

H A N N A H R I C H E L L

secrets of
the tides

READING GROUP NOTES



A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK



Secrets of the Tides is a taut and gripping family drama revolving around the troubled relationships of two sisters and their mother as the secrets that have haunted them for years are finally brought into the light.

Cassie, Dora and Helen are held back by the secrets they keep – they need to confront their pasts and deal with the guilt they each hold in order to move forwards in their lives, and it is the brooding presence of the house at Clifftops that eventually brings them together. Told from the alternating perspectives of the sisters and their mother, we gradually piece together the truth about what happened and the heartbreaking implications of their individual decisions on one tragic day, the drama building to a dramatic and unexpected climax as the picture becomes complete.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hannah Richell was born in Kent, England, and spent her childhood in Buckinghamshire and Canada. After graduating from Nottingham University, Hannah worked for the first years of her career marketing authors in the book publishing business before moving to Australia in 2005. She became a citizen in 2010 and after a stint working for Universal Pictures returned to publishing as a brand manager. She lives in Sydney with her husband, two young children and a black-and-white cat called Lennie.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW



What inspired you to write this novel? Did you have any particular influences?

For the first eight or so years of my career I worked in publishing in London. I was surrounded by terrifyingly talented authors and was far happier to market other peoples' books than to try to write my own. I simply didn't have the confidence to actually sit down and write anything myself, other than sporadic scribbles in my diary.

It was only when I moved to Australia at the end of 2005 that I felt an inner longing bubble up. It's a strange and liberating thing, moving to the other side of the planet. When my boyfriend (now husband) and I first arrived we felt detached from so much – work, friends and family. It felt, for a while at least, as if *real* life was continuing without us, as if the world we had known had moved on and closed up behind us. So to cope with the feelings of isolation, I began to write. My first attempt was pretty hopeless. I got halfway through a derivative kind of bonkbuster (working title: 'Diva!') and stopped soon after when I realised it was something I wouldn't ever want to see the light of day. Then I got distracted again with a full-time job in film. We gradually made friends and built up our social life, but all the while the itch of writing was there still, lying beneath the skin, waiting to be scratched.

Then, in 2007, two things happened: I fell in love with an Australian TV show called *Love My Way* and I got pregnant. *Love My Way* blew me away. I loved the characters. I loved their interactions. I loved the honesty of the script, and, for those of you who have seen it, wept at THAT moment halfway through series one when everything changes; it's totally unexpected and it split me open. I wondered if it would be possible to write a novel that did that, that could pull the rug out so completely from beneath a family, and indeed a reader, that you are left struggling for breath. And so the idea for *Secrets of the Tides* was slowly conceived.

Later, after my son was born, I found myself at home on maternity leave with a baby who was (thank goodness) a relatively good sleeper and I began to make a point of using his nap times to write. Every time I put him down to sleep, I would race to the laptop on the kitchen table and start writing. My first draft seemed to come in a rush and I felt so happy, to not only be so in love with my beautiful new family, but also with this absorbing new hobby.

The setting plays a pivotal role, with Clifftops becoming almost a character in its own right. Was the Tide family home based on a real place? Were you influenced by other novels where a house plays a central part, such as Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* or Kate Morton's *The Shifting Fog*?

I've always loved novels and movies where the location is as central to the story as the characters and their interactions – stories like *I Capture the Castle*, *Rebecca*, *The Camomile Lawn*, *Atonement* – so I knew right from the start that I wanted to try and make the house and its coastal location as much of a character as the people who inhabited it. The novels I've read and loved were obviously a factor, but I think the greatest influence in writing *Clifftops* was my own childhood memories of time spent at my grandparents' house in a small seaside

village in Dorset. Their home was really nothing like Clifftops, yet I couldn't help but use echoes from those days when trying to shape the fictional house and its surrounding landscape. It felt very natural to draw on those memories and weave the essence of them into the writing as I went.

The way in which you flip back and forth between narrators and in time, bringing us ever closer to that fateful day and then beyond, is a brilliant way of hooking and then gripping your readers. Did you always plan to use more than one perspective to tell the story?

Absolutely. I always wanted to write one event as seen through the eyes of different characters, to show that there was never just a single side to the story. I'm a firm believer that life is never simply black or white and the different voices felt like a good way to illustrate this. The structure and time frame also seemed like a good way to generate tension and suspense. I wanted to show a family in pieces and to starkly contrast this with happier days from the past, hopefully leaving the reader curious as to what has happened to them all, for a little while at least. The structure certainly posed the most problems when drafting the novel, but the back and forth in time and the multiple points of view always felt essential to the slow revealing of the secrets and truths hidden in the novel and I loved weaving in the little clues and signals as I went. It felt as though I was pulling together a vast, unruly jigsaw puzzle.

