

A Q&A with Cecelia Ahern

1. How did *Roar* come about?

It's been a long journey to get *Roar* to the bookshelves; a story in itself! Almost six years ago I was on a family holiday and decided to take time out to myself, so I grabbed a pen and the hotel notepad and found a bench in front of the sea and started writing a story that had been bubbling in my head for a while. It was 'The Woman Who Slowly Disappeared.' It took me an hour to write and I was immediately refreshed. A few weeks later I wrote another short story, then another. Each one was unusual but propped me up in an empowering way. It took me a while to realize that I couldn't publish these stories separately, that they belonged together, and so I slowly started building a collection while still working on my novels.

I felt that these stories were the most original pieces I'd ever written. I was so proud of them, couldn't stop talking about them to anyone who'd listen and I needed to get them out in the world.

2. Where did you find the inspiration for all the stories?

The first story I wrote was called 'The Woman Who Slowly Disappeared', which is the first story in the collection, and it was inspired by a meeting I had with a TV casting agent who was talking to me about demographics. When I heard that they didn't have a demographic for women over fifty-four years old it occurred to me, it's not just that women *feel* invisible as they get older, here is the actual proof. Women don't see themselves or their stories depicted on screen, you can understand how people start to feel a little written out of society, invalid and *invisible*.

I decided to title the stories 'The Woman Who...' and base the stories on metaphors or idioms, and I felt this structure was ripe for material: the stories kept on flowing.

I knew that I wanted to tell as many different stories as I could about as many different types of women, that represented all the facets of our lives, the different relationships we have, the different people we have to be or are expected to be, the moments when we feel overwhelmed, fearful, exhausted or confused. I wanted to write about all those real things that connect us all.

3. How was the experience of writing short stories different to that of writing a novel?

When you get on a long-haul flight, you do a kind of mental preparation for how long you're going to have to sit there, entertain yourself, be patient, feed yourself. Getting on a short flight, you prep yourself in a different way, and although that's an unusual way to explain it, I feel that's the difference between the two. A novel requires the mental preparation that comes with recognizing, okay I'm in this for the long haul, I must find an idea that can grow roots and branches so that stories and characters and strands can grow and be meaty and juicy for the length of a novel. I must be patient and think about the long game.

With a short story, my intent was to capture a moment in one character's life. It's a quick snapshot; there are no strands, or backstory or tricks or subplots. The story is about what is happening right now and how the character will overcome it. As soon as an idea would hit me, I felt inspired to write immediately.

Each story was written in a rush of adrenaline and I felt like I could play more with them, break rules. None of my women have names, I end the story just where I want, the titles are unusual as are the perspectives. It was a different experience and very satisfying.

4. Which is your favourite story and why?

I have many favourites that change as I relate to them differently depending on the type of day I'm having. The constant favourites are 'The Woman Who Slowly Disappeared', 'The Woman Who Was Kept on the Shelf', 'The Woman Who Found Bite Marks on her Skin' but if I'm forced to name just one I'd say 'The Woman Who Was Swallowed Up By The Floor and Who Met Other Women Down There Too'. It sums up the collection because the title represents my intent to be different yet honest, and while the story is humorous, I think every single person can relate to a moment when they've said or done something that they wish they could take back or hide from. It's surreal, it has humour but it's grounded in truth and I think that's representative of the entire collection.

5. Which was the hardest story to write and why?

The ones that I struggled with are the ones that weren't included in the collection. I wrote around forty stories, and it was an interesting process curating the collection. Some were kept out because of a repetition on theme, or because they didn't have as strong a message as the final thirty, but some didn't make the grade because I was circling an idea but never quite got there and that happens when writing sometimes: the idea is there, the writing is okay but there's no punch. You're circling it and circling it, but can't seem to bring it in to land.

6. What would your room to roar look like?

It occasionally looks like the bathroom I lock myself inside to count to ten. Other times it's my writing room. Though my kids would disagree, I'm really not a shouter. The best way for me to roar is to give me a pen and paper and then my voice is loud and clear.

7. What would you like readers to take away from *Roar*?

As with everything I write, entertainment and escapism is key. Beyond that, if the reader can identify with the stories, if they're moved, if they find them empowering and uplifting, if it helps them to look at life from a different perspective, then that is the bonus.

8. Who or what inspires you as a writer?

Here's a broad answer: Life. I believe that the three things that help me to write are observation, imagination and experience. I'm not at all a nosy person and don't concern myself with peoples' secrets, but I can be curious about life, and people, and human nature. My curiosity is linked to observation: it forces me to ask questions, it makes me want to research the meaning of things, the reason *for* things, and then I use my imagination to ask 'What if?'. Then I use my experience to write a story and create a character in a way that people can identify with it.

9. Can you tell us what's next?

I'm incredibly excited about my next novel because it's the sequel to my debut novel *PS, I Love You*. Titled *Postscript*, it's the PS to my PS and revisiting the characters fifteen years after creating them was emotional and challenging. I wanted to take these characters forward, and bring them in a direction that reflects the writer I am now. It was a brilliant journey. I ugly-cried through most of the book and I truly hope that *PS, I Love You* fans feel the same way that I did. I also hope that new readers will feel equally emotional about it as they discover the characters for the first time.

We meet Holly, seven years on from the death of her husband Gerry. She has moved on with her life and is happy, until she's approached by a group of people who call themselves The PS, I Love You Club. They've heard about Gerry's letters and they're inspired. They're also all ill, and they want Holly to help them write their final PS, I Love You letters for their loved ones before they leave the world.