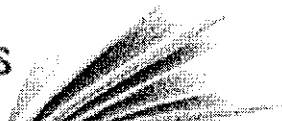


Books & Authors

What you don't read isn't



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About the Author

Full text biography:

Chris Cleave

Birth Date : 1973

Place of Birth : United Kingdom, London

Nationality: British

Occupation : Novelist

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about this author

Awards:

Book-of-the-Month Club First Fiction Award, 2005, Somerset Maugham Award, 2006, and Prix Spécial du Jury, 2007, all for *Incendiary*.

Personal Information:

Born May 14, 1973 in London, England; married; children: three. **Education:** Balliol College, Oxford University, B.A. **Addresses:** Home: London, England. Agent: Jennifer Joel, International Creative Management, 730 5th Ave., New York, NY 10019. **E-mail:** chrisclleave@gmail.com.

Career Information:

Worked variously as a bartender, sailor, teacher of marine navigation, and journalist. *Telegraph*, London, England, subeditor; *Lastminute.com*, journalist; *Guardian*, London, England, journalist.

Writings:

NOVELS

- *Incendiary*. Knopf (New York, NY), 2005.
- *The Other Hand*, Sceptre (London, England), 2008.
- *Little Bee*, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 2009. published as *The Other Hand*, Sceptre (London, England), 2009.
- *Gold: A Novel*, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 2012.

Contributor of articles to periodicals, including the London *Telegraph*; author of a column for the London *Guardian*.

Media Adaptions:

Incendiary was optioned for film by Archer Street/Film Four and was adapted for a film, which starred Michelle Williams and Ewan McGregor.

Sidelights:

Chris Cleave's first novel had one of the more ironic debuts in the history of publishing. *Incendiary*, a tale of a terrorist bombing in London that claimed a thousand lives, was released on July 7, 2005, the very day a series of terrorist bombings in the London Underground took the lives of more than fifty people. In Cleave's tale, suicide bombers strike a soccer match between popular London teams Arsenal and Chelsea. The nameless woman who narrates this novel is watching the events on television while in the process of making love to a journalist neighbor; meanwhile, her policeman husband and her son at the soccer match lose their lives. The tragedy inspires the widow to write a long letter to Osama bin Laden detailing the mundane and sorrowful events of her life in the aftermath of the killings. She relates her tale in a mixture of London slang, for she is largely uneducated and living on a housing estate. Sent into an emotional tailspin, she attempts suicide, but she then recovers to volunteer with police efforts to stop further bombings. London descends into a police state, and Muslims are persecuted. The narrator begins an affair with her husband's former boss on the antiterrorist squad, but as she begins to learn inside information from this new lover, she is manipulated by others to reveal what appears to be a government cover-up regarding the stadium bombing. Then, a second bomb attack strikes the city.

Cleave's novel, inspired by the terrorist bombings in Madrid in 2004 and by events in the United States in 2001, met with a wide range of critical assessments. Jennifer Reese, writing in *Entertainment Weekly*, felt that the novel, with its blend of heartfelt prose, dark humor, and thriller components, is "timely but chaotic." Simon Baker, writing in the *New Statesman*, had similar concerns, calling the characterization "weak" and noting that the author's "adherence to the epistolary format comes to seem forced." Baker concluded that Cleave's "too-slender grip on character and structure makes *Incendiary* a novel whose quality falls short of its ambition." Questions of taste arose from *New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani, who found *Incendiary* an "egregious book." Kakutani did, however, praise Cleave's "keen enough eye for social detail," further commenting that he "endows his heroine with his powers of observation." For John Dugdale, reviewing the novel for the *London Times*, Cleave's work is actually "two different novels jammed together," and "fusing them proves impossible."

Other reviewers had a more positive assessment of *Incendiary*. Writing in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Tamara Straus initially felt that the book "reads a bit too much like a Hollywood screenplay," but she went on to note that "Cleave has achieved something rare: a black comedy about the war on terrorism and terrorism itself." Brigitte Weeks, writing in the *Washington Post Book World*, found that the "power of this novel lies in its extraordinary momentum." Richard Eder, reviewing the same work in the *Los Angeles Times*, thought Cleave's widow--"a younger version of Mother Courage"--is "the saving narrator of this book." These sentiments were echoed by an *Economist* reviewer, who observed that Cleave had created "a distinctive narrative voice and a captivating heroine." Eder went on to note that the novel is "told in graphic detail somewhere between surreal nightmare and savage social irony." A *Kirkus Reviews* critic termed the book "provocative" and "an oddly elegant debut." Likewise, a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* called *Incendiary* an "impressive, multilayered debut." Praise was also offered by *Newsweek* contributor Malcolm Jones, who deemed it a "stunning debut" and possibly the "strangest epistolary novel ever written," as well as a "haunting work of art."

