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ABOUT ISABEL ASHDOWN :

Where were you born and where did you grow up?

I was born in Kingston-upon-Thames, but I grew up in East Wittering, a seaside village on the South Coast.

Were you encouraged to read widely as a child?

My father was an English lecturer, so our home was always overflowing with books. As a child, I loved the escapism of a good book.

What was your favourite subject at school?

I loved English – reading, and writing, and the rhythm of language and what you could do with it. All the other subjects were dull in comparison. I did enjoy art too, but I think I knew I wasn't really very good at it.

What did you want to be when you grew up?

I had no idea what I wanted to be, until I embarked on my Creative Writing degree at the age of thirty-four. Then it all became clear.

What book did you love as a child?

My father read me *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, and he used to say that I was rather like Alice. I remember being fascinated with the pictures and odd nonsensical poems, like Jabberwocky. I still am. I called my first child Alice. It's a good strong name.

What was your career before you began the novel?

I left school with pitifully few qualifications, so I learned to type properly to give myself a fighting chance of employment. I then worked for many years in the cosmetics industry, predominantly for The Body Shop. It was a fabulous business built on sharp wit, sound principles and honest hard work. By the time I left, I was a senior manager for the European region, but the creative calling was growing too strong to ignore.

How useful have you found taking a degree in Creative Writing?

When I started my degree, I hadn't written for almost twenty years. In my teens I wrote the usual angst-inspired poems, most of which went up the chimney for fear of discovery. So, when I started writing again in my mid-thirties it was reassuring to realise that some of it was actually quite good. Halfway through the degree, I started to submit work to various prizes

and publications, and gaining a handful of awards gave me the confidence to approach my writing career more seriously. My first writing award was with a poem called 'Milk and Eggs', which was shortlisted for the Bridport Prize in 2006. My short story 'Chez Fourniers' was published in the *French Literary Review*, and 'Following Some Disgrace' won gold prize in the Author v Author regional competition.

Did writing the book change you?

Enormously. Writing a book is such a personal journey that you can't help but be altered. Now I feel I really am who I am.

What do you do when you are not writing?

I'm in the second year of an MA in Creative Writing, so I spend two days a week working on my second novel, which will be the basis of my MA dissertation. But I also need to earn a living, so for the remainder of the week I work on other writing projects, producing copy for corporate websites and publications, and writing captions and gags for greetings cards.

At weekends we like to walk the dog in the South Downs or along the beach. Meals are always a focal point of any plans; we love to eat, especially with friends and family. And, of course, I read a lot. A tutor once told me you can't be a good writer if you're not a good reader. He's absolutely right.

Which authors do you most admire?

I think I tend to admire particular books rather than authors. Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden* is a small masterpiece, as is Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory*. Fay Weldon's *Puffball* opened my teenage eyes to the power of female writing.

What do you look for in a novel?

Characters above all else. If the characters are alive, the book is alive. If the characters are flat, why read on?

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

A Sunday morning in bed with an iced coffee and a plate of marmalade on toast, surrounded by my family, reading a great book. We often manage the first bit, but the reading usually has to wait.

ABOUT GLASSHOPPER :

How did you start writing *Glasshopper*?

Glasshopper began as a short story I wrote when studying for a degree in Creative Writing at the University of Chichester. I was struggling with the structure of the story, so I booked a tutorial with my tutor, Dave Swann, hoping he might have a few ideas to help me. Dave took one look at it and said, “I think this is actually the start of a novel.” I was horrified and excited all at once, because I knew he was right.

How long did it take to write?

The book was written over a two- to three-year period. I had to adopt some disciplined writing habits in order to keep momentum going. For a few months I was rising at 5am several days a week, just to get a couple of hours of writing in before the rest of the family came to life, looking for breakfast and spelling sheets and lunchboxes.

What encouraged you along the way?

When an extract from *Glasshopper* won the *Mail on Sunday* Novel Competition I was over the moon. The judges were Fay Weldon, Sir John Mortimer and Michael Ridpath. I felt deeply honoured that my writing had been selected by such a distinguished panel.

Did you visit the locations you were writing about?

Eudora Welty once said that location is the ground conductor of all the currents of emotion, belief and moral conviction that charge out from a story. For me, location was as important as plot in providing a backdrop to Jake and Mary’s emotional positions. I spent time in Brighton and the Isle of Wight, carrying Jake and Mary in my mind. The scenes in the Dordogne come from my childhood memories of long family holidays.

How easy was it to get into Jake’s mindset?

It was an accident. When *Glasshopper* was just a kernel of an idea within a short story, I thought I was writing in the voice of a teenage girl. But my workshop friends said, “Surely it’s a boy?” So Jake was born. As a child, I was a bit of a tomboy, shunning all things girly and wondering what it would be like to be a boy. Being male seemed so much easier than being female. I guess I probably do think like a man at times; I get on well with men, and I actually quite like them!

Did you prefer writing from either Jake or Mary’s point of view?

I enjoyed writing Jake and Mary equally. I separated the writing, so I was just writing one or other for long stretches, during which time I carried them around with me, thinking like them, imagining their responses.

Did you know how the novel would end when you began it?

About a third of the way into the writing, I knew how it would end. It just became clear, and I was able to plan out my writing schedule from there on, which made it much easier to be disciplined and get the words down.

Did you feel strongly that the book should say something about women’s lives, particularly through Mary’s own experiences?

I wanted to show a portrait of a family, to explore what happens when a family member malfunctions, for whatever reason. I wanted, through Jake, to look at the strange choices families make when they are exposed to an addiction like alcoholism. But, ultimately, I wanted it to be a book that would touch people and provoke interest.

