



She'll do anything  
to have a friend...and  
anything to keep one

# THINGS WE HAVE IN COMMON

A NOVEL

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# THINGS WE HAVE IN COMMON

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

People say books can get under your skin and shape who you are, but I had no idea to what degree this was true until I wrote *Things We Have in Common*.

Writers often talk about experiencing an existential feeling as they work, of feeling like little more than vessels for the stories they create, and particularly at the initial stages of writing *Things We Have in Common*, I had that experience too. When I decided to try to write a novel, I didn't know what theme, character, plot or even genre might emerge. The only conscious thought I had was to try writing to a fictional "you" because that felt intimate and seemed to me to perfectly represent a reader's personal relationship with a book.

I began a sentence: The first time I saw you, you were standing at the far end of the playing field... and felt instantly drawn to the tone of the voice. I knew it was a teenage girl speaking. I knew she was overweight and lonely and that the "you" she was addressing was a sinister, older man. I also knew that what she wanted to tell me was going to be dark, secret, and deeply delusional, and I wanted to keep going to find out what that was.

It's fairly obvious why I was drawn to such a dark theme, I suppose, since almost all the books I've read and loved, especially as a teenager, are dark, psychologically driven stories—*The Wasp Factory* by Ian Banks, *Don't Look Now* by Daphne du Maurier, *The Tulip Touch* by Anne Fine, *Magic* by William Golding, *This Sweet Sickness* by Patricia Highsmith—but where Yasmin, my protagonist, came from, I really had no idea. She is nothing like me, from background to life experiences, yet there she was driving the narrative of my story.

My teenage years were happy and active, but I was bullied at a young age, between 7-10. Like anyone who has been bullied knows, it is something that stays with you. Maybe it explains why I was and still am drawn to fictional characters that are, for whatever reason, pushed to the edges of society. Rejection is a powerful emotion to handle, even if only temporary, and a fear of rejection is something I think we humans all have in common. Subjected to loneliness as a result of rejection over time, I'm fascinated by what terrible acts any of us might be driven to commit.





# THINGS WE HAVE IN COMMON

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I was more than two thirds into my book before I remembered, out of the blue, *The Collector* by John Fowles. I had read it when I was 15, the same age as Yasmin. Immediately, I bought it and devoured it again and was stunned by how plainly it had influenced me, how whilst I had forgotten it for so long, my subconscious clearly had not. The story that Frederick tells us, like Yasmin's, is secret: only readers, as helpless voyeurs from another world, can hear it. And both Frederick and Yasmin, without access to love, look for what they emotionally need in fantasies of "golden" girls. In both stories, too, the protagonists are delusional. Unaware of where their actions are leading them, this blindness is perhaps the most terrifying aspect of their characters. Cast out by society, they have lost touch with it, instead creating their own, new moral compasses to fit their needs.

Quite where Yasmin came from and why I felt I knew her so well is still a mystery to me, though. I can only explain her as surfacing from that same subconscious place as Frederick from *The Collector*. Perhaps, before she came to the surface of my mind, she had been living her life down there amongst the characters from all the books I've read and loved, and that it was they as much as me who created her and her story.



# THINGS WE HAVE IN COMMON

LETTER FROM  
YASMIN

Sometimes I think it was fate that made me see you at the edge of the school field that day, watching Alice Taylor—like it was some decision the world had taken to finally put things right again. Or that—even though God doesn't exist and Heaven's a load of made-up story—it wasn't fate, but *Dad* that made it happen. Because I do feel him everywhere, like he's still here somehow, looking out for me.

Other times I think it was everyone around me—the kids, the teachers, *everyone*—because if they hadn't all been so horrible for so long, I probably never would've been stood there on my own like I was. They'd never have meant for me to see you. They only meant to make me so miserable I'd hang myself (with any luck, in the school hall where they'd get to marvel together at how the Ashfield school tie could possibly hold something so humongous).

I thought once I left school everything would be easy to understand, like the way Mum and Gary see things, but it wasn't. It isn't. Everything's a prism—it changes depending on where the light is. There's not much I remember learning at school, but I remember that, because it made me cry, how the colors were like ghosts and so beautiful.

And then sometimes there's so much meaning it all just vaporizes until there's none at all. It feels like being at the edge of space. I see people laughing and talking, and think how we're all just accidental blips on an accidental planet that's going to explode into an accidental universe.

So everything that happened after I saw you, and knew you were going to take Alice Taylor, just happened. It's all everybody's and nobody's fault. It doesn't matter. It's all just stuff.

—Yasmin

## Q & A WITH THE AUTHOR



### What would you like readers to take away from the story?

I'm drawn to characters who, for whatever reasons, are outcasts of society. I'm interested in what lengths they (and any of us) might go to in order to get what they need emotionally. I never contemplated what I'd like readers to take from *Things We Have in Common* when writing it, but now I hope they will empathize with Yasmin, delight in her determination to attain her goal, and perhaps to consider the part we all play in creating such a character.

### Do you relate to Yasmin in any way—her obsessive nature, wanting to be popular as a teenager, not quite fitting in, anything like that? Did you know anybody like her, growing up?

