

A Q&A with Maggie

What was your inspiration for writing *The Last Summer of Us*?

I think I'd been carrying Limpet around in my head for a long time. I grew up in west Wales, in a fairly small town where there wasn't a lot to do when I was fifteen. I was visiting a place called Henllan, and I had an idea for a story about a group of friends on a road trip around places very like that one. I even went as far as writing something and typing it out on a typewriter I'd saved up for. It didn't get very far, but I never forgot Limpet – and when I was back in the area, I picked up the story again...and here we are. In fact, the river at Henllan ended up being a direct inspiration for the place where Limpet, Jared and Steffan meet after the funeral. I wanted the story to be very specifically set in Wales and rooted in areas like Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire: I am Welsh, after all, and I had never really been able to find books about the places and characters I could see my friends in when I was growing up. More than anything, though, I wanted to talk about things like love and loss and friendship and hope, because we all go through them. We all feel them and the way we handle them helps make us who we are.

The novel explores grief and how it changes a family; what message were you intending to pass on to your reader?

Grief does change people, sometimes in big ways and sometimes in small ones. There are different kinds of grief, too: grief for a person or a relationship or a place (and there's even *hiraeth*, the infuriatingly untranslatable Welsh word for a kind of nostalgic longing for the place you come from. More than just homesickness, it's a sense of grief for what has been, and what could have been.) but it doesn't have to change us for the bad and it doesn't have to take away who we were before. We don't have to let it.

What was it like writing a character who is experiencing such emotional turmoil?

Limpet had to be written as honestly as possible, and sometimes that was hard. Not just because she needed to be someone you feel you know, but because she represents something that people really go through. We all lose people, in one way or another – so to hold back felt like it would be a massive disservice both to readers and to her. I tried to be as emotionally open as I could – my own mother died a few years ago, and while I wasn't in the same position as Limpet, I felt that having gone through that grieving process meant I could understand her better and make her more real. At the same time, it would have been a pretty bleak experience all round if it was all death, all grief, all the time – because that's not true either, is it? Trying to show that Limpet was more than that; that grief wasn't all she was and that it hadn't taken away who she was deep down, mattered just as much. Finding a balance between the two – both for her and for me – could be a bit of a challenge, and I definitely had a few days where I just wanted to sit under the table with a blanket over my head and pretend I wasn't there! But when it felt like I'd got her right, it was worth it.

If you could tell your teen self anything, what would it be?

I left home and went to university in London at seventeen, so I could easily fill a big, big book with advice I could have done with knowing then. Things like: "That haircut? No." Or: "Stop refusing to change lines on the Tube. Seriously. It shouldn't take you a YEAR to get past this. That's ridiculous." But if there was only one thing, it would be this: live. There'll be things you're glad you did, and things you wish you hadn't...and both of those are okay, because you shouldn't let anything stop you from living (not even a different Tube line). Life is a gift: why would you want to give it back unopened?