

THE MOTHER'S PROMISE

by Sally Hepworth

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A Conversation with Sally Hepworth

Could you tell us a little bit about your background, and when you decided that you wanted to lead a literary life?

I learned to write when I was five, and ever since then I've been writing stories. Before that, I told stories to anyone who would listen. So I think it's fair to say that I've always wanted to lead a life of storytelling.

I started writing with a view to publication when on maternity leave with my son (who is now seven). Back then I wrote in the evenings and over the weekends. Now I write from home four days a week while my kids are at school and/or in childcare.

Is there a book that most influenced your writing? Or inspired you to become a writer?

It was an author rather than a book. I grew up reading Roald Dahl novels—and now I'm reliving them again with my children. They are as good as they ever were. To this day, when crafting a story, I ask myself: What would Roald Dahl do?

As a writer, he wasn't afraid to take risks (i.e., writing a children's book about *very* scary witches), he trusted his audience to stick with him when he went to dark places, and he was always, always original (who else would have a little girl travel to London in the comfort of a BFG's *ear*?). True, I don't write for children, but I believe that all writers have something to learn from Roald Dahl.

How did you become a writer? Can you take a moment to tell us about your process. What challenges did you face, if at all? (Do you have any suggestions, or wisdom to impart, for others who wish to write a novel?)



When I decided I wanted to write a novel, the first thing I did was Google “how to write a novel.” True story. (I’ve often wondered if I would have ever become a writer if it wasn’t for Google.) As usual, Google delivered, providing me with a step-by-step guide on how to write a novel, which I followed to a T while writing my first.

Since then, my process has become much less structured. These days, I tend to start with a premise and perhaps a theme I’d like to explore and then see where the story takes me. If the story starts to feel stagnant, I do find it useful to jump ahead and do a little plotting, but generally I let the story unfold as it comes. And once I get to the end I go straight back to the beginning and start rewriting.

The only advice I ever give to writers is to focus on the story, not the words. It’s tempting to get caught up in the perfect word, sentence, or paragraph, but there is no such thing as perfect. As long as each word propels the story forward, it’s doing its job.

What was the inspiration for The Mother’s Promise?

A couple of years ago, my brother and his wife were headed away on a vacation without their two-year-old daughter. A few days before they left, at a family dinner, they asked me if my husband and I would be my niece’s guardian if anything should happen to them while they were gone. I’d already asked some of my brother and his wife for my own children, so the request was no surprise to me. I was surprised, however, when my other brother suddenly piped up.

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“If Sally couldn’t take her, I would!” he exclaimed.

My mum and dad added, “What about us? We’d have her.”

A good-natured squabble followed over who would be the best choice of parent for a child whose parents were (and still are) very much alive. So when I read an article about a single mother, diagnosed with terminal cancer, who was searching for a guardian for her eight-year-old son, it caught my eye. Her son’s father was not in the picture, her own parents had passed away, and she was an only child herself. She didn’t have any friends or colleagues whom she felt she could ask.

I asked myself: How does someone become so alone?

This question was the inspiration for—and the backbone of—*The Mother’s Promise*.

Can you tell us about what research, if any, you did before writing this novel? Do you have firsthand experience with its subject? Base any of the characters on people from your own life? What is the most interesting or surprising thing you learned as you set out to tell your story?

My research for this novel fell into three categories: ovarian cancer, social anxiety disorder, and abuse.

The ovarian cancer part was personal. My grandmother and my aunt lost their lives to this disease, and as such, it is an illness my family knows a lot about. Both my grandmother’s and my aunt’s experiences found their way into this book, with the help of doctors and nurses who provided medical jargon about the disease and its treatment.



The social anxiety research was not personal, so to get a better understanding of the condition, I read a lot. The memoirs I read by teenagers suffering from social anxiety were particularly useful to me. It was astonishing to me how adept these teenagers were at describing their emotions in the written word. There is something safe about the written word that allows people to chronicle their experiences and I leaned heavily on these memoirs in creating the character of Zoe.

Finally, I had to research abuse. Again, for this topic I looked to books and articles for research. This was eye-opening. Everyone has heard of physical abuse, but there are so many different types of abuse, and its one connecting link is control. I learned there are so many types of abuse beyond physical—verbal, emotional, financial . . . and sexual, which I decided to explore through the character of Sonja.

Are you currently working on another book, and if so, can you tell us what it's about?

I am currently finishing up edits on my 2018 novel, *The Family Next Door*, a domestic page-turner about the seemingly normal families in a suburban street of Melbourne, Australia.

The small cul-de-sac Pleasant Court lives up to its name. It's the kind of place where everyone knows their neighbors and children play in the street. Isabelle Heatherington doesn't fit into this picture of family paradise. Husbandless and childless, she soon catches the attention of three Pleasant Court mothers.

