novel Competition. Her next book, *Hurry Up and Wait*, is out in June 2011.



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