Cleave next wrote *Little Bee*, a novel published in England as *The Other Hand*. The story opens in London, where Little Bee, a Nigerian girl, has been held behind razor wire in a refugee detention center for two years. Now eighteen, she travels to England to seek asylum as a stowaway aboard a cargo ship, and the only people she knows in London are journalists Sarah and Andrew O'Rourke. The couple had taken a trip to Nigeria several years earlier in an attempt to get away and save their troubled marriage. Sarah is an editor at a London women's magazine, living in the suburbs and raising her four-year-old son, Charlie, who lives life in a Batman costume. She has been having an affair with Lawrence, a low-level press officer. When they planned their trip, Sarah and Andrew had been unaware of the violence that hangs over the oil-rich land, which is exploited by Western interests that manipulate the country's government at the expense of the people.

As the story goes back in time, Little Bee and her sister have taken new names so that they will not be associated with their tribe or their village, which has been destroyed. Sarah and Andrew meet Little Bee on a beach, where she and her sister are being chased by thugs who offer to trade the girls to the couple for one finger from each of them. Sarah sacrifices a middle finger to a machete, but Andrew can't go through with it. His is a decision that will haunt him, and the girls are taken by the men. Sarah's is one that she is aware of every day thereafter as she types the letters e, d, and c.

While in the detention center, Little Bee learns English from reading the newspapers, but her reference points remain in Nigeria. She formulates suicide scenarios should men ever come after her again. In an effort to make herself undesirable, she avoids bathing, binds her breasts, and chops off her hair. She paints her toenails once a week with a bottle of polish that she received in a charity donation box. She takes off her boots and looks at her painted toenails to remind herself that she is still alive. Little Bee is released after a mix-up in paperwork, and she finds the O'Rourkes through information from the wallet Andrew had left behind on the beach. When she arrives on their doorstep, Sarah is preparing for a funeral. The clinically depressed Andrew has committed suicide. Now the two narrators, Sarah and Little Bee, meet again.

Reviewer Erin McKnight, writing for the *Bookslut* Web site, commented that "Cleave's readers will surely recognize that Sarah's generosity is again Little Bee's salvation and Little Bee's resilience shall become Sarah's catalyst." Sarah's affection becomes the prize sought by both Lawrence and Little Bee.

"Like Little Bee, Sarah is a survivor," wrote Caroline Elkins in the *New York Times Book Review*. Elkins continued: "But the lessons of the past are not enough to steer either woman to safety. Instead, in a world full of turpitude and injustice, it is their bold, impulsive choices that challenge the inevitability of despair, transforming a political novel into an affecting story of human triumph."

On his Web site, Cleave commented that his childhood in West Africa and a visit to a British concentration camp inspired him to write this novel. One story in particular, Cleave noted, made him "determined to write the novel." It is the story of Manuel Bravo, an Angolan man who in 2001 escaped to England, where he claimed asylum. Four years later, Bravo and his thirteen-year-old son were caught up in a raid and interned at an immigration removal center, where they were to be held until morning, when they would be deported to Angola. During the night, Bravo hanged himself, saving his son, because minors could not be deported unless they were with a parent.

Cleave also noted that while he was a student, he worked for several days during the summer at the Campsfield House in Kidlington, England, which is a detention center for asylum seekers. He had been living close to the center for years without knowing of its existence. Cleave wrote: "The conditions in there were very distressing. ... Some of [the detainees] were beautiful characters and it was deeply upsetting to see how we were treating them. When we imprison the innocent we make them ill, and when we deport them it's often a death sentence. I knew I had to write about it, because it's such a dirty secret. And I knew I had to show the unexpected humour of these refugees wherever I could, and to make the book an enjoyable and compelling read--because otherwise people's eyes would glaze over."

In an interview with Patrick Freyne for the Dublin *Sunday Tribune Online*, Cleave said: "There's our world, of getting our cars fixed and worrying about deadlines, and then there's the terrible world where refugees come from. I was trying to get a circumstance where those two worlds would meet, and there are places in the world where holiday-makers are incredibly close to warzones. And Nigeria is one of those places. I was looking for a microcosm in which the developed world meets chaos." Of the detention centers, which he notes meet the definition for concentration camps, he commented: "It's a big business. These places are run for profit by private companies. And asylum-seekers are in a sense a cash crop for these companies. Once you start doing this, then the profit motive for continuing to do it becomes huge. It's extremely expensive, and very cruel. And I think there are better ways of enforcing whatever immigration quotas a country decides to have."

Writing for the London *Independent Online*, James Urquhart posited: "The taut spring of Cleave's intricate plot is a sequence of unpalatable moral decisions that cleverly bind life-choices to the guilty freight of conscience. But this novel's great strength is the squeamishly raw candour of its protagonists."