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But Ange, Fran, and Essie have their own secrets to hide. Like the reason behind Ange's compulsion to control every aspect of her life. Or why Fran won't let her sweet, gentle husband near her new baby. Or why, three years ago, Essie took her newborn daughter to the park . . . and returned home without her.

As their obsession with the new neighbor grows, the secrets of these women begin to spread. And they'll soon find out that when you look at something too closely, you see things you never wanted to see.



Fun Facts: The Title and Theme of The Mother's Promise

My working title for *The Mother's Promise* was *By Myself with You*. As I wrote it, it kept dawning on me that each of these four women was alone in her own way. Telling their stories alongside each other and then intertwining them was my way of bringing them together. Ultimately, *By Myself with You* became the theme, rather than the title.

Reading
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*Behind the
Novel*



Recommended Reading

The Help

Kathryn Stockett

The Story: A white socialite and a group of black maids join together to write a tell-all book about working as a black maid in the American South.

Why Read It? It's my favorite book of all time. I have not read such distinct, loveable voices as Aibileen, Minny, and Skeeter before or since.

Water for Elephants

Sara Gruen

The Story: A vet student joins a circus to care for the animals during the Great Depression.

Why Read It? Who doesn't want to read about a man who runs away to join the circus? Add to that an impossible romance, a psychopath, an endearingly grumpy old man, and an elephant and you have a recipe for a riveting book.

Big Little Lies

Liane Moriarty

The Story: Three women who live in the same beachside town face a crossroads in their lives.

Why Read It? Liane Moriarty is gifted at dramatizing the suburban world. In this book, it's the world of school moms, and the sinister secrets that lurk in safest-looking places.



The Husband's Secret

Liane Moriarty

The Story: A man leaves a letter for his wife that contains a deep, dark, and life-changing secret.

Why Read It? What would happen if you found out your husband had done something unforgivable? This book makes you ask yourself that question, and it hounds you (in the best way) until you come up with any answer.

Pretty Baby

Mary Kubica

The Story: A woman invites a homeless girl and her newborn baby into her home.

Why Read It? This novel had me flying through the pages, gasping at each turn.

The Invention of Wings

Sue Monk Kidd

The Story: A wealthy girl and her sister become pioneers in the early abolition and women's rights movements.

Why Read It? Based on the lives of real-life abolitionists Sarah and Angelina Grimké, this book combines real-life events with fiction for a story that will remain with you long after you turn the final page.

*Keep On
Reading*



Reading Group Questions

1. At the very beginning of the novel, Zoe describes her struggle with social anxiety very eloquently, saying that it felt like “being anchored to damp sand . . . waiting for the next wave,” but when her mother asks, all she says is that it feels like being out of breath. Why do you think she can’t bring herself to truly describe the feeling to her mother? Despite their close relationship, Zoe keeps much of her struggle and internal feelings to herself. What do you think her reasons are for this, and would you do the same in her situation?
2. Alice is a single mother without any sort of support system. Did it surprise you that she didn’t have a single person to call when she discovered her cancer? Do you think she should have told Zoe? What would you have done in her situation?
3. Despite struggling with social anxiety, Zoe has a deep desire to be an adept public speaker. What did you make of her decision to try and face her fear and be part of the school debate? And what was your reaction to her failed attempt on page 206, when she urinated on stage?
4. Throughout the novel, Sonja struggles with what she knows about abuse from her training as a social worker, and what she is feeling and experiencing in her own life. Why do you think Sonja wasn’t able to see it?
5. What did you think of Harry when you first encountered him in the book? Were you suspicious of him and his motivations? How does his experience with illness, although different from Zoe’s, parallel her own experience?



6. Kate, along with nearly 10 percent of women in the real world, struggles with infertility, as well as her husband's lack of understanding about her desire to have a baby. What did you think of Kate's desperation to have a baby? What would you have done in her situation? Would you have been able to let your dreams of motherhood go for the sake of your marriage?
7. Alice sometimes wonders "if Zoe had ruined her life, or if it was the other way around." Do you think Alice was responsible for Zoe's social anxiety disorder? Do you think Zoe is responsible for Alice's isolation? Or do you think it was a bit of both?
8. Why do you think that Zoe was able to connect with Kate in a way she couldn't with anyone else except her mother? What was your reaction to Alice's jealousy over their growing bond? Did you think it was reasonable? Would you feel the same in her situation?
9. In a powerful moment near the end of the novel, Sonja realizes that despite feeling isolated and afraid, she wasn't alone at all: "There were people everywhere." Take a minute to think about your own life. Are there more people you could turn to in an emergency than you might have initially thought? Do you know who you would turn to if you were in a similar situation?
10. What was your reaction when Zoe finally got to give her successful speech? How do you think that her success will affect her assessment of herself and her own abilities, even if (as she says), she'll never be "normal"?

*Keep On
Reading*