

Me Before You



By Jojo Moyes

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About the Book

They had nothing in common until love gave them everything to lose

Louisa Clark is an ordinary girl living an exceedingly ordinary life --- steady boyfriend, close family --- who has never been farther afield than their tiny village. She takes a badly needed job working for ex-Master of the Universe Will Traynor, who is wheelchair bound after an accident. Will has always lived a huge life --- big deals, extreme sports, worldwide travel --- and now he's pretty sure he cannot live the way he is.

Will is acerbic, moody, bossy --- but Lou refuses to treat him with kid gloves, and soon his happiness means more to her than she expected. When she learns that Will has shocking plans of his own, she sets out to show him that life is still worth living.

A Love Story for this generation, ME BEFORE YOU brings to life two people who couldn't have less in common --- a heartbreakingly romantic novel that asks, What do you do when making the person you love happy also means breaking your own heart?

Discussion Questions

1. If you were Louisa, would you have quit working for the Traynors? If yes, at what point?
2. Were you able to relate to the way Will felt after his accident? What about his outlook on life did you find most difficult to understand or accept?
3. Discuss the meaning of the novel's title. To whom do the "me" and "you" refer?
4. Louisa often finds Mrs. Traynor cold and judgmental. Is there an appropriate way to behave in Mrs. Traynor's situation?

5. What is your opinion of Mr. Traynor? Did it change after you read his side of the story?
6. Why is Louisa able to reach Will when so many others could not?
7. Were you as surprised as Lou to learn of Will's plans?
8. Compare Louisa's relationship with Treena to Will's relationship with Georgina. Do siblings know one another any better simply because they are related?
9. Would Patrick have asked Louisa to move in with him if he hadn't felt threatened by Will? If Louisa had never accepted her job with the Traynors, where would her relationship with Patrick have gone?
10. Discuss Louisa's own secret ties to the castle. Would most girls in her situation have blamed themselves? Should Treena have behaved differently in the aftermath?
11. What did you make of the way Lou's mother, Josie, judges Lou's decisions regarding Will. Is Josie's reaction fair?
12. Before his accident, Will was a philanderer and a corporate raider who would probably never have given Louisa a second look. Why is it that people are so often unable to see what's truly important until they've experienced loss?

Interview with Jojo Moyes

July, 2013 | As taken from Goodreads.com



Although English author [Jojo Moyes](#) bid the high-octane world of hard-news reporting good-bye for a quieter life writing novels, she brings a similar sense of timeliness to her best-selling work. In her 2012 groundbreaking novel, [Me Before You](#), Moyes crafted a swoon-worthy love affair between a quadriplegic and his caretaker, and also touched on the issue of the right to die. Her book [The Ship of Brides](#) pumped life into a historical era as it followed a group of young women traveling to England to meet up with the men they married by proxy during World War II. Now her latest novel, number 12, is [The Girl You Left Behind](#). Coupling a dangerous and complicated attraction between French Sophie and the German Kommandant during World War I with a modern-day story of a young woman struggling to get over the death of her famed architect husband, Moyes manages to bring in

the issues of war reparations, enemy lines, and class differences, all in one joyful human package. She chats with Goodreads about getting her writing done with three kids, how she hopes her books remind people to live their life without regrets, and the difficulties she faces as she searches for more roadblocks

to keep aspiring lovers apart. Interplanetary romance may be next!

***Goodreads:* You began your career as a journalist and then switched to fiction after writing for ten years for *The Independent*. What led you to that decision?**

Jojo Moyes: I'd always wanted to write a book, but it was after I had my first child. I'd been a news reporter, and I realized that I couldn't be that and have a small baby. I'd done really quite an exciting job of writing about Northern Ireland and the death of Princess Diana. I used to travel with my passport in my handbag. Suddenly I realized that that just wasn't going to happen anymore. So I started working on a novel around my working hours. Now I look back and I can't imagine how I had the energy to do that alongside the newspaper. I was younger then.

***GR:* So you had a newborn, you were working at the newspaper, and you were also writing a novel at the same time?**

JM: I look back and think it was insanity, but I have a very understanding husband. I wrote three books, one after the other, each of which got rejected. Number 4, which was my last go because by then I was pregnant with my second child and I thought, "I can't keep doing this." I wrote three chapters of book 4, and there was an auction and six publishers bid for it.