In 2012, the year that the Summer Olympic Games were held in London, Cleave released *Gold: A Novel*. The book focuses on three sprint cyclists, Jack, Kate, and Zoe. Jack and Kate Meadows are a married couple, and Zoe Castle is a cynical single woman. Tom Voss, a former cyclist, who narrowly missed out on winning an Olympic gold medal, is the trainer of Kate and Zoe. Tom has been troubled by that loss throughout the years. Kate and Zoe have been competing against one another for years, and they are ranked as the top two female cyclists in the world. Competing against each other in the Olympics will allow them to definitively determine who is the better cyclist. Jack and Kate have a daughter named Sophie who is suffering from leukemia. The couple struggle with both their rigorous training schedule and their daughter's illness. Sophie was born just before the Athens Olympics, so Kate was unable to compete there. Zoe did compete, and she won two gold medals there. Four years later, Zoe won another two gold medals in Beijing. Kate was again unable to attend because Zoe had just been diagnosed with leukemia. Although Kate is the more naturally talented cyclist, Zoe is the fiercer competitor. When Kate's father dies, she takes six months off of training, and her coach, Tom, criticizes her lack of commitment to her sport. Kate learns that Sophie has had a relapse of leukemia and must endure another round of chemotherapy. She wonders whether she should skip this Olympics, as well.

As the games draw closer, the Olympic committee releases a new rule: only one competitor from each country can compete in the sprint cycling events. Now Kate and Zoe must compete against one another to earn the spot on the British team. At age thirty-two, both women realize their athletic careers are near their end, making the stakes even higher. They agree to race three sprints against one another. The winner of two out of the three will go on to the Olympics. Other conflicts in the book include Jack and Kate's unraveling relationship and Jack's possible romantic interest in Zoe. As in *Little Bee*, Cleave uses flashbacks to delve into his characters' pasts.

Many reviewers praised Cleave's portrayal of the fast pace of cycling races, although they were mixed on the sentimentality of the plot. Alex Preston, a contributor to the online edition of the London *Observer*, compared the plot of *Gold* to those of Cleave's other books. Preston stated: "Though you might assume a book about the Olympics would prove less fertile ground for this kind of heart-tugging, *Gold* is violently, sometimes absurdly sentimental." Preston continued: " *Gold* is indeed a sentimental novel, but it has that rare gift of getting past the urban sneer to move and gratify, to stir us because it does, indeed, matter." In a review on the London *Guardian Online*, Patrick Ness commented on the book's ending: "In the end, *Gold* is a bit of a crowd-pleaser, and though I wished things didn't all come together quite so neatly, there's no denying that the novel is, ahem, an entertaining ride."

Regarding the action scenes, Carolyn Kellogg, contributor to the online edition of the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote: "His descriptions of riding fast, world's-fastest fast, are breathtaking." Writing on the London *Telegraph Online*, Caroline Greene opined: "Cleave occasionally captures the agonizing effort and heightened awareness that these athletes experience as they race around the velodrome." Similarly, James Urquhart, contributor to the online edition of the London *Independent*, suggested: "Cleave captures the heady balance of sharp motor control and vulnerability to the threat of bone-crunching, life-threatening impacts both in the velodrome and out."

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- *Bookseller*, December 10, 2004, review of *Incendiary*, p. 6; April 1, 2005, Benedicte Page, review of *Incendiary*, p. 24; June 17, 2005, review of *Incendiary*, p. 13; March 27, 2009, Andrew Steed, review of *The Other Hand*, p. 13.

- *Economist*, July 16, 2004, review of *Incendiary*, p. 79.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, August 5, 2005, Jennifer Reese, review of *Incendiary*, p. 69.
- *Financial Times*, February 7, 2009, James Urquhart, review of *The Other Hand*, p. 17.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, June 15, 2005, review of *Incendiary*, p. 652; November 15, 2008, review of *Little Bee*; March 15, 2012, review of *Gold*.
- *Library Journal*, July 1, 2005, Sarah Conrad Weisman, review of *Incendiary*, p. 65; January 1, 2009, Christine Perkins, review of *Little Bee*, p. 77; May 1, 2012, Donna Bettencourt, review of *Gold*, p. 70.
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- *Maclean's*, June 11, 2012, Marni Jackson, review of *Gold*, p. 65.
- *New Statesman*, July 18, 2005, Simon Baker, review of *Incendiary*, p. 56.
- *Newsweek*, August 1, 2005, Malcolm Jones, review of *Incendiary*, p. 54.
- *New York Times*, July 29, 2005, Michiko Kakutani, review of *Incendiary*.
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- *Times* (London, England), July 10, 2005, John Dugdale, review of *Incendiary*.
- *Washington Post Book World*, July 31, 2005, Brigitte Weeks, review of *Incendiary*, p. 3; February 25, 2009, Sarah L. Courteau, review of *Little Bee*, p. C4.

