

THE BEST OF ADAM SHARP

by Graeme Simsion

About the Author

- A Conversation with Graeme Simsion

Behind the Novel

- Ten Key Songs

Keep on Reading

- Recommended Reading
- Reading Group Questions

Also available as an audiobook
from Macmillan Audio

For more reading group suggestions
visit www.readinggroupgold.com.

 St. Martin's Griffin

*A
Reading
Group Gold
Selection*



A Conversation with Graeme Simsion

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

I spent my early life (that is, up to the age of fifty) in science and technology: I studied physics; worked as a computer operator, programmer, and database specialist; established my own consulting company, which I grew to around seventy staff before selling it, then made a big decision—to do a PhD in database design. But along the way (see third question) I'd caught the screenwriting bug, and when I finished my PhD, I enrolled in a writing program. I think “literary life” is a bit grand—at that point I wanted to get a movie made (okay, that's a pretty grand ambition, too). But my goal was to write something good rather than to “be a writer”; it wasn't about lifestyle. I expected I'd be doing database work for a long time to pay the bills!

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

Yes, but maybe not one you'd expect. It was *The Unkindest Cut* by film critic Joe Queenan. The book describes Mr. Queenan's experiences making an ultra-low-budget movie with virtually zero experience. I'm sure it was meant to entertain rather than inspire, but once you put a book out there . . . who knows what impact it will have? I had the same level of experience in filmmaking as Mr. Queenan, so I was all set. The ninety-minute movie I made was everything you'd expect from a first-time writer (I actually adapted an unpublished manuscript written by my wife), with friends playing all the roles and just a single professional on the crew—i.e., terrible. But I caught the screenwriting bug.

***What was your journey to becoming a writer?
When were you finally able to think of yourself as a
“real” writer?***

I'm a theory and techniques guy, so I enrolled in a part-time program in screenwriting at my local college in Melbourne, Australia. What they don't tell you (or what you choose not to hear) is how hard it is to get an original script produced. Even if it's great, why would a studio take the risk if they can adapt a bestselling novel that already has a million fans? So, having worked for five years on a screenplay, which of course changed hugely as I learned the craft, I decided to rewrite it as a novel. Of course, first I enrolled in the novel-writing program. . . .

I first thought of myself as a real writer on the day that my first novel, *The Rosie Project*, was short-listed for an unpublished manuscript award, which it eventually won. Someone thought I could write! But I didn't call myself a writer publicly until I gave up my day job teaching database design and consulting skills. That was when I figured I had enough money in advances for *The Rosie Project* that I could see writing as my primary way of making a living, going forward.

What was the inspiration for this novel, and more specifically, why did you choose to focus on music and the soundtrack of Adam's life?

There were two important inspirations. One was my wife reconnecting with a former boyfriend from Manchester. He and I hadn't got on too well when we were love rivals, but twenty-five years later he was prepared to accept defeat and enjoy a drink with me. It got me thinking, "What if?" and also about the broader issues of how we deal with the past, which is a theme of the book.

The second inspiration was the emotional connection we have with music. I think most people relate to music, but for some (many!) men of my generation, it can become an emotional language that partly compensates for emotional illiteracy elsewhere. There are men who would scoff at a love story, but tear up listening to Tom Waits singing the same words. I wanted not only to explore

About the Author

that, but also to write a book with a “soundtrack”: songs that readers might remember, or find and listen to, that would add another dimension to the story. The screenwriter in me coming out!

Can you tell us about what research, if any, you did before writing this novel? Did you base any of the characters or experiences on those from your own life? What is the most interesting or surprising thing you learned as you set out to tell this story?

Well, I don’t play piano—I’m not a musician at all. Adam’s piano playing is central to his life, so I spent a lot of time talking to a buddy who’s played keyboards in rock bands forever and filling in the gaps between the stuff he’d already told me. I even got him to teach me a bit, and that inspired the bit where Adam’s father teaches him. I like to do my research with people—they’ll tell you stuff you hadn’t thought of asking about, and their stories are stronger than just general facts and principles.

