

TLC Showcase

JOOLS ABRAMS

Introduction to the manuscript 2

Extract from *The Girl in the Mirror* 4

About the Writer 7

Introduction to *The Girl in the Mirror*

Girl in the Mirror began life as a short story called Crinoline Lady which I entered at the last minute into the Wasafiri International Life Writing Prize in 2017. It won. I'd thought maybe the story could be stretched out into a novel, a life story loosely based on the framework of the life of my nan in Manchester, either side of the second world war. I never intended to write historical fiction but given the experience of writing over 28 memoirs as a ghost writer, I was immersed in the field. As part of the prize, Wasafiri offered me an Arts Council bursary to work with TLC on their Chapter and Verse programme. I was paired with a mentor, the excellent Kerry Hudson, and submitted chunk after chunk of writing over a year. Kerry got what I was trying to do, make a novel in biographical form, and she understood the characters and the story, and the deadlines kept me on track. TLC's help was invaluable in getting to a manuscript stage.

I got to go to a TLC Writer's Day where I found the support of other attendees and the talks really helpful. I used the Being a Writer programme and other TLC workshops to keep me writing in lockdown and help me fine tune the book. Throughout the whole process, Aki and Joe's advice and Nelima's communication has been invaluable. Four years later, I had a completed book which was absorbed by another TLC reader, Stephanie Cross, who suggested changing the title to reflect the effervescent nature of the story. I submitted to agents and took it to Mslexicon, all said they loved the writing, but could not find a market, although the book had evolved into a new genre - a book club read, flitting across the uplit lands of noveldom. I decided to publish, Mary Tomlinson, recommended by TLC, did a copy edit before I sent the book off into the world again and it found publication under a new title - *Girl in the Mirror*.

A story with warmth and heart that chronicles the life of Muriel: A giddy kipper of a girl who craves the spotlight of a movie star, an ordinary girl with extraordinary dreams, growing up either side of the war in a family who behave as if love is on ration. Her restless spirit sparks out through her dancing shoes and love of art. Through dance, war, marriage and motherhood, she lives a life that seeks to contain a fragile mind and must choose to settle, or fly.

For this showcase I have chosen an extract in the final third of the novel, after the catastrophe in the middle, when Muriel's husband loses a leg and Muriel loses her mind, she circles back to the dimmed passions of her youth.

Extract from *The Girl in the Mirror* by Jools Abrams

The winter wind had bitten through her thin coat. She hung it in the wardrobe and fingered the worn astrakhan collar. It was time for a new one. A small surge of positivity and productivity drove her to a dusty shoe box below her Singer sewing machine. One of her Butterick patterns was double-breasted, she was sure of it. Maybe with a bolt of flannel from the market she could make something in the Cossack style. She carried the box downstairs and turned the radio on to listen to the Light Programme. Charlie Melville was playing some new jazz from America, a gravelled voice singing 'Mack the Knife'. She liked it. Liked listening to the story the lyrics told. The danger and menace about a shark and his sharp teeth. The Bible lay for once neglected as she sorted through the patterns in her box. The comfort that brought, the warmth of the fire and the medication soon lulled her to sleep in Jim's chair.

An unexpected peck on the forehead roused her from dreaming. There was a whiff of hops on her husband's breath. 'Hello, sleepy head, better shake yourself, we're going out dancing,' he said, his shirt gaping. He was sturdy now in his beige cardigan and as burly as that nurse in Prestwich she barely remembered, and almost as badly shaved. He shifted the weight off his false leg and half smiled, expectant.

Was Jim really asking her to dance? The radio was still on and jazz tinkled around the front room. They would never get around the settee. 'You don't dance, Jim,' she said.

'Mickey has got some spare tickets for a concert at Belle Vue. I thought you might like to go. He'll drive us there.' He folded his arms across his chest, pleased with his idea.

It was too much for Muriel, too improbable. She crossed and uncrossed her legs. Her calves burned from the heat. 'Why would I want to go anywhere with Mickey?'