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- *Guardian Online*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/> (August 9, 2008), Lawrence Norfolk, review of *The Other Hand*; (June 8, 2012), Patrick Ness, review of *Gold*.
- *Independent Online*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/> (August 22, 2008), James Urquhart, review of *The Other Hand*; (June 23, 2012), James Urquhart, review of *Gold*.
- *Los Angeles Times Online*, <http://articles.latimes.com/> (June 22, 2012), Carolyn Keillogg, review of *Gold*.
- *Metro*, <http://www.metro.us/> (February 23, 2009), Dorothy Robinson, review of *Little Bee*.
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- *Seattle Times Online*, <http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/> (February 12, 2009), Tyrone Beason, review of *Little Bee*.
- *Shelf Awareness*, <http://news.shelf-awareness.com/> (January 22, 2009), Marilyn Dahl, review of *Little Bee*.
- *Sunday Tribune Online* (Dublin, Ireland), <http://www.tribune.ie/> (August 3, 2008), Patrick Freyne, author interview.
- *Telegraph Online*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/> (July 15, 2012), Caroline Greene, review of *Gold*.*

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Chris Cleave

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Chris Cleave (born 1973) is a British writer and journalist.

Contents

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- 2 Writing
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Chris Cleave

Born	1973 (age 40–41) <div>London, England, U.K.</div>
Occupation	Writer
Language	English
Alma mater	Balliol College, Oxford
Subjects	Literary fiction
Notable work(s)	<i>Incendiary</i> <i>The Other Hand</i>

Biography

Cleave was born in London in 1973, brought up in Cameroon and Buckinghamshire, and educated at Balliol College, Oxford where he studied Psychology. He lives in the United Kingdom with his French wife and three children.

Writing

Cleave's debut novel *Incendiary* was published in twenty countries and has been adapted into a feature film starring Michelle Williams and Ewan McGregor. The novel won a 2006 Somerset Maugham Award and was shortlisted for the 2006 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. The audio book version was read by Australian actor, Susan Lyons

His second novel, *The Other Hand*, was released in August 2008 and was described as "A powerful piece of art... shocking, exciting and deeply affecting... superb"^[1] by *The Independent*. It has been shortlisted for the 2008 Costa Book Awards in the Novel category.^[2] Cleave was inspired to write *The Other Hand* from his childhood in West Africa. It was released in the US and Canada in January 2009 under the title *Little Bee*, and will be adapted into a film starring Nicole Kidman by Blossom Films in association with BBC Films.^[3]

Cleave is a columnist for The Guardian newspaper in London. From 2008 until 2010 he wrote a column for *The Guardian* entitled "Down with the kids".^[4]

Novels

- Incendiary* (2005)
- The Other Hand* (UK title, Sceptre, August 2008)
- Little Bee* (USA/Canada title, Simon & Schuster, Doubleday, January 2009)^[5]
- Gold* (June 2012)

Characters

Little Bee by Chris Cleave



Little Bee is one of the two narrators & she shines. She's remarkably mature for her age which is not surprising considering what she's been through. In spite of her traumas she proves herself to be kind & thoughtful, shown especially with Charlie, but all the time we know her, she's overwhelmed with fear, particularly of men.

This even includes Lawrence for he has no sensitivity for her situation. As in Nigeria, she's in the way!

Little Bee's experiences make **Sarah** seem shallow; she even says she is.

Lawrence accuses her of never listening, she fails to communicate with her husband & she cheats on him.

However, she's a good mother & is determined to help Bee. Also through Bee & their shared experience, she gains in self knowledge;

"---Little Bee has changed me Lawrence; I can't look at her without thinking how shallow my life is."

And she says of her son in his Batman outfit, "You start off like Charlie. You start off thinking you can kill all the baddies in the world."

Andrew & Lawrence.

These two characters in Little Bee by Chris Cleave, are not very well developed at all. They tend to fizzle out. Through Lawrence, Cleave emphasises how we don't care about other people's problems. He cheats on his wife, yet makes a baby with her & simply wants Bee to disappear for he fears for his job, ironically at the Home Office, & he wants Sarah for himself to continue their affair.

Cleave doesn't mention his adultery & he disappears from the story. Like most people, he isn't interested in the injustices in life. Governments, bad people & huge companies out for profit depend on this attitude!

Andrew is crucial to the story of the beach & later we get the impression that he would have turned out

to be a good guy but, he conveniently disappears as Cleave concentrates on his two narrators & the rest of their story. It's Bee who excuses them when she says, "We are all trying to be happy in this world."

Themes

Little Bee by Chris Cleave



Here are the main themes of Little Bee by Chris Cleave that we enjoyed discussing:

Politics

In Britain, Detention Centres & the appalling treatment of immigrants in them, feature strongly. It is easy to feel the writer's anger when we read that some of the girls, having been incarcerated for two years, including Little Bee, escape because one of the girls offers sexual favours to one of the guards.