Likewise, as an older guy, I have a bit of life experience to draw on. All of my characters are inspired by people I know, but not in a simple way that would get me sued: it’s a little bit of this person, a little bit of that, plus a dose of imagination. Adam has a bit of my wife’s ex, a bit of my piano-playing friend, a bit of a guy I once worked with, a bit of me (of course), plus a bunch of other people and the obligatory dose of imagination. I borrowed the A. Sharp musical name from a Canadian data guy whose name is not Adam.

Same with the incidents and stories. Many are inspired by personal experience, some by tales I’ve been told. And they’ve all been augmented and twisted out of shape. But if you think, “That wouldn’t happen” (and there’s one scene in part 2 that you may be thinking of), think again.

I had to hit the internet to make sure I got the music trivia right. Adam’s a “pub quiz” popular music expert, and I didn’t want the real ones writing letters of complaint.



The most interesting thing I learned was how much some readers—and even publishers and critics—expect you to keep on writing the same kind of story. *The Best of Adam Sharp* is quite different from *The Rosie Project*: yes, it has a male protagonist; yes, there are some comedic moments (I hope); and yes, it’s about love and relationships. But it’s not a “falling in love and living happily ever after” romantic comedy. I learned that I needed to tell people: “This is different. Reset your expectations.”

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

Yes and yes. That’s the answer you’d get from Don Tillman, my protagonist in *The Rosie Project* and *The Rosie Effect*. Luckily you’re asking me, not Don. The new book is the third (and last) in the Rosie series and it’s about the challenges of bringing up a child who may be on the autism spectrum. It’s also about identity, acceptance, and the decisions we make on behalf of others.

*About the
Author*



Ten Key Songs

The Best of Adam Sharp comes with a playlist of forty-seven songs, and a link to a website where they can be played through Spotify (<https://www.textpublishing.com.au/books/the-best-of-adam-sharp>).

I wanted readers to experience something akin to a soundtrack, at least as far as was possible from the printed page. The songs had to fit the story and it was no accident that I made Adam a pianist, so there would be plenty of room to include musical performances. But I also wanted them to be reasonably familiar, so there was a good chance readers would know at least some of them. My own taste came third, but there's only one song in the book that I really don't like (it's "Clair" by Gilbert O'Sullivan, for reasons that are explained in the book!).

The actual number of musical pieces referenced is probably closer to a hundred than forty-seven and they include two classical pieces, plus a smattering of jazz, blues, operetta (Gilbert and Sullivan), and music hall, but the majority are from the "classic rock" era. Why? It's the music that so many people know, either directly or because they can't escape it in stores, restaurants, and their parents' living rooms. On exchange in Belgium, my daughter went to a multinational sing-along. The song everyone knew: The Beatles' "Hey Jude." That had a bit to do with Adam opening the story by comparing his life to the emotional arc of that song.

Here are ten other songs that play a role:

1. **"Angelina" by Bob Dylan.** Not to be confused with the better-known "Farewell Angelina." This is the exception to me fitting the songs to the story: here the song came first and gave me a name for Adam's lost love. It's a rather obscure song in the Nobel laureate's repertoire, and one he's never performed publicly. But at one time I had a strong emotional reaction to it, and that was part of the



motivation for writing a novel that explored our relationship with music. It's also a reminder that the relationship with music is individual. I don't expect every reader to respond the same way to the songs, but, then, I don't expect them to respond the same way to the story, characters, and writing.

2. **“Someone Like You” by Adele.** A rare twenty-first-century inclusion (The Killers’ “All These Things That I’ve Done” also made it in). I had to ask my kids, in the spirit of Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity*: “What’s your favorite breakup song?” This was it. Problem was, my partner, crime-fiction writer Anne Buist, whose heroine sings in a covers band, had grabbed it for her own story. I had to find another one for her before she let me use it.
3. **“Lola” by The Kinks.** References to retro music are not always cool, but no one’s called me uncool for including this song—notoriously banned in Australia (where I live) back in 1970 for the sexual references and by the BBC in Britain for the product placement (the reference to cherry cola was originally Coca-Cola). When I needed a 1970s song for Adam to be learning at age seven, it jumped out as the perfect choice. Last year, I was interviewed about *The Best of Adam Sharp* on radio and we finished up with this song. The newsreader insisted on letting it play right through before starting the news three minutes late.
4. **“Summertime” by Janis Joplin.** I needed a song of uninhibited passion, and, sitting in a theater watching the Janis Joplin doc *Janis: Little Girl Blue*, I decided it had to be one of hers. The famous Gershwin song might not seem the obvious choice—there’s some restraint, for a while, at least—but I saw the opportunity to contrast the Billie Holiday version as a metaphor for . . . well, you can read the book.
5. **“Walking in Memphis” by Marc Cohn/Cher.** This is the song Adam plays at the end of a day’s

