

# TLC Showcase

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MELANIE GILBERT

**Introduction to the manuscript** 2

**Extract from *Starfish*** 3

**About the Writer** 8

## Introduction to *Starfish*

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*Starfish* is the novel I have been meaning to write all along. I have always thought of myself as a writer: kept a diary, dipped my toe in freelance journalism, tried poetry (but never felt I knew what I was doing with it), and wrote stories, most of them unfinished because they didn't really have a point. I was mainly writing to be a writer, rather than because any of it demanded to be written.

In 2008 I was working in a secondary school teaching refugee and migrant students from all over the world, and listening to a great many stories. I made notes; I wrote poems. Then I met a sixteen-year-old who crystallised everything: his was the story that had to be written. So I wrote it, mostly in bed at night after work. That first manuscript, as several agents kindly told me, was messy, perhaps not surprisingly. A very lovely reader at TLC gave me feedback and off I went again, pursuing the thread I was after. I was a runner up in the Bridport Prize in 2016, which kept me going – but runner up, not winner, and still *Starfish* was going nowhere. I went back to TLC. This second reading was tougher, but helpfully so. After some painful but necessary editing and some plot changes, *Starfish* is now finished. Or at least, I am finished, so it must be.

*Starfish* is no longer the story of the sixteen-year-old boy who set it all going: it is a novel, and in the process of writing I have drawn on many other experiences and stories, and changed a lot of things. He has changed, too. He's now a young man with a family, but we remain the best of friends because, despite all the changes, we still see life the same way.

## Extract from *Starfish* by Melanie Gilbert

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**S**her, a Kurdish asylum seeker from Iraq, has just finished a counselling session accompanied by his school teacher, Jane Godwin. It didn't go well.

As soon as we leave the building he lights a cigarette and puffs hungrily. He sags against the wall, spent. I feel pretty much the same, overwhelmed on his behalf, and relieved that the session of half-sentences and near-tears is over, for both of us. The bell has sounded, and school is out. We are released from the strain of trying to find a reason why; it is more than enough just to taste a cigarette, and feel the wind on your face as you step outside, and know that you are still living. The rest is too difficult to tackle.

*I thought ...* I say after a few puffs, *I thought you said your father was dead.* Sher stares at the sky and draws deeply on his cigarette and there is a long, still silence and then he turns his head to look at me and this look has confession and defeat and defiance all layered into it, as deep as the night sky. He says

*My mother too. I never have love of mother. Never.*

*Oh. So why did you tell Marina that your parents were OK?*

He sighs and puffs hard. *I am liar boy, I am lyin' to her.*

*Why?*

*It's just too hard to say. She is nice person but she is doin' her job and I don't wanna be like a .... I'm just not gonna do it. Sorry.*

*It's OK.*

*You wanna know what's happen to my mum and dad?*

*If you want to tell me.*

*My mum she died when I was a little boy. Maybe about two years old.*

*After your father?*

*Yes.*

*And was she murdered too?*

*She died from an illness. But people said my uncle poisoned her.*

*Which people?*

*People in the village. They think he poisoned her.*

*So what happened to you and your brother then?*

*He looks surprised by this question*

*We live with my uncle and his wife.*

*With your uncle? After he had murdered your parents?*

*Yes. I thought they were my parents. I didn't know anything until I was older. They told my brother and me that they was us parents, and their children was us brothers and sisters. All one big family! and he guffaws grimly.*

*My father got all the land and the money from his family. His brother was very jealous. His name is Abdul. He was jealous and so he murdered my father and took all the land and all the money. But he was afraid of my mother because she knew something about it, and people in the village were saying bad things about him. And also my brother Kawa and me, when we grew bigger, we was going to have to fight him, for .... for revenge. This is what happens with Kurdish people. If you know about it, you have to make revenge.*

*We start walking, slowly, up the road. We are not far from the churchyard so we head that way. It is a mild afternoon and there are early spring flowers among the headstones, camouflaging the beer cans and syringes and condoms. We find a stone bench.*

*He poisoned my mother, slowly, slowly so that people would think she had got sick and died. Then he bring me and my brother to his own family, because he want to look like he's being a good man, you know, a kind uncle. He tell everyone he want to look after his poor little nephews. Actually he wanted to give us lots of work to do on his land, and also he wanted to shut us up, so we wouldn't know anything about my father and we wouldn't say nothing. He is a big, big bastard. You can't imagine what a bastard he is, because you are a nice person and he has just nothing nice in him at all. Not one little thing.*

A raven caws loudly in the yew trees by the church. We watch it flap away across the sky on ragged black wings.

