

# TLC Showcase

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ANNE GOODWIN

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## Introduction to 'Underneath'

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**U**nderneath is a psychological suspense novel about a man who tries to resolve a relationship crisis in an unusual and alarming way.

Readers meet the main character, Steve, in three different guises: as an ordinary man, in flashbacks to his childhood and as a rather creepy criminal.

After twenty years roaming the world, responsible to no-one but himself, Steve has resolved to settle down. He gets a job, buys a house, meets a gorgeous woman and persuades her to move in with him. He can hardly believe his luck. He's especially pleased that, like him, Liesel doesn't want children. Life's perfect until she changes her mind about that. Now she's adamant that, if Steve won't agree to start a family, she's moving out.

Due to experiences in his childhood, Steve finds Liesel's ultimatum particularly threatening. Unable to bear either the prospect of fatherhood or the loss of the woman he loves, he needs to find a third way.

Not everyone facing relationship breakdown has the wherewithal to prevent their partner from leaving, but Steve happens to have bought a house with a cellar. Converting it into a prison was the last thing on his mind when he and Liesel first viewed it, but that doesn't stop him considering it as a solution when she threatens to leave.

Underneath is the story of the transformation of an ordinary room in an ordinary house into a prison, alongside the transformation of an ordinary man into a criminal. Will this be the solution to his problems or the catalyst for even more?

If it *feels* a long time since I approached TLC for a critique of the manuscript that eventually became my recently published second novel, *Underneath*, that might be because it *is*. As with my debut novel, [Sugar and Snails](#), it took seven years from inception to publication. For five of those years I worked on both novels alternately, never knowing which, if any, would be published first.

I received three separate TLC critiques for *Underneath* over the years: two of the full manuscript (from Ashley Stokes and Ewan Morrison) and one for the partial. Right from the start the feedback on this second novel was more optimistic than on the first, and I can't emphasise enough how inspired I felt by detailed editorial reports from writers and editors who seemed to get what I was trying to do and had advice on how to make it better.

As something of a [TLC junkie](#), my previous experience of critiques helped me in knowing what to ask for. As a woman writing in the voice of a man, I particularly appreciated being able to elicit the opinions of male readers. With flashbacks back to my dodgy narrator's childhood, I was also anxious that this would not come across as overly sentimental. Feedback also helped me hone the twist and sharpen up the novel's structure.

I was heartened when, meeting Ashley Stokes for the first time at an event a little after my novel had been accepted for publication, he not only remembered the manuscript, but agreed to write a blurb for the book.

## Extract from 'Underneath' by Anne Goodwin

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### Part One

*AS I DESCEND the concrete staircase, I can't see my feet for the cardboard box I'm cradling in my arms. Nudging the banister with my elbow for balance, I duck to avoid the underbelly of the main staircase and catch a whiff of chocolate sponge filtered through the fragrance of your freshly laundered clothes.*

*The stairs shunt left and left again. I count the last three steps beneath my breath. A short walk down the corridor and I'm setting down the provisions on the chequerboard lino alongside the panelled door.*

*I put my eye to the peephole and flick the switch on the wall. Inside the room, the ceiling light beams on the grass-green carpet dotted with daisies and on the three hundred and sixty degree mural in fiery sunrise hues. It picks out the lidded bucket in the far corner and, directly opposite the door, the double mattress marooned in a sea of discarded food packaging and dirty underwear. It traces the curve of your back where you lie beneath the duvet.*

*The duvet veils your torso, your hands, your head, your hair. But it can't disguise the spasm in your shoulders as the light comes on. The flinch. There's an echoing jolt through my own body, and I have to back away for a moment while my pulse quells. When I look again, you're frozen in the same teasing posture: camouflaged by the quilt apart from one foot peeping out the bottom, the enamelled nails a regal lapis lazuli.*

*The bolts squeal as I drag them one-two-three into their casings. I shoulder your box of goodies and shove through the cream-coloured door.*

WE MET AT the staff canteen at Queen's, when I was over there for my induction. Perhaps it was the new start, or the unseasonably hot weather for early May, but things felt a bit surreal back then. Like anything could happen.