Each of your protagonists is partly culpable for the tragedy at the heart of the story. Did you deliberately try to ensure readers could relate to aspects of each of their personalities?

I've often wondered if other writers just wake up one morning and know their characters, but for me it was an intricate and lengthy process getting to know the Tides. They started off

a little woolly in my head, just basic details scratched out onto paper, but with each new draft I noticed them grow and change. As I mentioned above about not wanting to show life as simply black or white, it was the same with the characters. It was important that they each had a reason for acting the way they did, even if it wasn't always the right reason or particularly justifiable. Of all of them it was Cassie who altered most dramatically from my earliest imagining but I like her all the more now – she's one of my favourites. If readers do find the characters in the novel relatable then honestly, I would be thrilled. I don't think a writer can ask for too much more than to have a reader say they care enough about a character to want to follow them on their journey.

The feelings of guilt experienced by each member of the Tide family are inextricably linked to their individual secrets and forgiveness is something that necessarily doesn't come easily for any of them. Was the complex nature of mother-daughter and sibling relationships something that you consciously chose to explore?

Yes. As I set out to write *Secrets of the Tides* I knew I would have to write their story with as much emotional honesty as possible. I am a daughter, a sister and now a wife and mother too, so it seemed absolutely right to me that the story be told from the three female viewpoints, to help me illustrate the complex and shifting bonds between the family members. And yes, I'm sure I drew from my own well of personal family experience along the way, even if on a purely subconscious level. (My mum is a psychotherapist so I'm sure she'll be reading with interest and coming to all sorts of wild conclusions about my state of mind. Ha ha.)

SUGGESTED POINTS FOR DISCUSSION



- The reliability of the three narrators is sometimes difficult to gauge. Did this make it harder for you to empathise with aspects of each of their personalities? What role did the shifting point of view play in your experience of the novel?
- The complex nature of mother-daughter, sibling and in-law relationships is explored in some depth alongside the conflicting emotions inspired by immeasurable grief. Discuss the ways in which different characters deal with their emotions – particularly drawing comparisons between their younger and older selves.
- Although Helen and Dora are very different, parallels can be drawn between their lives. How does Dora's relationship with Dan echo that of her mother's relationship with her father?
- The central characters are all female, but how important a role do you think the male supporting cast plays?
- Do you feel Richard's behaviour towards Helen justifies her embarking on an affair? And, if so, to what extent do you think he could be held responsible for the events of that fateful day?
- To what degree do you feel the prospect of becoming a parent changes Dora's behaviour and contributes to her addressing the events from her past?

- The way in which the past haunts the Tides is an important theme in the book. In what ways do you think the tragedy impacts upon Dora and Cassie's adult selves? Whose life do you think is most affected by it and in what ways is this shown?
- Discuss the linked themes of grief, blame and forgiveness, and the parallels that can be drawn between the three main characters in their handling of each.
- Both the coastal setting – at once therapeutic and threatening, with even the family's surname reflecting its importance – and the brooding presence of Clifftops itself, are pivotal to the book. What impact do you feel the location has on the story?
- Secrets lie at the heart of this novel and the way in which the characters handle them changes with time, but for perhaps none more so than Cassie. Discuss the self-destructive and almost catastrophic way in which she deals with her emotional turmoil and the reasons why she felt so unable to carry on living.
- Why do you think Cassie didn't share the truth about that day with anyone? What do you think brings about her change of heart when Dora visits her as an adult?
- Discuss Helen's reaction to the central incident. Do you think her response and immediate blaming of her younger daughter are justified? How do you think you would react in her situation?
- To what extent do you think the characters' behaviour and decisions on that fateful day led to the tragedy at its heart? Or do you think it was unavoidable?
- Cassie's suicide attempt at the start of the book makes for uncomfortable reading. Which other aspects of the novel made you feel uncomfortable and why? Did they lead to a new understanding or awareness of some aspect of your life that you'd not previously considered?

- There is an almost palpable tension throughout the novel – how you think the author achieves this and builds upon it?
- The story is told from multiple perspectives and from different periods in time. Discuss the strengths of conveying the drama in this way.

