

Q&A with Louise Beech

What inspired *The Mountain in My Shoe*?

Quite a few things inspired this book. While doing voluntary work with children in the care system, I befriended a young girl, who's now grown up and still in my life. I wanted to tell the story of a similar child going through such an ordeal. Also, I kept imagining a woman, standing at a window, very lonely, waiting for her husband to come home. I thought, what if he didn't? Then, what if she was planning to leave him and he never turned up? So Bernadette's story started there, and the two tales merged.

This book is quite different from your debut, *How To Be Brave*, which was a much more personal story with a historical backdrop; here you have entered psychological thriller territory. Was that intentional?

I always smile so much at this question. No, it was a complete accident! I remember when my lovely publisher first read it, and she said, "You do realise this is part psychological thriller?" I told my husband immediately, with a big childish smile. I had written such a thing! The reason it wasn't intended to be (at least consciously) is that when I write a novel I never think of genre or where my book fits. I simply tell the story as I feel it should be told. I suppose it's the mystery of missing people and missing books that makes it a thriller. And the reveal...

Your main character, Bernadette, discovers an inner strength as the story progresses, and it is her determination that brings resolution both to the story and to everyone involved. Is she like you, Louise? Or was there someone who inspired her?

I suppose a part of her must be inspired by me, since I drew on times in my own life when I had to be strong. Yet I felt I was writing a character quite unlike myself, in that Bernadette is quiet, shy, gentle, while I'm more outgoing, and no one who knows me would call me quiet. But I loved her. I know many women who have gone through similar difficulties as Bernadette, who have come out stronger, but had to draw on every ounce of strength they had to do so. I suppose this is a nod to all of them.

A Lifebook frames the narrative – can you explain what this is, and why you used this as a device?

When I did my voluntary work, I met a wonderful young girl in the care system, one with incredible strength too. She had a Lifebook, which many children in such a situation do, and it fascinated me. This is a book that the people involved with a child going through care record factual details in, so that when they are grown up they have a history. The story of a life via reports, social workers, carers and family members. Kind of impersonal but also full of many perspectives. I tried to recreate one for Conor in the novel, but also take into account a reader's patience. So I mimicked the style but shortened the documents somewhat. I knew this would be the perfect device for giving Conor's background; for giving the reader such a full picture. It also gave a portrayal of Conor's mum, via her own voice in the form of letters. I wanted her to 'speak' so the reader might be sympathetic.

This is a book about families, belonging and the meaning of home. What messages were you hoping to get across?

Yes, it's definitely a book about belonging, where we fit in. I wanted to explore what home really is. How blood isn't the only thing that joins us. Family can be more than merely relatives. It might sound a tad cliché, but really you only need love. Love is what makes a family. And the place you can be with these people is home.

Your dedication mentions your own son, Conor. How much influence did he have on your character, Conor, in the book?

Ah, my lovely Conor. He's twenty-five now. I had him very young, got pregnant while in the Sixth Form. I drew on memories of him as a child when creating Mountain Conor (as I call him to differentiate!) We were close when he was small because it was just the two of us. He always had the most incredibly unique way of looking at things. I used his observations a lot. Also, *How to be Brave* was about my daughter Katy's illness and so I felt Conor deserved tribute too.

The Hull setting and the Humber are beautifully and evocatively described. Are these important to you?

This was so important. In writing a novel primarily about home and belonging I naturally wanted to use some of the places I've called home as backdrop. I can hear the river from my house, see the top of the Humber Bridge from my bedroom window. I've lived on this estuary all my life. The dangerous currents make it the perfect river to rage alongside all the drama. When I wanted to isolate Bernadette, to reflect her being stuck in a difficult marriage, I drew on memories of a huge Victorian building I briefly lived in as a child. My mum had moved there as a single woman after her divorce. It was damp and dilapidated, always cold because of the nearby river, surrounded by woods, and home to five run-down council flats. All night I heard haunting sound of the foghorn. I based Tower Rise on this place.

There is an ongoing debate about genre fiction – what makes a 'thriller' and can a 'thriller' or indeed any crime fiction be considered literary. What are your thoughts and do you mind being described as a writer of either literary or genre fiction?

I never think of genre when I write. I never try and fit into a niche. I don't think there's anything wrong with categorising though – people who love crime will look for crime so it makes sense to label it such, just as with romance, chick-lit, horror, sci-fi, etc. But I can't conform to a boundary. If I naturally fall into a genre, great. But I absolutely have to write my novels the way they're itching to get out, they way they're meant to be, rather than what they should or ought to be. I don't mind being described as anything at all! Just don't expect it of me every time. I like to think I'm Everyday Literary because my sister once said to me, "You write dead literary stuff, but for everyday folk."

Tell us about your route to publication?

Oh, it was long. Long and hard, with many rejections. I could fill a hundred pages with it! But I'll try and summarise. Okay, so it has involved almost ten years of forty short stories, thousands of rejections, a few publications in magazines, two novels, more rejections, two plays, a couple of competition wins, another novel, thousands more rejections, another play, another competition win, another novel, thousands more rejections... until finally, on 9th February 2015, Karen at Orenda Books said yes to *How to be Brave*.

What are your main influences?

There are many. I try and read very widely. There's nothing I won't try once. When I read John Irving's *The World According to Garp* almost ten years ago it cemented the absolute knowledge that I must make my writing dream a reality. I'd wanted to be a writer since I could hold a pen, always had some story on the go. But the beauty and brilliance of this book touched me on a deep level and I decided then to pursue the dream with all I had. I also loved the beautiful writing of *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, the daring of *Tampa* by Alissa Nutting, the bravery of *The Humans* by Matt Haig, the perfection of *Jane Eyre*, the historical magic of *The Secret Wife* by Gill Paul, and I love the spark of newer writers like Cassandra Parkin, JM Hewitt, Amanda Jennings, Katie Marsh and Melissa Bailey.

What's next?

I'm currently editing my third novel, *Maria in the Moon*, which is 'pencilled' in for next year. Here's a little blurb for that: Memories are our only truth; and even then they lie. Catherine can't remember her ninth year. She can't remember why everyone stopped calling her Catherine-Maria. She can't remember why her beloved Nanny Eve stopped singing. Homeless during the 2007 floods, she volunteers at Flood Crisis to help others, and a devastating memory returns...

I'm also writing my fourth novel, currently titled *The Lion Tamer Who Lost*, which is a tragic love story.