Along with this, when we are told that the female inmates have to apply for tampons, one at a time & in writing, it makes the quote at the beginning of the book ludicrous & shameful.

"Britain is proud of its tradition of providing a safe haven for people fleeing from persecution & conflict."

In Nigeria, we learn about the oil giants clearing whole villages, killing everyone to make sure they can't tell the outside world of their treachery. Bee & her sister suffer nightmares & fear such as most people have no idea of, thankfully, as they make a bid to escape. Bee never loses this fear particularly of men. Cleave includes his views on globalisation several times too.

Communication.

There is a lack of communication between Sarah & Andrew which has serious consequences. Had he confided his intentions to her about what he is working on, she might have seen him differently instead of too late.

Contrasts.

These permeate the whole book as we see in the huge differences between Nigeria & Britain. On the beach when the killers come & worse even, when they rape her sister & tear her to pieces, contrasts to an immeasurable degree with the domestic details of life in suburban, middleclass Kingston upon Thames. Horrific!

Contrasts with the Detention Centre & Kingston upon Thames also cause the reader discomfort for this is on British soil under a Democratic Government, a caring elected group.

We also note how the ordinary runs alongside the extraordinary. Sarah can barely cope with what happens to Bee's sister. She tends to dwell on the routine needs of everyday life, her family & her job. We see all these contrasts throughout the story including contrasting characters.

Book Club Questions

Little Bee By Chris Cleave



Little Bee by Chris Cleave (kindle and hard copy) has a good set of questions for you to work through but here are some that we enjoyed discussing:

Were shocked by the conditions in the detention centre?

What is the significance of Little Bee's name?

Why is Charlie always in his Batman outfit?

Do you feel that the novel loses some of its early promise after we know the story of the beach?

The author uses contrasts to make his point. Discuss some of the contrasts in this book?

What do you think the writer means by Globalisation?

Do you find much humour in this novel?

✱ What is the point of Lawrence? What do you think of him as a character?

Does Andrew redeem himself, once you know his intentions are to write a book?

Cleave feels very strongly about The Detention Centres & Globalisation. Do you think he gets his message across successfully?

✧ Little Bee is called "The Other Hand" in the UK. Which title do you prefer and why?

Are there any weaknesses to the story?

✧ Did you like the fact that there were two narrators? Which one did you believe more?

What would you have done at the beach?

Like?

Little Bee by Chris Cleave



This book totally split our book club, with scores ranging from 1/10 to 9/10. That in itself gave cause for a great debate and discussion about the merits of this book.

Noone can deny that this book covers some fantastic topics and for that, it should be a great book.

But for some, the events weren't believable and the characters weren't developed enough to make the book plausible. Whilst they wanted to like this book, they just couldn't!

To begin with, the story is a real page turner as we anticipate what might have happened on the beach, but then it loses its impact. It stays that way until we find out what happens to Little Bee later.

Some weaknesses that we discussed included:

Would Bee really be able to speak English SO well after two years & be able to read The Times at her age?

The writer brings in Lawrence but then doesn't mention his adultery, concentrating more on the significance of his job at The Home Office. A little too convenient?

We also questioned whether the detail of her sister's death was really necessary - gratuitous violence? Surely we could have used our own imagination?

All in all, even the book clubbers that gave this book 1/10 would still recommend Little Bee by Chris Cleave as a great book club book. Fab discussion indeed.

Author Q & A

Here is a full author Q&A about LITTLE BEE / THE OTHER HAND – everything from the true stories surrounding the novel right through to discussion of its characters and themes. These are the questions that readers and interviewers have been asking me, and I've tried to answer them as best as I can. I hope you'll find this helpful.

Thanks to all the readers who've sent me questions. Thanks to Bond Street Books and Simon & Schuster for their input too. Special thanks to Daniel Goldin at Boswell Books – some of the best questions are from an interview I did with him. If you have any suggestions for how I can make this page more useful, please let me know via email or via the comments box. If you or your book club have a question, I'll do my best to answer it. If you've arrived at this page you've come quite far, so thank you for being interested.

Is the novel based on a true story?

No, but there's one true story in particular that made me determined to write the novel. In 2001 an Angolan man named Manuel Bravo fled to England and claimed asylum on the grounds that he and his family would be persecuted and killed if they were returned to Angola. He lived in a state of uncertainty for four years pending a decision on his application. Then, without warning, in September 2005 Manuel Bravo and his 13-year-old son were seized in a dawn raid and interned at an Immigration Removal Centre in southern England. They were told that they would be forcibly deported to Angola the next morning. That night, Manuel Bravo took his own life by hanging himself in a stairwell. His son was awoken in his cell and told the news. What had happened was that Manuel Bravo, aware of a rule under which unaccompanied minors cannot be deported from the UK, had taken his own life in order to save the life of his son. Among his last words to his child were: "Be brave. Work hard. Do well at school."

