

# Q&A with Susannah Constantine

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## **What was the inspiration behind *After the Snow*?**

Like many first novels, this story is semi-autobiographical. The two headline topics tackled are mental illness and the emotional dysfunction of the aristocracy, both of which I experienced first-hand. My beloved mother was manic depressive and I wanted to explore how a child can manipulate reality to protect themselves from the truth. Esme, the young protagonist in *After the Snow*, appears to the outside world as if she has an idyllic upbringing, with ponies, freedom and financial security. But home is far from secure. Riding the wave of her mother's erratic mood swings, she survives by creating a fictional world in her imagination; one that is predictable, organised and has a mother she can rely on. No matter what life we are born into, whether it is poverty or privilege, the resilience of children is extraordinary. It is this magic and hopefulness that I hoped to capture within my novel.

## ***After the Snow* is your first fictional book, how long did it take you to write it?**

Oh goodness, forever! I started writing *After the Snow* about six years ago on trains, planes and in TV studios. Trinny and I were making shows all over the world, so I would escape from the constant pressure of being on show by hiding in a make-believe world. It wasn't until my agent, Caroline Michel at Peters Fraser and Dunlop, took me under her vast wing-span of experience, that it stopped being a hobby and I began taking the possibility of becoming an author seriously. HQ, HarperCollins Publishers, was the perfect fit! It took serious polishing but the process taught me a huge amount about writing – and I loved it. Of course, there were good days and bad, the bad could go on for a week or two and that was frustrating. But when the words flow, everything else falls into place!

**What is your favourite thing about being a writer?**

I love the solitude. I'm a mum to three teenagers, so life is hectic and with writing I find peace. I love the idea of finding my 'writing spot', whether it's at home or away – there is a tremendous romance in the process. Often, I go alone to Cornwall, where I only have myself to worry about. I'll wake up very early and write for an hour. Then I'll go for a run, shower and have breakfast. Three more hours writing, then I'll take a break for lunch, have a nap, a walk, and start typing away again. Routine is essential and writing sessions are the only time I have a rigid schedule in place. There's something very comforting about knowing exactly what's going to happen each day. It's impossible at home, where I'm interrupted every few minutes. I love that it's up to me, that I'm in control of my time and my days – I've always worked in a large team of people and this isolation is hugely liberating.

***After the Snow* is written from the perspective of eleven-year-old Esme, her naivety is what gives the story its magic – how did you find writing the story from her point of view?**

The first draft of *After the Snow* was written from the perspectives of many different characters. I found it easy getting into their minds and emotions, always knowing the backstory that made them the way they are. But my editor advised writing the novel from just Esme's perspective – which was, I admit, very hard for a novice! It was very important to explore adult themes whilst retaining Esme's innocence. After all, this isn't a children's book. Thankfully, I had my own childhood and two daughters to draw upon. Watching them evolve and develop, I understand how differently children see the world – the cup is never half-empty and they are able to see the good in most things, not yet having fully experienced life and all the knocks it can bring. I wanted Esme to be strong yet naive, shy yet physically bold.

**Esme's relationship with her mother, Diana, draws on your own experiences as a daughter. Did you find these scenes difficult to write?**

Some of the scenes were extremely upsetting to write. In particular, there is one where Esme's mother attempts suicide and Esme is the one to find her, unconscious and engulfed in flames. I felt all the terror of losing my own mother, how everything sped up around me – something I tried to reflect in short, sharp staccato sentences. The most difficult scene to write was in the hospital itself, where Esme realises for the first time how ill her mother is. She has a moment of clarity where she can no longer pretend that this is the mother she has built within her mind. I wrote this awash with tears and painful memories, but it only strengthened the love I have for my mum and a greater empathy for how hard it is living with bipolar disorder. I felt regret that I didn't then have the understanding of mental illness that I do now. If she were still alive, I believe I could have helped her. When she died, she said three words: 'I am sorry'. I hope that she is at peace now.

**Why did you choose to set your book over Christmas?**

Christmas is always a magical time and a writer's dream. There is so much colour and sparkle at this time of year – and I'm also obsessed with snow. I mean *really* obsessed! So, with these two elements, I knew I had a backdrop that would lighten the painful parts of the story and provide endless vignettes to describe and escape into. Think of Bruegel's paintings, there is a whole world of activity taking place. The white-covered world is so calm and pure that it highlighted the turmoil building within the Cluny and Lonsdale families. Christmas is a time that, traditionally, families come together, so there was a boiling pot of human interaction to explore.

**Who are some of your favourite authors?**

I love *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis! More than anything, this book was all about snow and Aslan was my first crush! I also adore *Winterdance: Fine Madness of Alaskan Dog-racing* by Gary Paulsen, it's the true story of an amateur musher, who against the odds (and in a moment of madness) took part in the Iditarod Race. And of course, more snow! His story makes climbing

Mount Everest seem like a walk in the park, capturing beautifully how man and dog rely on each other in extreme conditions. More than any other sport, in my opinion, dog sledding is all about trust, leadership and love. You must read all of Jo Nesbo's books. More snow, fabulously well-constructed believable characters, dark, all-consuming page-turners and thrilling narratives. And finally, H. E. Bates, it's wonderful to be transported back to a time when life was simple, free from computers, TV and consumerism!

**What would you like readers to take away from *After the Snow*?**

I hope that anyone who has been affected by mental illness, through a friend or family member, or even suffering themselves, to come away with a greater sense that they are not alone. In the frenetic chaos of today, I hope that my book provides a moment of calm and sweet nostalgia as we charge towards Christmas. I feel so blessed to have grown up in a time when life seemed simpler. I love to read, to escape into a world that I might know nothing of, or one that releases those memories long locked away. I dearly wish that *After the Snow* moves you in a similar way.

**Can you tell us a little about what you're working on next?**

I'm currently working on my second novel, which is a sequel to *After the Snow*. Set in London in 1979, Esme is ready to make it on her own, but starting to question whether she ever will escape from her past... And that's all I'm saying for now!