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A Conversation with Clare Mackintosh
author of I LET YOU GO

How would you describe I LET YOU GO?

It’s a psychological thriller about the consequences of a fatal hit and run, and a woman trying to escape her past.

Your background is interesting – you went from police detective to journalist to novelist. What inspired your career transitions and how do you think the three relate?

I spent 12 years in the police and loved every minute of it, but it became increasingly hard to balance a busy career with life as a mother of three young children. I took a career break and reinvented myself as a freelance feature writer, and at the same time I wrote *I Let You Go*. I signed a two-book publishing deal the month before I was due back at work, so I handed in my notice and never went back. The thread that links all three types of work is storytelling: as a detective I told victim’s stories on their behalf; collected witnesses’ stories to support allegations of crime. My job was to pull together all the threads of a story and present it to a court in such a way that they could decide on a verdict. In that way it wasn’t dissimilar to the stories I now present to readers.

The hit-and-run case in the book was inspired by a real-life case. Can you explain?

In 2000, just after I started my career in the police, there was a tragic hit and run in Oxford, England. It killed a nine-year-old boy and sent shockwaves through the city. I didn’t work directly on the case, but I was profoundly affected by it. I couldn’t understand how anyone could drive away from such a terrible act, and I couldn’t see how the child’s mother could ever survive such a tragedy. Many years later I lost my own son – in very different circumstances – and I began to understand the impact grief has on one’s life. The more I considered this, the more a story took shape.

Given your experience in the police force, was it necessary to do additional research before writing this book? If so, what kind of research did you do?

In *I Let You Go* I was writing within my comfort zone, so I didn’t need to do much research, although I did check some procedure with a couple of former colleagues. Most of the “research” I did was more about trying to capture experiences; I even walked fully clothed into a freezing ocean in November in order to write a particular scene better!

Which character in I LET YOU GO do you most identify with? Why?

There are elements of my own personality in many of the characters. As a young detective constable I was as determined as Kate, and I have definitely been as short-sighted as DI Ray Stevens. I’m very fond of Ray’s wife, Mags, at home with the children after giving up her own police career, and definitely sympathize with her. But it’s really Jenna I can relate to most strongly. Jenna’s grief for her son is my own, and I sobbed through many of the scenes in *I Let You Go*.

Everyone who reads I LET YOU GO is shocked by the twist in the middle of the novel. Without giving anything away, was the twist something you planned in advance or did it come to you as you were writing?

The twist was the first element to arrive. I knew exactly what I wanted to achieve, and why I wanted to do it, and I knew that if I could pull it off, it would provoke an extraordinary reaction among readers. From there it was a question of letting the story take shape around it.

Ray, the lead detective working on the hit-and-run case, struggles to balance his family life with work and is haunted by past cases. How closely do his challenges mirror what real-world detectives deal with?

Very closely, I think. Policing is a tough job and it's hard to maintain healthy relationships when you're under so much pressure at work. Police officers deal with some really emotional cases and it's inevitable that some hit home harder than others. I found it very difficult to switch off and I know many of my colleagues felt the same.

I LET YOU GO was the UK's top-selling crime fiction debut in 2015. Why do you think so many readers have embraced the book?

I've been overwhelmed by the response to my debut novel, and I've loved hearing from so many book groups and readers around the UK and beyond. It seems to appeal to fans of both procedural crime and mystery, as well as of literary thrillers and psychological suspense, so I guess I'm covering all bases!

Tell us about your literary influences. Who are your favorite writers and what kind of books do you love to read?

I read widely, across all genres. Right now I'm reading Alex Marwood's *The Darkest Secret*, an exceptional thriller out this year. I love Sophie Hannah's books, and I've been a fan of Jodi Picoult for many years – I love how she explores such big issues in her writing.

What are you working on now? What's next?

I'm playing around with ideas for my third novel, and working on the edits for my second, *I See You*, which is out next year. It's about a woman who sees her photograph in the classifieds of a London newspaper and sets out to find what it's doing there.



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