Why is the novel called "The Other Hand" in the UK, Ireland, Australia and India and "Little Bee" in the US and Canada?

It's quite common for novels to change titles when they cross the Atlantic. I like both the titles the novel is published under. "The Other Hand" is a good title because it speaks to the dichotomous nature of the novel, with its two narrators and two worlds, while it also references Sarah's injury. "Little Bee" is a good title too, because the novel is really Little Bee's story, so it's a straightforward and an honest title. Also I like it because it sounds bright and approachable – and my aim with this novel was to write an accessible story about a serious subject. I like the fact that the novel has two titles. I like it when divergent choices are simultaneously right. While we're on the subject, I like my name. I think "cleave" might be unique in having two synonyms that are antonyms of each other. You see? I'm doomed...

Did you have a personal reason to write the novel?

Yes, there was a chance encounter that really shook me up. Around fifteen years ago I was working as a casual labourer over the university summer vacation, and for three days I worked in the canteen of Campsfield House in Oxfordshire. It's a detention centre for asylum seekers – a prison, if you like, full of people who haven't committed a crime. I'd been living within ten miles of the place for three years and didn't even know it existed. The conditions in there were very distressing. I got talking with asylum seekers who'd been through hell and were likely to be sent back to hell. Some of them were beautiful characters and it was deeply upsetting to see how we were treating them. When we imprison the innocent we make them ill, and when we deport them it's often a death sentence. I knew I had to write about it, because it's such a dirty secret. And I knew I had to show the unexpected humour of these refugees wherever I could, and to make the book an enjoyable and compelling read – because otherwise people's eyes would glaze over.

Was it your intention to change people's minds about asylum seekers?

Readers are smart and I'm not in the business of lecturing them. I see my job as providing new information in an entertaining way. Readers will then use that information as the spirit moves them. I think the job is important because there's something you can do in fiction that you don't have the space to do in news media, which is to give back a measure of humanity to the subjects of an ongoing story. When I started to imagine the life of one asylum seeker in particular, rather than asylum seekers in general,

the scales fell from my eyes in regard to any ideological position I might have held on the issue. It's all about exploring the mystery and the wonder of an individual human life. Life is precious, whatever its country of origin.

What could Little Bee do if she was allowed to stay as a permanent citizen?

I think Little Bee could do anything she set her mind to, because by definition she is a survivor. When I was a teenager in the 1980s, we thought of asylum seekers as heroes. The hundreds who died while trying to cross the Berlin Wall, for example. Or the pilots, performers and scientists who defected from the Soviet Union. Or the heroes of previous generations – Sigmund Freud, who fled to London to escape the Nazis, or Anne Frank, who could not flee far enough. Albert Einstein, Karl Marx, Joseph Conrad – all of them refugees – I could go on and on. When horror and darkness descend, asylum seekers are the ones who get away. They are typically above average in terms of intellectual gifts, far-sightedness, motivation and resilience. These are the people you want to have on your side. It will be a monument to our hubris if we allow ourselves to start thinking of them as a burden.

*interesting perspective on
asylum seekers*

Why did you choose to open the novel with the quote from *Life in the United Kingdom: A Journey to Citizenship*? What does the typo in this quote mean for you?

The quote is "Britain is proud of its tradition of providing a safe haven for people fleeing [sic] persecution and conflict." I took it from *Life in the United Kingdom*, which is the text book given to immigrants preparing for their citizenship test in the UK. It covers British history, government and etiquette. It offers the excellent advice "If you spill a stranger's drink by accident, it is good manners (and prudent) to offer to buy another." Less gloriously, though, its summary of British history is rather selective, and the work as a whole is riddled with inaccuracies and typographical errors. My belief is that if a refugee is prepared to walk away from a regime that has imprisoned and tortured her, flee to the UK, apply for asylum, and commit to memory the contents of the text book we make compulsory for her, then for our part we should at least be prepared to have that text book professionally copy-edited. The typo in that opening quotation is a nice example of a bureaucracy that is pretending to care, but not pretending very hard.

brought us the "War on Terror". As a writer one is easily frightened when the West declares war on a noun, but at the time I felt it acutely because our first child had just been born and I hated the way our elected leaders were so clearly making his world a more dangerous place. When I get scared it tends to come out as dark comedy, or layered irony – anyway, *Incendiary* was how it came out. I wrote the draft in six weeks in early 2004, after the Madrid bombings and while the Abu Ghraib torture story was breaking. I went into a room in Paris with a coffee maker and a radio and I came out six weeks later with a beard and a manuscript, not really knowing how I'd done it.