I'm nothing like Yasmin yet I suppose since I didn't struggle to write her, I must have more elements of her than I imagine! I think, although I love a good party, I'm a bit of a loner, hence the writing. And like Yasmin I can be obsessive—I definitely listen to songs far, far more times than a sensible person would and for years longer too! I'm also dogged and don't easily give up. Writing requires these traits just to keep going. And then there's food. Like many millions of teenagers, I was obsessed with food. I would not have been classed as overweight, but was always dieting and fighting a bingeing disorder. I never knew a Yasmin growing up—other than the girl that intrigued me as an adult in our street—but I knew an 'Alice' at primary school. There's always an Alice isn't there—the 'perfect' one the other girls want to be like or be close to?

### You have a teenage daughter. Did she influence Yasmin's character and/or her voice?

My daughter is 16 but is nothing like Yasmin. Maybe on some level, having a daughter the same age as my protagonist gave me the confidence to write a character of that age, but Yasmin seemed to come from my subconscious, her voice and thoughts very clear to me. I've written a blog about where characters come from because this is such an interesting question for me. It feels as though Yasmin came from somewhere so deep in my subconscious that I didn't create her at all, rather that she 'grew up' around all the other characters in books that have had an impact on me.

### Have you always wanted to be a writer?

Yes, since I was 8. I wrote story after story then—missed most of Christmas day one year for *The Adventures of Tinkerbell* (a cow in my version). I mainly wrote plays as a teenager then got onto the MA Creative Writing course at the University of East Anglia where I was lucky enough to be tutored by Malcolm Bradbury and Rose Tremain. But then I went into film editing (which is similar to writing in

## Q & A WITH THE AUTHOR



many ways). I had a wonderful time working on features including *12 Monkeys*, *Seven Years in Tibet* and *The Talented Mr Ripley*, but I craved solitude and wanted to be in charge of everything! And you can do that as a writer—the direction, the editing, the acting, the lighting, and the rest of it, too. That’s what is so utterly brilliant about writing, and all for the cost of a notebook and pencil.

### Is it true that you only wrote one draft of *Things We Have in Common*?

Not really. It’s true in the sense that when I wrote the last line, that was it—finished—but my method is different to many writers. Unable to fly through a draft and then go back to edit, I make much slower progress, editing as I go. I find that polishing and reworking the text en route allows me to discover more depth and meaning in each scene and gives me time to get a feel for what needs to come next. Once under the eyes of my agent and editor there were changes of course. Mainly, I added a few scenes to allow the story to breathe. I think with my previous picture book writing experience I’d written too economically in places.

### What are you working on now?

As mentioned, I’m drawn to stories about people who are, for whatever reason, social misfits. The protagonist of my second novel is one such character. Unbearably lonely, he is caught between a paralyzing fear of his desire and a yearning to express it. When he recognizes his own suffering in another, he knows he is the only one who can help. But his carefully constructed world is tearing at the seams, he is deeply deluded, and his actions threaten to destroy far more than just his sanity.





# YASMIN'S FAVORITE STRAWBERRY TARTS

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## Ingredients

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### FOR THE CRUST

- 1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/3 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup cold unsalted butter, cut into small pieces
- 1/4 teaspoon salt

### FOR THE FILLING

- 8 ounces reduced-fat cream cheese, softened
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1 1/2 to 2 pounds strawberries, hulled and halved
- 1/4 cup seedless red currant jelly

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## Directions

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### CRUST

1. Blend flour, 1/3 cup sugar, butter and salt until crumbs begin to form. Transfer dough to a round tart pan. Suggest using a 9 inch round pan with removable bottom.
2. Flour fingers and press dough evenly into pan and up the sides. Use a flat-bottomed cup to create an even surface.
3. Freeze crust for 10–15 minutes, until firm.
4. Prick edge of crust with a fork for a decorative flair. Bake crust until golden for 25–30 minutes at 350°F. Remove from oven and let cool completely.

### FILLING

1. In a medium bowl, mix cream cheese and remaining 1/4 cup of sugar until smooth. Spread the mixture evenly in the bottom of the crust.
2. From the outside edge in, place strawberry halves top down on the cream cheese filling.
3. In a small saucepan on medium low, heat red currant jelly until it becomes liquefied. Brush strawberries with jelly and let sit for 25 minutes. Chill for up to six hours and remove from pan just before serving.

Cut into slices and serve with a sweet white wine for your book club.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. The novel is written in the second-person point of view. How did this affect your reading experience? Why do you think the author chose this POV?
2. Do you think the author intends the “We” in the title to include you?
3. Yasmin is a very introspective character, often imagining scenarios removed from her daily life. How does this trait shape her as a narrator? Does this make her unreliable? What external factors contribute to her fantasies?
4. Why do you think Yasmin fantasizes about Alice’s disappearance? What emotional need, if any, does this fulfill for her?
5. How does Yasmin’s life at school affect her life at home? How does her home life affect her behavior at school?
6. What roles does Mr Caldwell fill in Yasmin’s life? What roles does she fill in his?
7. Does this novel challenge our understanding of guilt and innocence? Who is the perpetrator? Who is the victim?
8. In what ways is this novel a search for belonging?
9. What did you think of the ending? What did you make of the very last sentence?
10. Would you befriend Yasmin?