*My Uncle Abdul, he was a rich man, a big guy, you know, everyone did what he told them to do in that place. He knew lots of people in the army and the police. People kept their mouths shut because they was afraid of him. Also he has a wife and she is very quiet, very sweet, but when they are at home and the door is closed, she tells him what to do. She is very bossy but she does it like a woman, you know, she doesn't show she is the boss. But really she is a big guy just like him. She want her family to be the best, the richest, the most powerful people down there, in that place. She is very jealous.*

*So when we are six or seven years old, me and Kawa, we are looking after the sheep. We went into the hills with the sheep for days and days and more days, and they give us nothing to eat, we just have to find food and we have a gun. They don't wanna look after us, and they want us to work. When people come to the house they make a big fuss and they give us nice food and that, but when there is no-one there, they forget about us. They don't wanna think about who we really are.*

*One day when I was twelve years old I was looking after the sheep in the hills and I don't know where Kawa was, he was doing something else. I met this crazy man, he was quite famous in our village, and he was completely crazy. He used to swear at everyone, you know, just for no reason he would swear at you. You walk past him and he shouts Fuck off! at you as loud as he can. Some people gave him food, and some people they throw rocks at him. I thought he was quite a nice guy, really. He was very old. He was sitting on a rock and staring at the ground, and you know, he was .... there was water coming out of his mouth....*

*Dribbling? I say, and Sher says*

*Yeah, he was dribbling a bit, and his hands was shaking. I came up close to him and he pointed at the ground and he said 'There's blood here'. I didn't understand what he was saying, I thought it was just rubbish, but he said 'There's blood in this land. Your blood. Your father's blood.' I was just feelin' like I was going to faint, there was no noise, just the sheep and this crazy man was lookin' at me. So I ran away, and I went and found Kawa and I told him what the man said, but Kawa said it was rubbish. Forget it.*

*But I couldn't forget about that. People in the village, sometimes they said things that I didn't understand. They said 'You look like your father'. My sister she said that people in the village told stories about a murder, and said that we weren't really brother and sister, we were cousins. I believed her because I just thought we seemed different from my other brothers and sisters. My uncle and aunt didn't treat us like their children.*

*I was really angry. You can't imagine how angry. I was so angry I wasn't even scared, and one day I told my uncle: 'I know who you are. I know you killed my father and mother'. He hit me, and he knocked out my tooth and when I was on the ground he kicked me. I thought he was going to shoot me with his gun, and when I got up and ran away, he did try to shoot me, but he missed.*

*I couldn't go back to the house, not ever again. He would kill me. But I had nowhere else to go. I was twelve years old and everyone knew my uncle and they were scared of him. So I had to go back, but after that he hated me and he hit me. He was always hitting me and I was always running away from him. He is one fat bastard. Kawa was scared.*

*When we was older, I was about fifteen, we went to our other uncle, and he helped us. He said we can borrow some money so we can get out of that place, and when we get enough money we can pay him back. We said OK, and we gave the money to those men – those criminals, they do these things for you, they take you over the mountains to Turkey. But one of them, he steal Kawa's money so Kawa couldn't get out, and when I found out I was already in Turkey on my own, so I couldn't do nothing.*

Sher's head goes down and he fiddles urgently with his shoelaces. His voice comes out as a mutter, close to the ground. I have to strain forward to hear him.

*They take me to Turkey and they put me on a truck and I don't know where I'm going but sometimes it's Greece and then it's Italy and it's a city I don't know where I meet some Kurdish people who help me, and I meet some bastards who steal my food and stuff. They ... Kawa he phonin' me sometimes he stay in my country he tell me he say he lookin' for work and he my cousin she phone me my uncle she don't know what happen but they people down there they sayin' he killin' my brother then he OK I dunno ....*

*It's OK, I say. It's OK. He winds his shoelace around his finger until it turns white and for a while he says nothing. Two boys pass by bouncing a ball and swapping goal stories.*

*I go to UK, I go to Dover, I tell them I am from Iraq but they don't believe me, they send me back to France. Some other Kurdish people, they tell me 'You have to say you are from Syria, then they will listen to you.' So I say I am from Syria, and I am sixteen years old, and there is a war in my country, so they let me stay. They take me to social services, and they find me a place to live.*

This was the Sher that had dropped, like a bird whose internal compass had failed in flight, into school and my office, where he had pushed up the sleeve of his shirt. At that meeting I had seen burn marks and the tracks of tears; he had seen a face that might have been his mother's, and heard a voice that might be persuaded to forgive, because he knew it had pity in it. We had both been looking. I had found a cause to support; Sher had found a sanctuary.

Sher stands up abruptly, the shoelace trailing. His fingers have already reached the packet of cigarettes out of his pocket, and he says *I have to go now* and as he walks away I see him light up again.

## About the Writer

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Melanie is the writer of *Starfish*, a complete but as yet unpublished novel. She is a History graduate and a teacher with long experience of working with displaced people, from survivors of Pol Pot's Cambodia and the wars in the Balkans, to the student demonstrators of Tiananmen Square in 1989. She lived and worked in China for six years as a teacher and VSO Field Officer, learning a little Chinese but a whole lot more about people, culture and homesickness. She now teaches closer to home in a multi-cultural Oxford secondary school with a large and ever-changing population of asylum seekers and refugees.



In the course of her teaching career Melanie has collaborated with social services, charities, lawyers and politicians to support asylum seekers, and is getting quite used to being interviewed for PhD projects on migration. She has also trained in counselling skills and works with mental health professionals to support students with problems resulting from trauma.

Melanie is halfway through a second novel, *The Stories They told Marianne*. The starting point was her great-grandfather, an Irish immigrant who was gassed and died in the First World War. This led her to stories of women, grief and survival, as well as a niggling mystery that just won't go away. A hundred pages in, she is still wrestling with where it's all heading.