

A woman with long, wavy hair is shown in profile, looking out of a window. The scene is overlaid with a teal-to-green gradient. The text is centered over the image.

# THE NEW GIRL

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BOOK CLUB KIT

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Much of the novel centers on female relationships and the way women interact with each other—do you ever find yourself thinking some of the same thoughts that Margot, Maggie, and Winnie had when interacting with other women?
2. Margot is distressed at the thought of going on maternity leave and feels that it will leave her high-powered position vulnerable—would you have had the same concern if you were in her position? Why or why not?
3. After Winnie and Charles lose their child, the primary focus is supporting Winnie through her grief, while Charles is secondary. Why do you think that is?
4. What do you think Winnie stands for as a mother, even though she has no child? How do you think the loss affects her perception of herself?
5. As Maggie becomes increasingly successful in Margot's old position, she begins to resent the fact that she will be forced to give it up. Is it fair of her to feel this way? Would you feel this way if you were in her position?
6. Margot and Maggie are both seen struggling to balance their work and home lives. Margot is pulled between a career she spent years building and motherhood, and Maggie is pulled between the time it takes to build a career and the time it takes to build a relationship. Can you relate to their struggles to balance their lives?
7. Margot still carries guilt for what happened in high school; do you think she bears any blame? Can you relate to her guilt, merited or otherwise?
8. Do you believe Margot, Maggie, and Winnie will continue their friendship beyond the end of the novel? Do you think tragedy ultimately bonds or breaks relationships?
9. Do you think Winnie and Charles' marriage will survive after the events of the novel?

## Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

**Q:** What was your inspiration for *The New Girl*?

**A:** My own experiences of being on maternity leave are at the heart of the book—I started writing *The New Girl* at my kitchen table while my baby was asleep. I'd never felt so many strong and conflicting emotions before, and I wanted to try to capture them—in part, I think, to try and rationalize them to myself!

I wanted to write something about the pull that many women with young children experience between being at home (and in love) with their babies but also of having left part of their identity behind in the office—where, in the UK at least, it is very common to have someone else filling in for you while you're away.

I spent my twenties building a career in a role I adored, and my job has become part of who I am. So to step back from it voluntarily and have someone else take over for a while felt very odd. I felt guilty even admitting that I missed working as I nurtured my tiny daughter—it seemed ungrateful, given how blessed I was with this gorgeous new life.

I spent so many hours mulling this as I pushed the baby around in her pram, and eventually came up with a structure that would place a new mother between two paradigms of womanhood: a glamorous and ambitious younger temp who'd trigger the protagonist's insecurities from afar, and a bereaved mother whose tragic loss of a child made Margot's concerns seem petty by comparison.

**Q:** Did your experiences as a fashion editor at *The Times* influence how you wrote about the fashion industry?

**A:** I probably dug more into my experiences as an assistant and then a writer at the British editions of *Glamour* and *Vogue*; I wanted Maggie to feel the same razzle-dazzle as I had when I was first starting out. Being a fashion editor on a newspaper is less of a whirlwind than working on a glossy—you share an office with people of different ages and with different interests, and with men! I found fashion magazines a more pressured working environment, smaller offices crammed with very similar people. Certainly there was more scope for handbag envy.

## Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR CONTINUED

Being on maternity leave made me see my job in a new light. I'd worked in fashion for so long, I'd forgotten how exotic and bizarre the industry can seem from the outside. The women I chatted to at playgroups and in cafes had so many questions about what I did. I realized that the smallest details could be fascinating or unexpected—from what type of chairs there are on the front row to how messy the fashion cupboard always is, or simply the day-to-day running of a fashion desk. I tried to write about the industry in a way that felt insider-y, but which also disabused a few notions of how glamorous it all is.

