

## Interview for *A Funeral for an Owl*

Questions put to Jane by J J Marsh. Interview first published by Triskele Books.

**Can we start with the cover? How did you, or your designer, create such a beautiful image?**

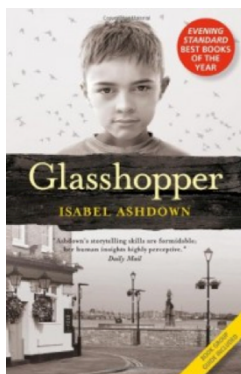
Having worked with Andrew Candy on the covers for my two previous books, *I Stopped Time* and *These Fragile Things*, we had already established a brand 'look'. The way we operate is that I am responsible for sourcing the images and coming up with a basic design concept, and he executes it using his marvellous eye and technical wizardry, which, frankly, is way beyond me. Some authors hand over far more of the process to their designer, but, for me, one of the joys of self-

publishing is how I present my work.

'Owl' deals with the issue of missing persons. I had found what I had thought was the perfect image on-line and had tracked down the photographer via Google Images. It appeared on several photographers' websites but it was not theirs and, no, they hadn't researched who owned the copyright. It turned out that the photographer was Turkish interior design student, Yunus Emre Uzun. He very kindly gave me permission to use the image with no charge and no limitations. I think you'll agree it is stunning.



Unfortunately the resolution wasn't good enough. So, after all my research, I had to start again from scratch. I wasn't thinking straight. In my mind, I was still looking for the one perfect image. Deadlines were looming and I was becoming less and less convinced that it existed. And then, one morning at 3:00am, I remembered the cover for *Glasshopper* by Isabel Ashdown, which combined several images. I could do this!



Normally, I prefer to avoid giving my characters a face – this is something best left to readers' imaginations – but I also remembered what a strong image a boy can be. U2's cover artwork for their album, *Boy*. And, of course, the film poster showing Billy from *Kes*.

Initially, I looked for a boy with a pair of binoculars, but that would have obscured his face. What I found was far more powerful. A boy looking out of a window, his face reflected back at him. The wonder in his eyes is palpable. A boy who might be looking out of the window of his council flat and catching his first glimpse of an owl. There was an overwhelming choice of images of barn owls, but I was looking for an owl with 'angel's wings'. (Photo libraries rotate their stock of images, so it's worth logging out and logging back in again.)

*Shamayal pointed to the empty shelf space, then paused in front of the large framed photograph over the fireplace. "I bin meanin' to aks about that. When I woke up it was starin' right at me. It's some kinda owl, right?"*

*"A barn owl." Aimee's owl, to be specific, because that is how Jim thought of it. Looking at the photograph afresh, he was still struck by the image: the bird's talons extended, its whole body taut as it lands on a slim post.*

*“Right, right. The wings, all spread out and that?” The boy mused. “They’re kind of like an angel’s.”*

*Funny kind of angel. If that’s what she was. “In some cultures, people think they become owls after they die. That would make them ghosts.”*

*“Ghosts? Yeah, I get that.”*

It was easier to source images of railway tracks.

I gave Andrew a very specific set of instructions, most of which he ignored. What he produced took me by surprise. I had imagined that the text would need to be brightly coloured. I had also imagined my small owl dancing along the top of the titles. I explained that I was not at all afraid of white space. Instead, this is what he came up with.

And now it's difficult to imagine the book with a different cover.

**The inflexibility and bureaucracy of the British education system appears rather accurately portrayed. Is that your background or is this the result of good research?**

If I’m completely honest, a structural editor – the mother of teenage children – pointed out that there were some flaws in my initial ‘research’ (or lack of). It was while I was ironing out those issues that I discovered another major flaw: I had failed to take account of the fact that it is thirty years since I left school. The behaviour of my teachers would have been illegal under current Child Protection laws. The stupid thing is that all of the information I needed was available on the local government website, had I realised I needed it. Then it struck me that this provided a huge opportunity. I could change the focus of the novel: what kind of boy would it take to make two teachers put their jobs on the line? And it gave the plot a new momentum.

My angle was the suggestion that some of the rules that have been put in place with the best of intentions – to protect – actually deprive the most vulnerable children of confidential counsel from someone they trust. Not everyone will agree with that view but, when I was growing up, we had a wonderful teacher who operated an open-house and provided a safe place for those who were struggling at home, no questions asked. It was surprising who would turn up at her door. Today, in an environment when any relationship between teachers and pupils outside the classroom is taboo, she would be sacked. I think that’s terribly sad. Fiction provides a unique opportunity to tell one side of a story through the eyes of one or two characters. It’s not the whole picture by any means, but it is one aspect of it.

**One of your strengths is powerful characterisation and believable dialogue. Many authors who excel in that area have experience in other media – is that true of you?**

Not at all. I left school at the age of sixteen with an R E ‘O’ Level and a swimming certificate and entered the world of insurance. My writing is very character-based, so from my perspective, you couldn’t have paid me a better compliment.

I come from a large family where the rule was that it was rude to interrupt, so I guess that I've become a listener and a keen observer. As someone who never has the right words to say at the right time and who regurgitates conversations over and over in her mind (sometime months after they take place), it is rather gratifying to be able to put words in someone else's mouth. I often get the dialogue down on the page and use it as a framework, hanging the prose off it. Of course, the reader only sees the fine-tuned version which has gone through any number of edits.