The new novel [*Little Bee / The Other Hand*] came out of a sense of my own complicity in some of the evils of the world. I'd moved on from considering myself as an outraged – and blameless – observer, which I guess is where I was at with *Incendiary*. A year on, I realised that people like me are often part of the problem. I began to think about my life, and how it is relatively easy, and how it is therefore relatively easy to ignore the suffering of others. And since suffering is the rule rather than the exception in the world, it's not an easy moral question to duck as a writer. So I decided to address it directly, by imagining the most striking example of someone who is dispossessed – Little Bee – coming to ask for a help from someone – Sarah – who is a little bit more like me. I never plot my work in advance, so I was very interested to discover how the moral ambiguities would play out.

As a writing task, this novel was harder than *Incendiary*. I did a year of research. I interviewed asylum seekers and people involved in their cases, I researched the oil conflict in Nigeria, and I familiarised myself with Nigerian English and Jamaican English. It was a lot of work before I even started writing. Then the book took nearly two years to write.

The novel is at times funny, yet it deals with serious and tragic events. How do you arrive at the bittersweet tone?

I'm able to do it because I have good readers. I can have my characters explore some fairly dark humour – for example, listing methods for a young Nigerian girl to kill herself at a garden party hosted by the Queen of England – while trusting my readers to understand that I am not making light of a serious theme. Rather, I am offering up a dark theme to the light, so that it may be examined. This is the only way I know to tell a serious

story about current events without it becoming a lecture. And when I interviewed refugees and asylum seekers while researching this novel, I found that some of them use humour in this way too. These are people with very painful stories to tell. They have learned that in order to survive, they must get people in positions of power to listen to – and believe – their stories. And they have further learned that such people are more likely to listen if they make their stories entertaining, by showing the joy of their lives as well as the tragedy. They are the masters at telling their stories – because if they don't get that balance right, they die. That's motivation, right there. As far as storytelling goes, they're playing in the major leagues. Novelists are amateurs by comparison.

Why does Little Bee talk about how she would have to explain things to “the girls back home”?

The “girls back home” are the novel's Greek chorus – they are a foil in whose imagined reaction the cultural dissonance experienced by Little Bee can be made explicit. It's a good device because it feels more natural than having Little Bee go around talking straight to camera and saying “Wow, I'm freaked out by this. And this. And this.” Much better for us to have Little Bee's thoughts after she has understood the situation and can explain it to the “girls back home” from a position of superior knowledge. This allows us to appreciate the cultural gulf, whilst allowing the narrator to be knowing rather than tragic.

I look at human culture the same way science fiction does, but I look at it through the wrong end of the telescope. In sci-fi an ordinary protagonist discovers an extraordinary world, and the genre is exciting because of the emotional dissonance. But my thing is contemporary realism, so I'm always showing the ordinary world to what is effectively an extraterrestrial protagonist. It's fun to do. Through this lens the most mundane events – Little Bee drinking a cup of tea in Sarah's kitchen – acquire an immense significance and a certain beauty. Also, the things in our culture that are sad and ignoble – the fact, for example, that we can enjoy our freedom while imprisoning and deporting those who ask to share in it – appear in sharp focus through the eyes of an alien narrator. We have become accustomed to viewing our own actions in soft focus, but the alien narrator has not yet acquired this cultural immunity. She sees us as we can no longer see ourselves.

How do you expect readers to react to Andrew's actions on the Nigerian beach?

I don't have a preconception of how readers will react to that scene. My aim was to create a scene that was perfectly morally ambiguous, and in which the reader might quite justifiably side with either Andrew or Sarah. Andrew isn't such a bad guy. What he fails to do on the beach is what most people would probably fail to do, myself included. Once Andrew realizes he's made the wrong choice, it's too late for him because the moment has passed and he is condemned to spend the rest of his days regretting that he failed life's test. Sarah is lucky, really. She's not inherently more moral than her husband, but just at that one critical moment she happened to do the right thing. This means that she can look back on her actions on the beach without too much guilt or shame. She can move on with the rest of her life while Andrew must enter a terminal decline. It's ironic because Sarah's infidelity is the reason the couple find themselves on the beach in the first place. And yet her premeditated affair goes unpunished by life, while Andrew's momentary failure of courage dooms him forever. Life is savagely unfair. It ignores our deep-seated convictions and places a disproportionate emphasis on the decisions we make in split seconds.

interesting

Is Charlie/Batman based on your own children?

Charlie is based on our oldest boy, who was four years old when I started the book. For six months he would only answer to "Batman". For a whole week I just listened to him and took dictation, which certainly beat going out to work for a living. Charlie's "goodies / baddies" worldview is endearing but of course it's naive and he's not in the book as an example of an ideal morality. Charlie is in the novel for two reasons. First because he's funny and loveable – he gives the novel an emotional centre; a reason for the adult protagonists to not simply walk away from the situation and disperse. Second, Charlie is a study in the early formation of identity. Little Bee is a novel about where our individuality lies – which layers of identity are us, and which are mere camouflage. So it's a deliberate choice to use the metaphor of a child who is engaging in his first experiments with identity – in Charlie's case by taking on the persona of a superhero.