I grabbed a table by the window, partly curtained by a plastic bougainvillea, nodding to a pair of nurses at the next table as I set down my tray. The way they turned away

from me was as standardised as their uniforms. I didn't let it bother me. Amid the chorus of chatter and cutlery, I searched for the spices in my chicken madras, and didn't look up until a laminate tray grazed mine.

A woman with lavish Pre-Raphaelite hair beamed down at me. "Mind if I join you?"

"Be my guest!" Her hand shot to her mouth. "Gosh, I'm so sorry. I thought you were Adam Applegarth."

"I could pretend to be," I said. "If it would help."

She laughed, resting her hand on the back of the blond-wood chair. I put her in her early thirties, slim verging on skinny, but I admired a woman with the gumption to walk past the salad bar in a public place.

"You might as well sit down," I said. "Your curry's getting cold."

Gathering up the folds of her flouncy gypsy skirt, she dropped onto the seat. "What's it like?"

"Tastes like plasticine, but the colour's good."

"Turmeric," she said, loading up her fork like a spoon.

I clocked her ID, dangling from a ribbon round her neck below the vee of her pinstriped waistcoat. Hospital hierarchies were still new to me but her Art Therapist had to trump my Theatre Orderly any day. "Liesel O'Malley. That's an interesting juxtaposition."

Liesel swallowed a yawn. "*Sound of Music* meets *The Aristocats*?"

"I was thinking Germany plays Ireland."

"My grandmother versus my dad. I'll have to tell you about that one sometime."

"Perhaps right now you'd rather talk about Adam Applegarth?"

She shook her head, a beam of sunlight glancing her nutbrown curls.

"Don't be shy," I said. "What's he like?"

"Average build. Square jaw. Short black hair. Thinnish nose. Kind eyes."

"Good-looking?" The two nurses clattered their trays as they vacated their table, noses aimed at the ceiling.

Liesel's gaze darted back and forth between my face and my photo ID. "I think so."

"And personality-wise?"

"A proper gentleman, but bold, too. Decisive. Spontaneous. Occasionally rather shocking."

"I could tell you something shocking."

"Go on, then."

"I've won the lottery."

"Never! How many millions?"

"Not even a quarter. Two hundred and thirty thousand, give or take a few quid."

"It's still a lot of money," said Liesel. "What are you doing here? You could be climbing Kilimanjaro. Trekking the Inca Trail. Snorkelling on the Great Barrier Reef."

"I've spent the last twenty years travelling."

"Now that *is* shocking," said Liesel.

"Time to stop pissing about. Gonna buy myself a house and settle down."

"So you're house-hunting right now?"

"Just about to start."

"That'll be fun."

"You think so?" The whole thing felt such a mammoth waste of time, I'd have outsourced it to my sister if I could trust her judgement.

"Don't you love poking round other people's houses?"

"Can't say I've had much experience of it."

Liesel's hair fell across her face as she turned her attention back to her food.

I'd have to be rather more bold and decisive to sub for Adam Applegarth. "Why not come with me? I've got a viewing this Friday at six."

"Sorry," she said. "No can do."

I studied the orange smears on my plate. "Of course. Never should've asked."

"Not at all," she said. "I'd love to come, but I've got a hospital appointment."

I'd been an idiot to expect Liesel O'Malley to be free on a Friday. If she wasn't on a date with Adam Applegarth, she'd be gossiping with her girlfriends at some cliquey riverside bar. She'd probably rather stay home and attend to her abundance of hair than see me again. But she could've done me the honour of a more credible excuse.

"Sure."

"What the hell, it's not as if I'm ashamed of it." Liesel fingered the top button of her waistcoat, exposing a snip of white lace underneath. "Can I tell you something shocking?"

I remembered my sisters whispering behind a screen of hands, planting secrets in each other's ears. "If you like."

"I'm booked in for a termination on Friday. But if you arranged another viewing next week, I'd gladly tag along."