FURTHER READING



Something Might Happen – Julie Myerson

Rebecca – Daphne du Maurier

Jane Eyre – Charlotte Brontë

I Capture the Castle – Dodie Smith

The Shell Seekers – Rosamunde Pilcher

The Hand that First Held Mine – Maggie O'Farrell

The Last Letter from Your Lover – Jojo Moyes

Things I Want My Daughters to Know – Elizabeth Noble

One Day – David Nicholls

My Sister's Keeper – Jodi Picoult

THE LANDSCAPE OF
secrets of
the tides



One of the places I felt most comfortable as a child was out in the countryside, rambling across fields and through forests with our two dogs bounding at my side. It was the perfect time for daydreaming. This photograph sums up so many of those childhood walks I took. I can almost hear my wellies squelching up the muddy path and the wooden stile's creak of protest as I pull myself over into the meadow on the other side. I love stiles. They are so quintessentially English, and best of all, they are an open invitation: to keep walking, to explore and go further. (I only realised how many stiles I'd written into the novel when it came to the US edits of the manuscript – we struggled to find another suitable word that would translate to the American market!)

When Richard takes Helen to Clifftops for the very first time, he guides her on a blustery walk up to Golden Cap. Their route might have taken them past this very sign.

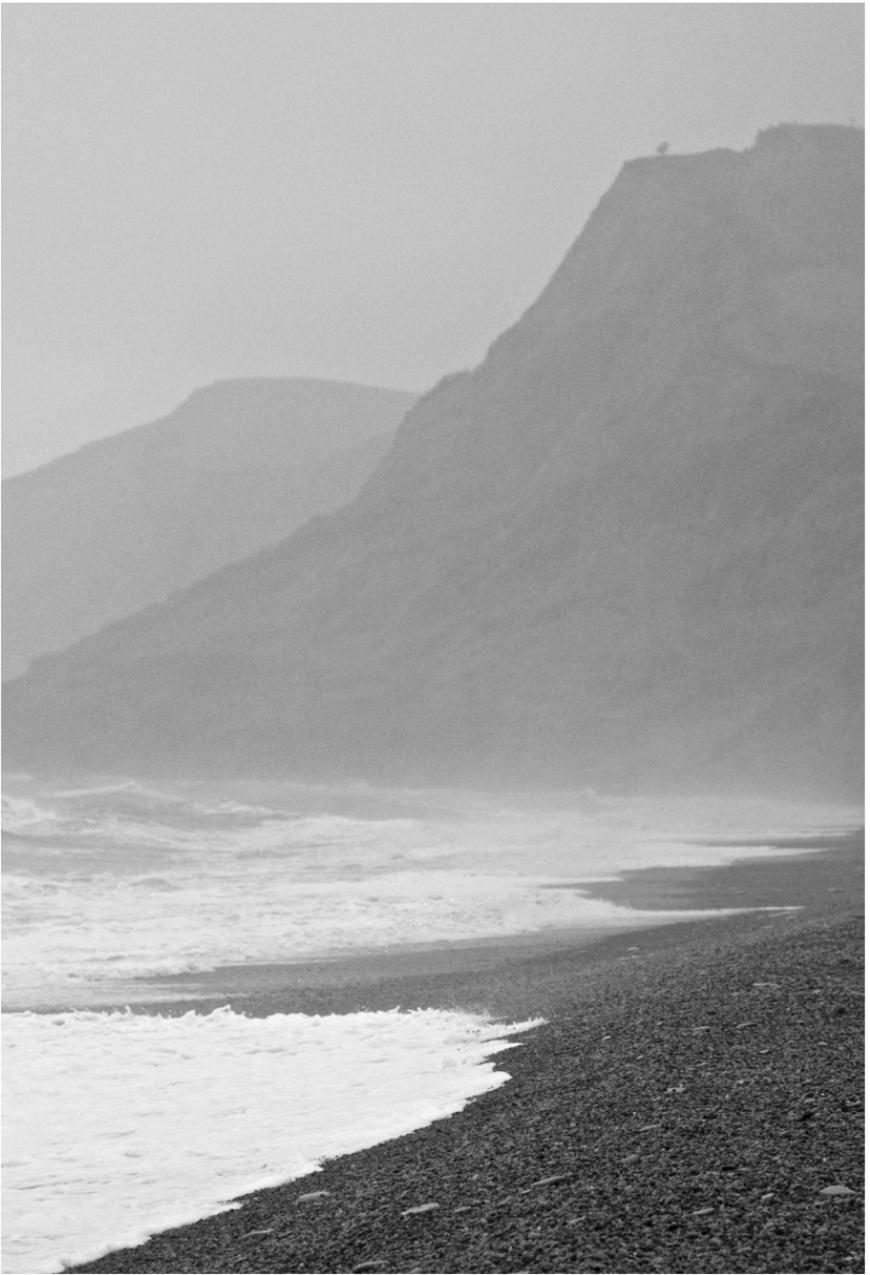


'That cliff you can see ahead of us is the highest point on the south coast of England. It gets its name from the exposed yellow sandstone you can see at the summit. I've always thought of it like its golden crown.'

