



TAMSIN WINTER TACKLES THE UNIVERSE AND OTHER BIG QUESTIONS

What inspired you to write Jemima's story?

I had read a newspaper article about an eleven-year-old girl who received a letter from her school telling her she was overweight and I couldn't get it out of my mind. Almost the entire article centred around the mother's perspective – how she felt and what she thought about it. I looked at the photograph of that girl and wondered what she was

feeling. I thought about how receiving a letter like that would have affected me at her age, when I was already self-conscious and insecure and my body was changing in so many ways. Jemima's story came from that.

What is the message you wanted to send and why?

I hope Jemima's story shows how important it is to respect every body, including our own. We spend so much time and energy worrying about what we look like, trying to hide or disguise our bodies, thinking and speaking negatively about them. On social media, we are bombarded with messages telling us how our bodies could be improved, yet our lives would be improved dramatically if we weren't judged for the way we look! In a recent Girls Attitude Survey, 52% of girls aged 11-21 said they sometimes feel ashamed about the way they look. Ashamed. It's an incredibly sad statistic but one that's not surprising. We are rarely encouraged to think about how incredible our bodies are, or the amazing things we can achieve just the way we are. Like Gina says, we are literally made of star dust. I hope Jemima's story helps readers to look in the mirror and appreciate all the qualities they share with the stars.

Did you draw on any personal experiences or those of people you know?

I can remember vividly the first time someone commented on my body. I was sitting on my nana's sofa and someone grabbed my leg and held it up for everyone to see, saying, "Look at the size of her legs!" I can remember feeling confused, embarrassed, uncertain about what was wrong with the size of my legs. Then later, I decided they must be too big. I was about eight years old when it happened, over thirty years ago, but I still hear that voice sometimes when I look in the mirror.

Of course, there was nothing wrong with my eight-year-old legs. They were legs that had won medals for ballet, legs that had earned swimming badges, legs that could run, tap-dance, roller-skate. But from then on, I forgot about all of that. I had the slow realization that what I could do mattered a lot less than how I looked. And all I saw when I looked in the mirror was everything wrong with me.

What followed was a period of disordered eating that lasted well into my twenties. I guess part of me wanted to write the story I needed when I was younger.

Did you ever find it hard putting yourself in Jemima's shoes?

Yes, mainly because she is a lot brainier than I am! The best part of writing for me is getting inside the character's head. It can be heartbreaking sometimes, but it's essential to make them real. Writing the scenes where Jemima tells her dad about the video posted online and decides to quit *Brainiacs* were the hardest to write, I think. I suppose Gina's pep talks were what I would tell the younger me if I had the chance. I didn't have the same experiences as Jemima growing up, but that feeling of wanting to be somebody else, or wanting to astrally project myself out of my body, is a familiar one to me. It took me a long time to feel comfortable in my own skin, to feel happy being myself. It was awesome to get Jemima there a lot sooner.

Did you do any research? How did you come up with all Jemima's interesting facts?

I had to do so much research! I read books, blogs, articles, watched YouTube a lot, talked to young people, teachers and parents about body image, self-esteem and body-shaming. Plus, I know so much about space now I could

probably get a job at NASA. During my research, I read so many nasty body-shaming and fat-phobic comments, but I also learned fascinating and beautiful things about our bodies. We have approximately 100,000 miles of blood vessels just in our brains. 100,000 miles! I wish people would remember how incredible human bodies are before they comment on them.

Both Jemima Small Versus the Universe and your previous book Being Miss Nobody deal with the subject of bullying – was this intentional or is it a theme that creeps into your writing?

After *Being Miss Nobody's* release I was contacted by lots of readers young and old who have been victims of bullying. Sadly, it is still a part of too many people's lives. From everything I found out during my research for *Jemima Small Versus the Universe*, I don't think I could have written the book authentically without touching on the bullying that many people face in and out of school for their size. Bullying often happens in hidden spaces, or comes from places we maybe wouldn't expect, like Harry's "friends". The scene where Harry reveals his bruises is based on something a young person told me during my

research. The comments posted on Jemima's video are based on real comments I read online. Lottie's bullying is truly vicious, yet Jemima still wants to be liked by her. That aspect of bullying – feeling like you somehow deserve it, or it's not a big deal, or it's happening because of some flaw you have, rather than the bully being at fault – is something I wanted to explore in the book. I also wanted to show the importance of friendship. Miki's love and loyalty towards Jemima combats Lottie's spitefulness and ultimately helps her to speak out. After everything Jemima goes through, the final scenes felt wonderful to write.

How do the characters appear in your head? Is Gina based on anyone in particular?

Developing characters is my favourite part of the writing process. I knew from the very beginning that Jemima would be super-smart and have something of an attitude. Gina's massive smile, her enthusiasm and general health-freakness are maybe based a tiny bit on my sister. Jasper's character was so much fun to write. I always pictured him dressed in a cape, performing magic tricks, so researching and writing those scenes was a lot of fun. The sibling

dynamic is something I love to write, probably because I am a middle child! Jasper is deeply annoying and his relentless boasting in front of their dad cracks me up, but he's lovable too, and he's there for Jemima when it really counts. Dad's exasperation with Jemima at times is maybe slightly reminiscent of my own teenage years. But really, the characters take on a life of their own. They sort of appear in my head, then never seem to leave.

Do you have an Auntie Luna?

Sadly, I don't have an auntie quite like Luna, but I'm an auntie myself and Luna definitely represents #auntiegoals for me. Her belief about all of us being intricately connected to each other and to the universe is something I definitely share. I promise I haven't done any naked moon-bathing, but I do believe the universe gives us little signs to guide us towards our destiny. I think we could all benefit from a deeper connection to the natural world, like Luna has. Don't we all feel the magic of infinite possibilities when we're looking up at the stars? Although maybe I'd draw the line at nettle soup.

Tamsin Winter grew up in a tiny village in Northamptonshire where there was nothing to do. She spent her childhood reading books and writing stories, mostly about cats (she loves cats so much that they still always appear in her books). She has a degree in English literature and creative writing, and has been teaching, travelling the world and daydreaming for most of her adult life, and now lives in Leicestershire with her son. She is passionate about writing stories that she hopes can make a difference to readers' lives.

*"More than anything, I hope my stories teach
young people to believe in themselves.
Because that's what makes magical things happen."*



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#JemimaSmall