**Q: Did becoming a mother influence your depictions of motherhood in the book?**

**A:** Absolutely. I knew that having a baby would change the way I lived, but wasn't prepared for how it changed the way I felt about myself and how I behaved with other people. Having my daughter made me simultaneously the weakest and strongest I have ever been, incredibly insecure but also much more confident. I doubt myself more than I ever have, but I also trust my judgment in a way I never used to. The rollercoaster of emotions and identity reminded me of being a teenager, which is why the book looks at female friendships in school too.

Once you're in the cohort of people trying for and having babies, you also become so much more aware of how fraught the whole process can be—the fear, the pain, the struggle to conceive, the grief and trauma of miscarriage. I wanted Winnie's story to stand for a side of motherhood that isn't often discussed, but which can loom large in the mind of most women as they find their way in this new identity.

Becoming a mother was (still is) utterly discombobulating and I wanted to convey that in the book. I was already au fait with feeling impostor syndrome at work—I didn't realize you could have it at home too. I wasn't prepared for the guilt, the nagging feeling that I was doing it all wrong and that someone was about to find out, the constant anxiety—and I count myself as someone who had a happy and fulfilling maternity leave with a pretty relaxed baby!



## Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR CONTINUED

**Q: Do you feel a lot of pressure both as a mother and as a woman in the fashion industry? Is it difficult to be a mother in the fashion industry?**

**A:** I don't think it's more difficult being a mother in the fashion industry than in any other job—whatever their profession, women are encouraged to hold themselves to impossible standards both at home and at work, and all too often this leads to a certain suspicion you're failing on both fronts.

Fashion has a reputation for being bitchy and competitive—it can be, but more and more there's a sense of solidarity too. It's rare to work in a majority-female industry and to see women, with children and without, in the top jobs. I've always had plenty of role models, not to mention supportive female colleagues and bosses—I can imagine being shocked at the lack of visibility of women in senior roles in other workplaces.

In my opinion, the biggest pressure on women and mothers comes not from the fashion industry but from social media—the bikini selfies, the endless holidays, the perfectly curated lives and feelings of inadequacy these apps can bring. Social media fuels the illusion that “having it all” is easy and the norm. In my admittedly very privileged experience, having it all means having a partner who does just as much childcare as you do and splits household chores 50/50 too.

**Q: You're a journalist; how was writing fiction different? Did you like it more or less than writing nonfiction?**

**A:** As a journalist, I rely on facts and quotes to tell other people's stories. As a novelist, I felt so much more exposed: my ideas, my imagination, my characters, my plot—all out there to be critiqued and weighed in the balance. *The New Girl* contains so many themes and strands that are close to my heart that, at times, putting it out there felt a little like one of those anxiety dreams where you're inexplicably naked in the supermarket and everyone is looking.

As much as I love my job, I'm not sure this book would have happened without some time away from it. The daily deadlines and immediacy of writing for a newspaper do put a certain limit on one's attention span, and it took months (thank goodness for all those buggy walks!) to flesh out a narrative and characters even before I began writing.

## Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR CONTINUED

Once I'd started, I loved the freedom of fiction—the space and word count to work through thoughts at length, to linger over descriptions and invent the things that needed describing—but, without the usual deadline or word count, I also found it vast and intimidating. I had to set myself chapter targets to hit so it felt less overwhelming, and gave myself a completely arbitrary deadline to make sure I got to the end.

I'm not sure I could choose one medium over the other. I have wanted to be a writer since I was a little girl. Just like Margot and Maggie, I have always felt immensely lucky to make a living from words—I hope you enjoyed reading them.

# PLAYLIST

1. "Juice" by Lizzo
2. "Strange" Combination by Teleman
3. "Donkey" by Bessie Turner
4. "The Best Of It" by Whyte Horses, La Roux
5. "Lost In Yesterday" by Tame Impala
6. "I Follow Rivers - The Magician Remix" by Lykke Li, The Magician
7. "Can't Do" by Everything Everything
8. "Livin'" by Jetta
9. "Stop This Flame" by Celeste
10. "Don't Be So Hard on Yourself" by Jess Glynne