### **How did you go about nailing the voice of Shamayal, the disenfranchised contemporary teenager?**

Can I get this out of the way? I'm white, middle(ish) class and born in the 1960s, writing the voice of an under-privileged mixed race boy, born in the 1990s. The first property I bought was a two-bedroom flat on the High Path Estate in Wimbledon. This was my blueprint for the estate. Although I haven't walked in his shoes, living where Shamayal grew up, I have walked in his footsteps. Then, I borrowed a few mannerisms from someone I used to work with - the repetition of *right, right, right*. The deep laugh. I watched a few episodes of *Toy Boy* and (tell me if you can get arrested for this) I jotted down conversations overheard on trains and in my local park. Of course, you could never actually transcribe teenagers' speech patterns. They would be completely unreadable. After you delete all of the 'likes' and the majority of expletives, what you aim to arrive at is a sanitised version which still sounds authentic. Think Ronnie Barker's approach when writing the script of *Porridge*.

It's a joy to write characters like Shamayal and Bins (an elderly man who is assumed to have learning difficulties) because they have such specific voices. You can hear them speaking to you. It's far more difficult to write dialogue for an 'everyman', like my main character, Jim. You have to find your character's quirks and vulnerabilities and exploit the hell out of them.

### **This is the third book of yours I've read and thoroughly enjoyed, and now I notice certain recurrent themes: the effects of the past on the present, and unexpected events which challenge the system, whether that is religious, social or pattern of thinking. Are these themes conscious for you?**

I am hugely interested in cause and effect, yes. One of my favourite authors is John Irving and the first novel of his that I read was *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Irving overlays the story of Owen Meany, (a boy brought up to believe that he was the product of a virgin birth), with the somewhat dull present-day life of his best friend, John. Talk about cause and effect! I enjoy a novel where a back story is gradually unveiled. One of the reasons authors write is because they want to create a world with logic, with order, with consequences, sometimes doling out justice, sometimes giving people second chances. All authors are playing God to some extent.

As for unexpected events... most of the events I have written about are based in truth, albeit slightly unexpected ones. What inspired me to write *These Fragile Things* was the discovery that a woman in Surbiton - close to where I live - claims she has seen visions of the Virgin Mary every day for the past thirty years. When challenged recently that that there were too many coincidences in *I Stopped Time*, I referred the reviewer to the biography of model-turned-photographer-turned-journalist Lee Miller. I see myself as a magpie. I collect obscure facts and think, how can I recycle them?

**How do you work? Your books often contain more than one timeline or point of view, so I'm guessing you're a planner.**

Gosh, no. I am a layer-er. With the exception of *Half-truths and White Lies*, which virtually wrote itself, none of my published novels bear any resemblance to their early drafts. *A Funeral for an Owl* is no exception. It started life as the story of thirty-year old Jim recounting the story of his nine-year old self's friendship with Aimee, a girl from the other side of the tracks. Most of the action took place over a six-week period, the summer holidays. The reader was left in no doubt that Aimee killed herself. One of my colleagues had committed suicide leaving behind two teenage children, and this event and its aftermath were very much on my mind.

Then I asked myself, who Jim is telling his story to? Is he in therapy? Is it one of the doctors who saved his life? The twist was that it was St Peter and that Jim was an atheist. He got a second chance and woke up on the operating table. My agent loved it! She said that we should put it out there immediately.

But Transworld, my then publisher, exercised their right of first refusal. My book lacked a strong female character and they had put a lot of effort into marketing me under their women's fiction imprint, something that completely passed me by. And so I set the manuscript aside for a number of years. In the meanwhile I wrote *I Stopped Time* and *These Fragile Things*, but I held onto a soft spot for Jim and his owl story. The characters were very real to me. I had blurred the lines between my life and theirs by including personal history and setting their stories in my local neighbourhood. Also, the material was too good to shelve. And so, when I came to the end of my next project, I began to re-write it.

Unless you want to be pigeon-holed as an author of Christian fiction, you cannot play the religion card twice. Having exhausted this with *These Fragile Things*, St Peter obviously had to be shown the door. In the meantime, knife crime had risen dramatically in London. My story already had knife crime in it, so I explored where I could take that.

The central theme in my previous fiction was missing persons, and I found myself studying the Missing Persons ads in *The Metro*, the fourteen and fifteen-year-olds whose stories aren't sufficiently high-profile to land them on the pages of newspapers. They are simply slipping between the cracks. And so I looked into the facts. One in ten children 'run away' from home before they reach the age of sixteen, an estimated 100,000 every year. Shockingly, a quarter of those young people are actually forced out of their homes by parents or carers. Two-thirds are not reported to the police as missing. That's 75,000 children for whom a Missing Persons ad will never be placed. All of these children are highly vulnerable, at risk of substance abuse, sexual exploitation and homelessness. Mobile phones and social networking sites have made it even easier to target them. And then I discovered a particularly poignant quote from Lady Catherine Meye: "*We can't establish for certain how many children are missing. You'd have more chance of finding a stray dog.*" So that got me thinking, what if...?

Every time you introduce a new angle, each *what if?* question has to be pushed to its limits.

Writing in such an organic manner is hardly ideal, and I would certainly never recommend it, but setting material aside and revisiting it is an excellent practice. It allows far greater objectivity. You have to analyse what isn't working any why. Writing is very much a learning process and I'd like to think that my writing had improved. I went back and polished every page, really concentrating on the short-

lived relationship between Jim and Aimee. Young as Jim was, even though there was an age difference, even though their relationship didn't develop, there would have been sexual attraction. Ignore something as critical as that, even if you think it might be taboo, and the writing you produce is dishonest. When someone has spent years dwelling on a very short period of time, on events that gained greater significance afterwards, you aren't simply reporting facts. Jim would have embellished the story in his mind. The Aimee the reader meets is the memory of the memory of the memory. She had to shine, everything she said had to carry a message, and the summer had to feel endless. My job was to convince the reader that these few events shaped a man's life.

Also, I got the opportunity to meet Shamayal and Ayisha, and to turn Bins, my favourite character, into a hero.