'Come on, it's a dance, Muriel. When was the last time you had a chance to go out dancing?' he pressed.

She granted it was a temptation. She gathered up her patterns from the floor and began to stack them back in her shoe box when she noticed the four quarters of a black-and-white picture of a young woman in bias-cut silk. She reassembled the jigsaw, placing the ragged edges together on her lap. She did not remember she was the one who had torn up the photograph from Mrs Belmont's. Her younger self gazed back from her knee, fragmented but defiant. Muriel dropped the sections back in her box underneath the patterns, vowing to glue them back together the first chance she had. She had not felt like dancing for a long time. She was still unsure. Perhaps Jim would change his mind.

'The place will be full of youngsters dancing the jive. I can't jive,' she said. That was not quite true. Annie had shown her how in the kitchen. She got the spin and a little of the bounce, but there would be no way Jim could swing her up in the air or send her twirling, and she wasn't letting Mickey near her. Anyway, she was far too old for jiving at forty, surely? 'And you won't like the music, Jim,' she pouted. She'd heard Belle Vue had become a rock and roll venue and some nights there were skiffle bands. 'Besides, you're not dressed for it.' That was her final salvo.

Jim loosened his work tie. 'I'll get washed and changed then. Tonight's a special night at Belle Vue, Louis Armstrong & His All-Stars. I think you'll like him – they're a big thing in America.'

Muriel slid to the edge of her seat, poised with excitement. 'Louis Armstrong? Really? There's a coincidence, I've just heard him on the radio. I do like him,' she said.

'Well he's on tour and this is his only night in Manchester. Come on, love, let's go.'

'What about Billy? I haven't made his tea.'

'I'll leave him a few bob for a fish supper,' Jim said.

'But I don't have anything to wear.'

'What about the dress you wore to the races last summer?'

When Harry had driven them to Chester Races on a family day out. Muriel had worn her best polka dot dress, let her hair blow wild in the warm breeze and laughed like the giddy kipper dancer she once was. Her excuses weren't cutting through Jim's resolve, and the jazz on the radio finally dissolved her last objections. Sometimes she found lost moments of happiness; she could make tonight one of those moments.

Muriel rummaged for her dress in the depths of her wardrobe. It smelled slightly of mothballs and she worried that it wouldn't fit anymore, but it fell neatly over her new girdle when she slipped it on. She snapped on some stockings and pushed clips in her hair to restrain some of the frizz. Smoothed Pond's cream over her face and hands, found a vortex of red inside a metal lipstick tube and rubbed her little finger inside, blotting it on her dry lips and pressing the last of her 4711 cologne behind her ears. When she returned to the front room, Jim had poured her a sherry from the Christmas leftovers. He'd shaved, changed his shirt and combed his hair. Muriel caught herself in her mirror above the sideboard: her reflection looked something like her old self.

Jim took her hand. 'You look nice, you look like Elizabeth Taylor.'

She laughed at the comparison but appreciated the compliment. 'Hardly, Jim.'

'Will you be all right tonight?' he asked. She knew what he was implying. Would she behave? He was taking a chance that she would stay steady by his side while her insides fizzed. Jim leant forward and kissed her on a powdered cheek. 'I'm proud to take you out, Muriel Burns.'

She nodded. 'I know.' Outside, a car horn beckoned.

'You're going to need a coat,' he said.

'I'm not cold,' Muriel answered. She shone enough as she stepped onto the avenue to brighten the winter night.

About the Writer

Jools Abrams, originally from the North West, now living in Hertfordshire, is a prolific writer of memoir, ghosting 28 books for clients in the last four years. Her work has been published by Walker Books and Mslexia, and performed in London, Kent and Herts. She has written two YA and one MG novel, a non-fiction book, features for SCBWI, national websites and an award-winning short screenplay, run local spoken word events and workshops and was the Writer in Residence at Talliston House. She has an MA in Creative Writing from Birkbeck and is currently working on her own memoir, *The Sibling*, about growing up with an autistic brother in the '70's and '80's.

