

Information for Beta Readers

Firstly, a huge thank you to everyone who has offered to give up your time to read and comment on my book. I'm overwhelmed by your response. Welcome on board to new friends and a big welcome back to those of you who have been part of my writing projects since the very beginning. It's great to have a more balanced mix of men and women this time around. We also have some authors!

Before we get started, a little background detail.

This book started life as my reaction to the outcome of the second inquest about Hillsborough, primarily the expectation that now that justice had been delivered, the families could get on with their lives. (While writing the book, the 50 year anniversary of Aberfan also came about, an incident I was less familiar with.)

Despite these two incidents, I didn't want to make it a book about blame of individuals, because so many individuals behave heroically in the most terrible circumstances.

I also combined two of my fears – travelling in rush hour and escalators – plus a near miss incident I experienced last year. I was on my way to a book-reading at Waterstones Covent Garden and was carrying with me all of my stuff for a day's work in the city plus a suitcase full of books in tow. The escalator at Monument was out of order and we were diverted to the (much steeper and faster) escalators at Bank. I pushed my suitcase in front of me and it dragged me down, so I fell. Fortunately, there was no one directly in front of me...

My choice of date was totally random. I simply researched everything I could find on-line around that date. I did not allow myself to cheat when I uncovered anything inconvenient. (For those of you interested in that sort of thing, journeys on the Underground doubled again in the 10 years following 2003, and I had an email from Southern last week saying that journeys on the overground have doubled in the past 12 years.)

Where this book differs from my previous books is that I'm playing with a larger cast. I also felt that the book needed to be written in the present tense (which does not come naturally to me) to give it a more contemporary feel.

My book is not intended to be for everyone. (It may not be for you!) The intention is that it should have as broad an appeal as possible within its genre.

I haven't been a beta reader before. How does it work?

Other authors may use beta readers at a different stage of the process. I am now about ten edits into the manuscript and have used the services of a structural editor. Having whittled out more than 30,000 superfluous words I have reached the stage of what I can only call 'faffing about' (changing the order of words in a sentence, then changing them back). In my world, this is still quite an early edit. In terms of time-scale, I am probably half-way through the book. I have lived with the subject-matter for over a year and am far too close to it to be subjective. This is where you come in.

After I have analysed your feedback, I will incorporate changes. This means working each change through from beginning to end to see what impact it has on the novel as a whole before going on to the next. It is possible that the ending may change as a result.

When I am happy as I can possibly be, I will use a copy editor (sometimes more than one), incorporate any further changes, and then a proofreader. Finally, I order a printed proof and give it a line-by-line read through. As you will see, this process is very much a collaboration, but signing it off is all down to me.

How will my feedback be used?

Please don't be offended if your suggestions are not incorporated. They are all valuable. I am particularly interested in whether a number of people identify the same issue, in which case there is clearly something I need to address.

Should I point out typos and inconsistencies?

I know that some of you are superb proofreaders and I don't expect you to hold back (Hello Harry Matthews and Sarah Marshall). The copy that goes to the copy editor should be as clean as possible. Equally, if you notice someone walking into a room wearing a jacket, only to put their hand in their coat pocket, please don't assume that someone else will pick up on it later in the process. Nothing is too trivial to mention. I had palpitations when I found that a bucket changed into a kettle when I was reading the final proof of *I Stopped Time*.

How should I provide feedback?

I am very open about this, except that I would prefer not to have it by drip-feed. An overview by email is fine (in which case, chapter and page numbers are very useful as references.) Please feel free to track changes in the Word Document (Review > Track Changes) and use the Comments facility (Review > New Comment). For those who like a structured Q & A approach, I have included questions, both general and specific. (Please don't just give yes and no answers, unless that is all you think is required.)

What timescale do I need to work to?

My timescale is a month. If you don't respond within this time, I will assume that you don't have time to help out. (Life gets in the way. It happens.) In the past, some of you who couldn't meet the deadline have been kind enough to be my first reviewers. I even found my last book on Goodreads before it had been published.

Copyright and Piracy

I am taking a leap of faith in emailing the Word document. I would ask you not to share this with anyone. I am copyright protected, but piracy is something we all live with. Unfortunately, I know of other authors who have found their early drafts for sale under different titles, with minor changes. But quite simply, the book is not yet as good as I would want it to be.

How will my name appear?

Finally, please can you check that your name is as you want it to appear in the 'Acknowledgments' at the end. (The wording of this will also change.) My most embarrassing typo ever was getting my copy editor's name wrong. (We both missed it).

Authors: if you want me to link from your name to your website or books in the e-book version, just ask. If you are an author and feel you can provide a quote for the cover, even better!

Questions

- * Did the story grab your interest from the very beginning? What were the questions in your mind?
- * Did you get oriented fairly quickly as to who was who, and where and when the action is taking place? (Specific: Were you confused by the flashbacks, multiple point of views, other?)
- * Was there enough conflict, intrigue and action to sustain your attention?
- * Did you find yourself skipping over any sections? If so, which ones were they? (In terms of the character Eric, the research is intended to show up on the page, however, did you feel bogged down with detail?)
- * Were there any parts at which you felt the story started to lag or at which you became less excited about finding out what was going to happen next?
- * Could you relate to the main characters? Did you feel as if you knew them? Did you find yourself rooting for them?
- * Did any of the characters feel like stereotypes or caricatures?
- * Did the relationships between the characters seem real or did they seem contrived?
- * Did you get confused about who was who? Were there too many characters to keep track of? Too few?
- * Did the settings pull you in, and did the descriptions seem vivid and real to you without bogging you down with too much detail? (Specific: If you knew the places, did you recognise them? Is there anything I could add that would help other people recognise them? Tiny details can be the most evocative.)
- * Did you notice any discrepancies or inconsistencies in time sequences, places, character details, etc.?
- * Did the dialogue feel real? If not, please comment on what felt forced.
- * Which parts resonated with you and/or moved you?
- * Which parts did you actively dislike or not like as much? Was there anything you found offensive?
- * Were there any parts that you feel could be compressed?
- * Were there any parts that you feel could be dealt with in more depth?
- * Are there any scenes, perhaps reported on or referred to, that you would like to see happen in 'real time'?
- * Was there anything that confused and/or frustrated you?

* Was the ending satisfying? Believable? (This is not a tidy ending as I had to give the idea of lack of resolution/continuity, but were there enough reveals.)

* How would you describe the book to a friend?

* How you would you describe the main themes of the book?

* Would you recommend this book to a friend?

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