OUT THE BACK door, weeds thrust upwards through the cracks in the paving. The covered carport alongside reeked like a night shelter for feral cats. Liesel tapped a dandelion-clock with her bare foot and a mass of gossamer bombed around her brilliant-blue toenails.

"A bit of a scrub and it'd make a lovely patio," said the estate agent.

The other side of the high brick wall, a radio buzzed: a jangle of adverts on the local network. It still felt strange to be able to pick out the words so easily with the sun as hot as in Cochin or Caracas or Dar es Salaam.

Liesel made a visor of her hand as she inspected the corrugated roof of the carport. She wore a sleeveless maxi-dress of harlequin chiffon and an assortment of pins held her thick chestnut hair off her neck. "That's not asbestos, is it?"

The estate agent consulted the printed sheets of A4 clamped to her clipboard. Her *particulars*, as she'd referred to them earlier. "I don't think so." Her heels clicked on the paving as she ushered us back indoors. "Now I guarantee you're going to like this." Her sharp black suit and crisp white blouse made no concession to the weather or her condition. Liesel and I, in contrast, might've been heading for the beach.

We re-entered the house through the kitchen, its innards concealed behind curry-coloured cupboard doors. Like the other rooms, it smelled like a crusty old sock.

"It's rather poky," said Liesel, running her hand along the dusty work-surface.

I hadn't known her long enough to learn the language of her face, to distinguish genuine disappointment from charade. Either way, she seemed to be enjoying playing along with the estate agent's assumption we were buying together.

The woman pushed through the glass-panelled kitchen door and took a right into a tiny alcove I hadn't noticed on the way in. *Dead space, this*, I thought. Perhaps I could knock through the wall and extend the kitchen.

The estate agent turned a key in a solid wooden door and fumbled for the light switch on the wall. A concrete staircase dipped steeply to the basement. She stroked the banister as she negotiated the steps one at a time. "Watch your heads," she said, as Liesel reached up to touch the underbelly of the regular staircase above.

Approaching the wall at the bottom, the stairs veered left and left again; three more steps brought us to a narrow corridor decked with tessellated lino, which must have been immediately below the hallway on the ground floor. I couldn't see what there was to get excited about. As if to compensate for its limitations, the estate agent indicated the storage area under the staircase, and the lavatory behind the door at the far end. Each time she stopped, she rested her clipboard on her bump, as though the *particulars* were feeling the heat, not her. Liesel sniffed.

Then we noticed the panelled door, painted cream, on the right. A metal bolt squeaked as the estate agent dragged it out of its moorings. She stood on tiptoe to reach another bolt at the top and crouched to unhitch a third.

"What on earth did they keep down here?" said Liesel, peering blindly into the room. "It's like Fort bloody Knox."



## About the Writer

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Anne Goodwin writes fiction for the freedom to contradict herself and has been scribbling stories ever since she could hold a pencil. During her career as an NHS clinical psychologist her focus was on helping other people tell their neglected stories to themselves. Now that her short fiction publication count has overtaken her age, her ambition is to write and publish enough novels to equal her shoe size.



Her debut novel, *Sugar and Snails*, about a woman who has kept her past identity a secret for thirty years, was shortlisted for the 2016 Polari First Book Prize. Her second novel, *Underneath*, about a man who seeks to resolve a relationship crisis by keeping a woman captive in a cellar, was published in May 2017.

Author of over seventy published short stories, and placed in several competitions, in 2016 she was awarded First Prize in the Writers' Bureau short story competition for "A Daughter Your Age" and in the Ilkley Festival short story competition for "Tobacco and Testosterone". Her short story collection, *Becoming Someone*, will be published in November 2018 by Inspired Quill.

Her fiction explores themes of identity, mental health, marginalisation, attachment, gender, adolescent development, troublesome bodies and other psychological and social issues.

Anne is also a book blogger with a special interest in fictional therapists.

**Website:** <http://annegoodwin.weebly.com/>

**Twitter:** @Annecdotist

**'Underneath' is out now and you can purchase it here:**  
<http://www.inspired-quill.com/product/underneath/>