hiking. I could have chosen any number of songs that featured walking, but this is the one my piano-playing friend Pete Walsh would have chosen. In the playlist, I nominate Cher's recording as the version I had in mind, but I've heard Pete's many times more: he just hasn't recorded it. I don't play piano myself (I've had to disappoint book-event organizers more than once) and Pete was my informant for all things musical. There's a nod to him in the form of Pete the Project Manager, who plays at Adam's work farewell.

6. **"Early in the Morning" by The Mojos.** Probably the most obscure track in the book, but the only one by someone I know personally (bestseller success has not given me a pass into rock 'n' roll circles). Blues lady Fiona Boyes is a long-standing friend and was singing with The Mojos back in 1989 when Adam Sharp visited Melbourne. I chose the song because of Gina Woods's driving piano.
7. **"I'm Henry VIII, I Am" by Herman's Hermits.** This was, along with "Mrs. Brown, You've Got a Lovely Daughter," a hit in the USA, but neither song was released as a single in the UK. Singer Peter Noone hammed up his Mancunian (Manchester) accent, and it went down better overseas than at home. I wanted a song that would give a taste of Adam's accent, which so appeals to Angelina, and while there's no shortage of great singers out of Manchester, I went for the unsubtle version. I figure Adam would've hammed it up too in the interests of impressing the foreigner. (Few people I know actually like the song, but most recognize it.)
8. **"Angel of the Morning" (Chip Taylor) by Merilee Rush and the Turnabouts/Juice Newton.** This much-covered song is central in the book and clearly has some nostalgia power: at a preview of *Deadpool*, Juice Newton's version apparently had the audience clapping. It's been covered by

everyone from Olivia Newton-John to Nina Simone. At the Australian launch of *Adam Sharp*, local legend Deborah Conway sang what most of the guests thought was the best version they'd heard. I wanted to quote some lyrics, something that's notoriously hard to get permission for, but I found the songwriter Chip Taylor (of "Wild Thing" fame) on Facebook and he eased the way. Mr. Taylor's brother is also name-checked in the book (a bit of pub trivia there) and he has a niece named Angelina.

9. **"Walk Away, Renée" by The Left Banke/ The Four Tops.** From time to time, someone complains that *The Best of Adam Sharp* has given them an earworm. Most of the time, it's this song. I needed a song with a contemporary name (for 1989) in it and there wasn't a big selection. In the end I chose it ahead of "Daniel" (which happens to be my son's name) because I didn't want two Elton John songs.

10. **"Farther On" by Jackson Browne.** When I was twenty-one, a friend and I drove an old Kombi van around Australia. The soundtrack to our six-month journey included Jackson Browne's first five albums—on cassette. In *The Rosie Project*, I subjected Don Tillman to Jackson Browne on repeat on his road trip to find Rosie's father. Mr. Browne ended up contributing several songs to the *Adam Sharp* list: proof perhaps that the songs we hear in our teens and early twenties are the ones that stay with us. Adam plays "Farther On" as a result of what he calls "unconscious song selection"—his personal trick for accessing his subconscious mind. On the last page, he does it again, with another Jackson Browne song, and his choice should tell us something about his inner feelings as the story ends.



Recommended Reading

Juliet, Naked

Nick Hornby

Mr. Hornby is best known for *High Fidelity* and *About a Boy*. All three books feature male protagonists (frequently more like Sheldon Cooper than Mr. Darcy), love, and popular music. And Mr. Hornby's music taste is more sophisticated than mine!

