

New York Times bestselling author

Clare  
Mackintosh

"Utterly heart rending and incredibly uplifting, *After the End*  
is the most moving book you'll read this year."

—LISA JEWELL, author of *Then She Was Gone*

after  
the  
end  
a novel



book club kit

PUTNAM



# *A Conversation with* **Clare Mackintosh**

## **What inspired you to write *After the End*?**

Twelve years ago one of my children became critically ill with meningitis, and we had to make a decision about his future. I asked the doctor what would happen if my husband and I disagreed on the best course of action, and she said, “You have to agree—the alternative is unthinkable.” *After the End* is about the unthinkable.

## **What kind of research did you do to write the novel?**

Much of the story is based on my experience of having a critically ill child; of spending time in hospital, and of the worry and grief and exhaustion that accompanies it. I was helped enormously by a pediatric nurse and by a barrister, both of whom gave up their time to help me work out the intricacies of the story, and to add authenticity to characters and settings. One of my characters—Max—is American, and I spent some time in his hometown of Chicago, which really helped him come to life for me. I had already written the first draft and identified where he hung out, so I could visit those places on my research trip and add detail in the second draft. Finally, I worked with an Iranian teacher to understand where my fictional doctor, Leila, might have come from. I loved learning about Persian food!

## **Your previous novels—*I Let You Go*, *I See You*, and *Let Me Lie*—were all suspense, making *After the End* a change in direction for you: a big-hearted, issue-driven novel about relationships, family, and the choices we make. Why did you decide to write in this new space? Did anything surprise you about writing in a new genre?**

Genre is a useful signposting tool, but ultimately it's a publishing construct: a good story is a good story. *After the End* is just as suspenseful, just as tense, just as emotionally charged as my previous books, and it features ordinary people in an extraordinary situation—just like my previous books. In many ways it was harder to write because I haven't worked in a medical field (my previous career in the police meant that writing police officers came easily to me), but I enjoyed the research and I loved every second of writing it.



© Astrid Di Crollanza



**As parts of *After the End* are based on your own life, could you tell us a bit about your writing process? Did the very personal nature of the story change your approach to this book? Was writing this novel different from writing your previous books? Are there specific moments from your life experience that you wanted to include in the book?**

Although my own experience was the catalyst for *After the End*, the story isn't my own; it's Max's and Pip's, and that made it less emotional to write than I had expected. I didn't start writing the book until I knew the characters inside out, which meant all I had to do was think about how each turn of events would impact each of them, and I would then know how the scene should play out. This is very different from my previous books, which I plotted in intricate detail. I wrote *After the End* fast, with an urgency that mirrored the story, and when I'd finished it I felt like I was coming up for air.

**We see questions of what makes a life worth living and who gets to make that decision rising again and again in medical cases that are covered by the media. Why do you think these stories become so sensationalized? How do you approach the line between private and public in *After the End*? Is this true to your own experience?**

My own experience was a very private one, and for that I am very grateful. It is a hard enough time for families without the intrusion of media and protestors. There is a feeling that we have a right to know about these moral dilemmas, and in discussing them in the papers and on the news I think we lose sight of the fact that these are real people, not case studies. In *After the End*, public sympathy is heavily weighted toward Max, further reinforcing the divide between him and Pip.

***After the End* features two storylines tracing two possible futures. Did one of these storylines occur to you first? Was one easier to write than the other?**

This was always the way I wanted to write the book—ever since that conversation with my son's doctor, all those years ago. In order to make our decision, we had to hypothesize based on the

few facts we knew. What would life look like—for us, for our son, for his siblings—if he lived? What would life be like if he didn't? Splitting the narrative in *After the End* explores those options. It also ensures no one reads this book and feels their own choices are being judged. There are no right answers.

**What do you hope readers will take from *After the End*?**

I would like readers to think about what they would do in Max's and Pip's shoes, and consider whether their opinion changed during the course of the novel. I hope it will prompt discussion about other big life events, and what might have happened if a different decision had been made. The book is inspired, in part, by one of my favorite poems, Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken". We all have "crossroad moments" in our lives, and wish we knew what lay ahead. It's interesting to consider how different our paths would have been if we'd taken a different route.

