

Q&A with Hannah Begbie

What inspired you to write *Mother*?

My youngest son was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis when he was five weeks old. I felt both overwhelmed with the sheer amount of stuff we'd have to do to keep him halfway healthy, and also frightened of the risks to his health that I now saw in the world around me. I felt like my job as a mother, to sustain and nurture life, had been impossibly compromised. There was guilt and pain, but there was also a new baby that I loved wholeheartedly. My response to these complex feelings was to write: I began creating characters and situations that allowed me to explore some of the possibilities that lay before me. Really, I think I was trying to come to terms with how to love while living with an acute fear of loss.

I was also interested in how mothers of chronically ill children are often seen as 'saintly', seeming to put aside *all* of their own needs in favour of supporting their child – a kind of Platonic ideal of motherhood, where nothing but the child is central. But can this imperative to protect and nurture really trump all other considerations? What happens to these women's desires and dreams, their complexity, their rage, their doubt?

***Mother* deals with some intensely raw emotional depths as Cath negotiates a life-changing illness which affects her new baby. With the bare bones of the medical plot based on your own personal experience, how did you find the process of writing this novel?**

Some of the medical plot was indeed drawn from our experience of having a child diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, but I reconstituted all of it through Cath's eyes. Her background and character created a very different set of responses to the situation than those that I had experienced. Writing the novel was a complicated and sometimes unsettling process. As I wrote I was both removing myself from the pain of my own reality by inhabiting a character and yet diving into other dark and painful places. So it was a bruising process but I feel like the upside was getting to a raw truthfulness in Cath.

Was *Mother* the first book you wrote? Have you always written?

From the age of eight, my parents gave me a diary to write in every year and it's the most valuable present I've ever had. Writing every day allowed me to access an inner voice that gave me the confidence to build other voices. But I approached writing fiction very gradually. I used to be an agent (representing comedians and screenwriters) and one thing I always told my clients was: don't send out work until it's ready, because you never get a second shot at that first impression. I had embarked on early drafts for other ideas, but *Mother* was the first time I felt compelled to see an idea through to completion. It was a story I urgently wanted to tell. I couldn't have put it aside.

Cath is a very layered character and, on the surface, she makes some choices that seem incomprehensible from an outsider's perspective. How did you find her motivation when writing and how did you balance the need to explain her actions? Do you think it was important to make her likeable at all or was it more important to show her from all angles?

I didn't worry about making Cath likeable. I wanted to explore her truth. For me, one of the absolute joys of writing a character in the first person is that you get to explore your character's beliefs, their background, their thought processes and delusions – and the process of doing that naturally creates empathy, even when your character is thinking or doing things that you might recoil from. Cath is making decisions from a place of real pain, exhaustion and grief. I tried to fully inhabit those feelings and to suspend any judgement I might have felt for her.

The television rights for *Mother* have been bought by the multi-award winning production company, Clerkenwell Films. Will you be involved in its adaptation to screen? And is there anyone you've pictured in the roles for Cath, Dave and Richard?

My husband is an experienced screenwriter and he will be adapting *Mother* for television. I'm sure we'll discuss the issues over tea and gin at home, and I might even be at the odd meeting, but when it comes to television adaptations, he is the expert. I can't wait to see what he comes up with.

As for the casting, I've lived with those characters in my head for so long that I find it almost impossible to imagine them in another form. There are so many great actors working at the moment that I'd be thrilled to be a part of the audience, watching someone give their take on who Cath or Richard or Dave is beneath the surface.

What do you want readers to take away from *Mother*?

My greatest hope is that the book might inspire a conversation about how complex our entwining identities as mothers and fathers, partners, friends and lovers are. I think sometimes we are unforgiving of our failures, and of the failures we perceive in others. So I hope that the book generates a little more empathy. Some of my most-treasured moments as a reader have been when a story made me feel that I'm not alone in my questions. I'd love it if something I have written offered a reader that same comfort.

What are you working on next?

My next novel places another female protagonist in the heart of a terrible dilemma, one that forces her to consider the limits of what we owe strangers, and also how the small, personal moral choices that we make can sometimes profoundly shape the wider society we live in. I'm very excited about it.