Are any of the characters based on people you have known?

No, but a few borrowed traits have slipped in along the way.

How did you decide on the structure of the book?

The structure came to me as I was writing the Jake strand of the book. I decided that his mother, Mary, needed a voice, to prevent her becoming typecast as nothing more than a hopeless alcoholic. But in order to stay in voice, I kept writing Jake until I had the full first draft of his story, at which point I switched over to find Mary’s voice. Writing Jake actually helped me to unearth Mary, before I’d even written a word of her narrative.

What was most challenging about the writing of the book?

Dealing with uncertainty and doubt was probably the most challenging aspect of the writing process. From the point at which you decide to commit to writing your first novel, you face a gaping chasm of work yet-to-be-done. It can be a lonely experience. But I found that once I’d imposed a strict, businesslike approach to my writing schedule, I was suddenly liberated in terms of creativity, and no longer worried about how much I should write, or about how long it might take me to complete the novel.

ABOUT WRITING :

When do you write?

My writing has to fit in with the rest of my life, with my family, my job and my MA. This could mean working at 5am or at 9pm, but I try to fit in a few decent stretches of writing every week.

Where do you write?

I have a basement office in our old Victorian semi, where I can shut myself away from the outside world. I need quiet to write, and the lack of view means I'm not easily distracted. The dog often comes down and sits with me as I work, so it's not lonely.

Why do you write?

I used to think I need to work and want to write. But gradually I discovered that the truth is I need to write and I want to work. I like to work with others, earn regular money and enjoy financial stability. But the compulsion to write is greater, and if I'm not writing enough I become irritable and petulant! It's an addiction in its own way, but, hopefully, a productive one.

What do you read if you need a prompt?

I read a great deal, but when I'm in a very active writing phase I tend to read less, as it clutters my thinking.

Do you listen to music as you write?

No, I need the quiet.

Do you revise and edit your work as you write?

Yes, as well as editing several times over at completion.

What tips would you give aspiring writers?

1. Carry a notebook at all times. You never know when an idea might strike you. Once or twice I've made the mistake of thinking, "Oh, this idea is so great – I don't need to write it down as I'll never forget it." And then it's gone. Now I don't take any chances: I keep a notebook in my handbag, on my bedside table, in my glove box, in my rucksack . . .

2. Read. Read widely and read with a writer's eye. Don't be intimidated by brilliant writing – just try to be conscious of what makes it so good. Likewise, with bad writing, try to understand what doesn't work, and why. It all feeds in to your own writing and helps you to judge your own work with a more critical eye.
3. Join or form a workshop group. A good workshop group will let you read and critique each other's work in a trusted, friendly environment. Putting your writing through the workshopping process can transform pretty good writing into great writing. I couldn't have completed my novel without the help, sharp eyes and encouragement of my workshop friends.
4. Submit your work to competitions and publications. There's no doubt that agents and publishers will read your work with more interest if you've got a handful of writing successes under your belt. It is time consuming, and can be disheartening when you don't win or get accepted. But it's a great investment, and hugely encouraging when you do win a prize and see your work published.

What single thing would improve your writing life?

More free time for long mind-clearing walks with my dog. Oh, and a daily full-body massage.

What distracts you from writing?

My family. In a nice way.

How do you balance writing with work, study and family commitments?

It is difficult, but the only way to balance it is to get organised. I have a very supportive husband, who is not only an exceptionally talented carpenter, but also an amazing cook. I'm very lucky.

Are you working on a second novel?

I'm now working on my next novel. In the early stages of writing, I find I'm most interested in discovering the characters, in understanding their dilemmas and choices, and in watching the subsequent repercussions of those choices unfold before me. Whilst my second novel will have a very different theme to that of *Glasshopper*, it will appeal to a similar readership.

FIVE LOCATIONS :

Brighton & Hove

A few years ago, on a university trip to a poetry reading in Brighton, two friends and I had a couple of hours to kill. Before the reading began, we ate chips on the seafront and wandered along to the Palace Pier before the reading began. As we stood on the pier, the sun started to go down, and the sky filled with a dark cloud of starlings. It swooped up, over and beneath the pier with spectacular ferocity and grace. I felt deeply moved, and I knew that the starlings would be part of this book, for both Mary and Jake.

Portsmouth

I find harbour towns fascinating. All those boats coming and going gives a place a sense of possibility; the promise of other places, other lives. I knew that Jake's life had to have an urban quality about it, and somehow Portsmouth seemed right. From there, Jake and his family would travel to the Isle of Wight and France for some of the most pivotal moments of the novel, in which the contrast between these places could reveal more of the characters' anxieties and desires.

Isle of Wight

I visited the Isle of Wight as a child and returned as an adult to research the book, on holiday with my family. We walked along the Tennyson trail, and stood at the monument, breathing in the clean air, surrounded by water at all sides. The sense of freedom became an important feature in Jake's visits to his relaxed Aunt Rachel at Manningly Farm.

Dordogne

The French location is based on a real location in the Dordogne, where we holidayed for several years in the late 1970s. The barn we stayed at belonged to a good schoolfriend of my father's, Paul Walshe, and for two weeks a year it was all ours. Dad would run in the field at the back of the barn, building up his lap count, as I sat and kept tally. My mother, a wonderful artist, would sunbathe on the lawn, shaded beneath her enormous straw hat, making pencil sketches of the scenery. It was an enchanting, primitive, romantic location, and it seemed the fitting place for Jake and Mary's story to end.