**What was it like to write a relationship from the perspectives of both the husband and the wife? Was there a voice that was more difficult for you to capture? Did either of the characters surprise you along the way? Do you relate more to Max or to Pip?**

Whenever I wrote a Max chapter, I related to him; whenever I wrote a Pip chapter, I felt for her. I knew them both so well by the end of the writing process that they both felt easy to write—I could hear their voices in my head and know exactly what they would say. Writing Max's story was harder from an emotional perspective, because it's the road I never traveled—the road I sometimes wish I'd traveled—and although it was therapeutic to explore what that might have looked like, it was also difficult.

**The story shows the impact of the decision on not just the parents but also the medical caregivers—specifically, on Dylan's doctor. Why was it important for you to include this perspective in the book?**

Leila is the character I got to know first, possibly because her words—the decision she asks Max and Pip to make—are



“It’s often the case that you only  
know you’ve made the  
right decision once you’ve made it,  
so I’m a firm believer in trusting your  
instincts, and your heart.”



the starting point for the whole story. She provides us with a professional perspective on Dylan’s condition, although she holds her own bias, just as we all do. I also wanted to show Max and Pip through the eyes of someone apart from each other, to show the differences between how someone looks and how they feel.

**Do you think it’s possible for a marriage to survive what Max and Pip went through, and, if so, how?**

I think it is very hard to survive trauma, and when that trauma is played out in the public domain it must be nearly impossible. Relationships need investment, and time, and total honesty, and all those things require doubling in the aftermath of a crisis. My own marriage survived the loss of our son, and the agony of the decision-making that preceded it. Would it have survived had we disagreed? It’s impossible to know.

**Do you have any advice for readers who are also facing difficult decisions or asking themselves “What if . . .”?**

I walk a lot, and I find it helps with any kind of decision-making. Imagine yourself in five years time: in this job, in that country, without that person in your life. . . . Take yourself through a “day in that life”: how does it feel? It’s often the case that you only know you’ve made the right decision once you’ve made it, so I’m a firm believer in trusting your instincts, and your heart.

**What’s next for you?**

I’m in the process of planning my next novel, written from the perspective of two women: the girlfriend of a man who dies during a struggle with police, and the wife of the police officer with him when he died. It’s inspired by a real-life case and is already breaking my heart.



# discussion questions

1. *After the End* follows both Max and Pip. Did you relate to one voice more than the other? Why?
2. Why don't Max and Pip agree about Dylan's future? How does this disagreement change their relationship? Were you surprised by either's opinion?
3. Discuss how the novel explores the power of our choices to change not only our lives, but those of our loved ones, and the lure of the question: What if? How has this question shaped your own life? Do you believe in fate, or do you think we make our own choices?
4. At one point, Leila "tries to imagine what it must feel like to have your own private hell made public" (p. 384). How does Max and Pip's relationship change once their dilemma is covered by the media? Do you think the story would have played out differently if they had been allowed to keep their decision between themselves? Why or why not?
5. How does the idea of losing Dylan change Pip? How does it change Max? Have you lost someone in your own life? How does this novel explore the idea of hope in times of grief?
6. Pip worries that loving Max isn't enough to make their future together right (p. 305). Do you agree that sometimes love isn't enough? If Max and Pip continue to love each other, why can't they be together? What does it mean to love someone but not be able to be with them?
7. Max, Pip, and the judge assigned to their case must all imagine Dylan's future and determine what is right for him. How does each approach this choice? Do you think "evidence" should play a role in a decision like this? What about emotion? Have you ever had to make a decision in a situation with no "right" answer?
8. One question central to this novel, as the judge asks the court, is "What is a life?" (p. 384). How would you answer this question? Do you agree more with Max's interpretation, or with Pip's?
9. *After the End* suggests that sometimes the end is just another beginning. What does this mean? How does this idea shape the novel? How might you take this idea into your own life?
10. Were you surprised by the novel's ending? Why or why not? What do you think the final decision for Dylan should be?