Helen gazed at the bald patch crowning the top of the cliff. In the gloom of the overcast skies it didn't look golden, more of a dirty mustard colour.

Richard read her mind. 'It's probably more impressive on a sunny day, but the views are great, it will be worth it, I promise.'

Can you see it, there in the distance, cloaked in mist? That's Golden Cap. Every Dorset holiday I would walk to the summit with my family and although it always felt like a trek to reach the top, the views were spectacular. On a clear, sunny day the ocean sparkles cyan blue, and the surrounding fields and cliffs are a dazzling green. You can see for miles and miles, all the way to Dartmoor. When it's overcast and windy and you're looking out across the water, you almost feel as though you could be up there in the sky, flying with the gulls.



This is the beach at Seatown, at its most wet and windswept, exactly how Helen would have experienced the fictional summer-town beach that very first time with Richard – empty but for two upturned fishing boats.



Richard had been hoping for a romantic walk along the shore, but the lead-coloured sea lashed against the pebbles, and a bitter wind raged at them, tearing their coats. They stumbled and shivered their way along the shoreline until they both admitted defeat and hurried back to the car, heads bowed.

‘Well that was a great success,’ joked Richard, fiddling with the car heater. ‘There’s nowhere quite like England in the spring, is there?’

In summer this scene would be transformed, of course, with families and holiday-makers, the narrow lane down to the shore choked with traffic and caravans; the backdrop of green fields filled with orderly lines of parked cars, their bonnets glinting in the sunshine.



It was the beach at Seatown that inspired the events of that tragic summer day when the lives of the Tide family are changed for ever. I always imagined the Crag to be located somewhere in the rocky cliffs at the far end of the beach.

These ancient church ruins at Stanton St. Gabriel, located on the blustery western slopes of Golden Cap, inspired the scene where Dora unexpectedly visits her grandparents' graves. Legend has it that once the church was abandoned for ceremonies in the nineteenth century, it became a smugglers' warehouse. The site is now protected by the National Trust and is definitely worth a visit – it's an area that feels full of ghosts and history.



As a child, every day spent on the beach in Dorset felt like a treasure hunt. My grandfather encouraged us to comb the rock pools for shells, and my siblings and I lived in hope that we would be the ones to find a special fossil buried among all those millions of pebbles. When we weren't hunting for treasure we were often skimming pebbles or playing poohsticks.





In Lyme Regis, even the lamp posts look like fossils and I'm sure that bench below, on a warmer day, would look very inviting – just made for sitting and enjoying hot, salty fish and chips eaten straight from the paper.

To me the Dorset coastline is like an ever-changing canvas. It offers such extremes, such contrast. On a sunny day it's awash with life and noise and vibrant colour. Under stormy skies it is stark and wild and unpredictable. Take these fishing boats, for example: normally they would be bobbing up and down on the ocean, hauling in catch, a lively hive of industry; but abandoned in a rainstorm they take on a more ghostly, melancholy feel. It was these shifting moods and colours that made Dorset the perfect coastal backdrop for the story of the Tides.



A rain-soaked cobbled alleyway, like this one in Bridport, was exactly where I imagined Tobias Grey's art studio and gallery to be located. Helen would have stumbled down here in a rage, seeking refuge from an unexpected downpour and instead finding a whole new world of trouble.





I took this photo on a last pilgrimage to Dorset, just before I emigrated to Australia in 2005 with my boyfriend, Matt. The area meant so much to me that I wanted to share it with him before we left. On a sunny day down on the Dorset coastline the chalky cliffs gleam white and the sea goes on and on for miles, an endless blue merging with the sky.

Here I am revisiting memory lane in the pub garden of The Anchor Inn in Seatown in 2005. It was always such a treat; one of the few places, as kids, where we were allowed to drink Coke (always straight from the bottle) and eat packets of crisps, although they always came with the warning: *don't ruin your lunch!* I didn't have access to old family photographs at the time of writing *Secrets of the Tides*, so I would occasionally revisit these more recent photos when writing scenes for the novel – I think they helped me reconnect with the place and the emotions that landscape conjures in me. It's only now, as I watch my novel go out into the world and my own children grow and thrive, that I begin to understand just how powerful childhood memories can be.

Hannah Richell

July 2012





If you would like to find out more about Hachette Australia, our authors, upcoming events and new releases you can visit our website or follow us on Twitter.

www.hachette.com.au
www.twitter.com/HachetteAus

Discover more about Hannah and her new novel by visiting her website (www.hannahrichell.wordpress.com) or her Facebook page (www.facebook.com/hannahrichellauthor)