How did using two voices allow you to tell the story more thoroughly?

What were some difficulties you faced writing from a female perspective?

After nearly two years with this project I realised that the strongest perspective would be a dual one. This is a story of two worlds: the developed and the developing, and of the mutual incomprehension that sometimes dooms them to antagonism. So by taking one woman from each side of the divide, and investing each with a compulsion to understand the other, I was able to let the story unpack itself in the mind of the reader. This was a huge breakthrough for me. One shouldn't underestimate the role of the reader in this novel. I wanted to write a story that was never made fully explicit; which relied on the reader's interpretation of the characters' dialogue. Once you trust the reader with the story, the writing is really fun to do.

It's not without its technical challenges, of course. As a man it requires concentration to write from a female perspective, but I see that as an advantage. If I'm consciously writing someone so different from myself, then I'm protected from the trap of using my own voice to animate the character. It forces me to listen, to think, and to write more precisely. Using two narrators is difficult though. To differentiate their vocabulary, grammar and idioms is quite straightforward if you make an effort to understand and inhabit the characters, but the hard thing is how you handle the overlaps and the gaps in the characters' knowledge. When both narrators have witnessed an event, which one will you choose to recount it? Or will you let both of them tell it, and play with their different perspectives on what they've seen? When you use your narrators in series, you need to work to make it not feel like a TV show with bad links between segments. But when you use them in parallel, you need to take pains to avoid the text feeling repetitive.

Add into the mix the fact that the story is not told in linear time – the first half of the book is working backwards into history, while the second half works forwards into the future – and it quickly gets complicated. The trick is to make it read smoothly. It's scary how many drafts you go through till you achieve something that reads simply.

Why is Sarah so much harder to like than Little Bee?

I like Sarah, but I'm also glad when people don't. I like them for not liking her, because it probably means they have a strong moral sense and don't

suffer fools gladly. But maybe they should give her a break. Sarah's not perfect, that's for sure. But actually when you look at what she does, it's very noble. She sacrifices herself, both mentally and physically, in order to save the life of a stranger. To my mind that excuses a lot of her shitty behavior – the adultery, the cynical day job, the aloofness. By contrast her husband, Andrew, is a moral paragon in his world, and yet when real life suddenly arrives to test him, he is found wanting. I also think Sarah inevitably suffers by proximity to Little Bee, who is much easier to like. If Sarah is more twisted, I think it's because her path through life has necessarily been more convoluted. Little Bee's life is extremely harrowing but it is also very simple – she is swimming very hard against the current, struggling to survive and not to be swept away. Sarah doesn't have the luxury of knowing in which direction she should swim. And so she takes some bad directions, makes some bad choices in her life, but ultimately her heart is good and she proves it.

Is the ending meant to be tragic or hopeful?

I trust the reader to have their own idea of the characters and of their destiny. The problem with novels is that they are like the real-life relationships they describe: they are readily begun, and they never reach a definitive end where the whole thing achieves completion. So, being quite committed to realism, I trust the reader to see that. I have unusually great readers, I think. I get lots of email that makes me realize the level they're operating on, and that I can trust them more and more in my future work. I don't need to lay everything out or make everything obvious. I like it when readers bring their own inner life to the party.

What other writers do you like?

I admire Cormac McCarthy most among the living writers. It's hardly an original position to take, but what can I say? What can anyone say about a man who has given us such an incredible body of work over several decades and who can then, in his seventies, write "The Road", a novel which would tip the scales when weighed against all of his previous work?

I also like writers who can make me laugh while telling a compelling story. For this reason I love the work of John Steinbeck. It's his little novels I like more than the important ones. Whenever I'm feeling low I go back and read the scene from Cannery Row where Doc orders a beer milkshake.

Handwritten note:
Sarah is a moral paragon in his world, and yet when real life suddenly arrives to test him, he is found wanting.

There are also some writers whose work I like and who aren't as widely read as I think they should be. I think Howard Jacobson is among the greatest British writers, and his novel "Koolhaas Nights" is one of the best of the last ten years. Alex Wheatle writes superb stories steeped in the street life and the vernacular of South London, and his new novel "The Dirty South" is excellent. And Ross Raisin is definitely one to watch in Britain. He's an excellent writer with strong principles, and his first book "God's Own Country" is great.

Why do you write novels anyway?

I do it because I don't know much about the world and I want to find out more. I enjoy the work of educating myself through research, and then I enjoy the process of writing. Novels are incredibly intricate engines, and if you change one little piece here, it can throw the whole thing out of equilibrium way over there. So you spend half your time with tweezers and a jeweler's eyepiece, and the other half with safety goggles and a lump hammer. And eventually, usually around three in the morning, the thing just clicks into gear and runs. It's the most uplifting feeling. I get it about once every three years.