The Hotel New Hampshire

John Irving

I'm a longtime fan of John Irving, and *The 158-Pound Marriage* features two couples in the sort of tangle that Adam finds himself in. But *The Hotel New Hampshire* belongs to what most regard as his golden period of writing, with his characteristic slightly larger-than-life story and characters, and a sex scene that's more transgressive than anything in *Adam Sharp*. Charlie mentions the book and that scene, in *Adam Sharp*, so you should know what to expect. It's more about family than a single relationship—though there's overlap. . . .

Norwegian Wood

Haruki Murakami

Not only a male protagonist but also young and Japanese, and definitely more at the literary fiction end of the scale—i.e., a tougher read but rewarding for that. And there's a movie.

Addition

Toni Jordan

You may have to look around to find this one—or order online. Australian author Ms. Jordan lives just around the corner from me and this book is probably closer to *The Rosie Project* than *Adam Sharp*. But it's a love story with quirky characters and a female protagonist as weird in her way as Don Tillman is in his.



Two Steps Forward

Graeme Simsion and Anne Buist

Yes, that's me and I'll justify recommending my own book because it's a collaboration with my wife, who's an author in her own right (of the Natalie King psychological thrillers and some erotic fiction she wrote for "practice" under the name Simone Sinna—read the latter at your peril). It's a story of renewal set on the Camino de Santiago walk in France and Spain, and there's a romantic subplot. Half of it (my half!) is written from the male perspective, and he's my typical slightly geeky male protagonist. But tall and intelligent . . .

Commonwealth

Ann Patchett

Despite featuring their songs in my books, I don't get to meet rock stars, but I have met star author and bookstore owner Ann Patchett. This book, first published around the same time as *Adam Sharp*, is a finely executed family saga, with well-drawn characters and a great sense of place.

Dirt Music

Tim Winton

I'm justifying this one because it does have a band in it, but really, it's here because I'm Australian, Mr. Winton is one of our finest writers, and it's a window into a part of the world (Western Australia) that most don't know.

*Keep On
Reading*



Reading Group Questions

1. In the prologue to the novel, Adam makes a comment about his life experiences, saying, “These days I was taking more from my bank of memories than I was putting in.” What exactly do you think he means by this? Have you ever felt similarly? Did you do anything about it?
2. How does the prologue set the tone for the rest of the novel? Do you think you would have a different perspective on the prologue if you went back and reread it after finishing the book? How so? The writer Elmore Leonard says, avoid prologues—do you think the author should have followed his advice?
3. Throughout *The Best of Adam Sharp*, Adam refers to Angelina as his Great Lost Love. What do you think of the idea of having a Great Lost Love? Do you only get one? Does everyone have a Great Lost Love?
4. What did you think Angelina’s motive was when she first contacted Adam? Do you think, after the events that unfolded after she reached out, that it was ultimately a good thing or a bad thing?
5. On page 97, Angelina tells Adam, “You’d be a fantastic dad.” Do you agree with her? What do you make of the way that Adam, Angelina, and their respective partners navigate the difficult choice surrounding whether or not to have children?
6. When Adam returns to Claire, she tells him she doesn’t want to know about what happened and compares the situation to friends Randall and Mandy, who split up. Is it sometimes better not to know? Claire, Charlie, and Angelina all ultimately forgive their partners for cheating. Should they have done so?



7. Adam often uses music as a touchstone to help him remember and reflect on different parts of his life. Are there moments in your own life that are deeply connected to a certain song or artist? If you were putting together a soundtrack of your life, similar to the one included at the end of the book, what songs would be on it?

8. One of the themes throughout *The Best of Adam Sharp* is the influence parents can have on their children, as we see in Adam's reflection on his own complicated relationship with his father. How do you see the impact of his father on the choices Adam makes? What about Angelina and her parents? And Claire?

9. On page 112, Adam says that music was Claire's "way of opening up emotionally." How do you think the ways that Claire and Adam use and react to music differently affected their relationship? Do you think there's a difference in the way men and women respond to popular music? Do you use music like this in your own life?

10. What do you think of the last words in the novel—"It was going to be all right." Do you think it will be all right? Is there a message in the final song that Adam plays, "The Pretender"? What kind of feeling does the novel, and those ending words in particular, leave you with?

*Keep On
Reading*