***GR:* So in your latest work, [The Girl You Left Behind](#), why did you choose to juxtapose World War I with the modern day in your novel?**

JM: I felt that I'd read an awful lot of books set in World War II, and I wasn't sure I could bring anything fresh to it. I saw a couple of documentaries over here about the life of ordinary people in World War I. One of the things I discovered was that I hadn't realized how extensive the German occupation of France was. It was really shocking to me and kind of moving. It made me want to write about that period. The level of obsession with food, for example, and the fact that Germans could just come into your house and demand anything that they wanted. I couldn't imagine what that would be like.

***GR:* Was it particularly difficult to gather information about that era since there are no longer any survivors?**

JM: Yes, it was. Usually when I research, I go to primary source material as much as possible. I wrote a book called [The Ship of Brides](#), and I went and spent time on an aircraft carrier. When I write about horses in [The Horse Dancer](#), I went to France to look at Le Cadre Noir, which is an ancient riding academy.

What I found was, that aside from this book and some other archives, a lot of the information about life in France under the occupation was actually destroyed due to the expansive nature of the bombing in World War I. Huge swaths of France were just completely destroyed. I found some wonderful photographic archives, which were great. The Internet makes things so much easier because people are

uploading their archives and information all the time. I relied very heavily on that. Then I did some research in France. I did a bit of touring of museums devoted to World War I in the north of the country.

GR: In [The Girl You Left Behind](#) the French female character Sophie has an attraction to the German Kommandant who is currently occupying her town. Why was the idea of creating this dangerous dynamic—the allure of the enemy—interesting to you as a writer? Love affairs are never cut and dried.

JM: To me, that's always what makes a really interesting story. I love the tension between what should happen and what does happen. The thing that always interests me when I'm writing a story is people doing the wrong things for the right reasons. I like having a dilemma that you can put yourself into. What Sophie is faced with is if you do the wrong thing with this man, you may well win your husband his life. That's a tough decision to have to make, especially if it might cost you your husband. If you can introduce a dilemma that the reader can insert himself or herself into, then it almost doesn't matter what period you write in because you can carry the reader with you.

GR: The German Kommandant is one of the most vivid characters in this book. What made him such a real character for you?

JM: With him it's all about control. I think in another world, him and Sophie would have been friends. I think she would have quite liked him. But he is in this impossible position where at one level he's a man that's been separated from his wife for a very long time, and he recognizes a kindred spirit. On the other hand, as complex as most people are, you have a soldier who will shoot a man if he's going outside the rules.

What I wanted was someone you couldn't quite get a measure of. Most people are like that. We all don't fit in as good or bad or predictable. I wanted that tension of wondering what way their relationship was going to go. That feeling that you might be playing with fire and you weren't sure if he was going to be a good guy or a bad guy. I think ultimately, he's probably a mixture of both.

GR: In your previous novels, as well as this one, you seem to be comfortable taking class differences and putting them right next to each other. Many of your characters are quite sharply drawn from different worlds. Liv is a former wife of a famous architect, Sophie is a waitress, Will is an upper-crust type, and Louise lives at home and supports her parents. Is that an interest of yours? Why do you think that is?

JM: Yeah, I guess I am. In England we're exposed to it all the time. It's only when you go to another country, perhaps like America or Australia, that you realize how hidebound we are in England by class and how quickly we make judgments about things as random as somebody's shoes or where they went to school. Funny enough, the book I just finished writing is about a man who goes on a road trip with his cleaner, where I kind of play with these ideas a lot. I think it's not so much class now, but of opportunity

and money as the great dividers. The thing that obsesses me at the moment is the idea that you can be talented, smart, funny, kind, and all those great things, and still not get ahead because of the way society is moving. I guess I'm interested in pushing people together who might not normally be together to see what happens. Like I said before, all good stories thrive on tension, and I think any way that you can introduce a new tension adds to the fun really.

GR: That seems to be another characteristic in your work, adding tension on many levels...

JM: I worked this out early on, but the interesting thing about a love story is not what keeps them together but what keeps them apart. If you look at the great love stories, like [Pride and Prejudice](#), you're desperate for Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy to get together. But they don't, not until the very last bit of the book. They start moving together and something, whether it be her sister's behavior, class, or circumstance, pushes them apart. What you're doing is creating this desperate need for resolution in the reader. The problem for the modern novelist is that a lot of the tension that existed in previous years has disappeared. Now if you want to hook up with someone, you text them or you do a booty call. It doesn't matter if they're married. It's just all out there. There's nothing stopping you. The challenge becomes how do I keep characters apart in a landscape that has no reason to keep them apart.

In [Me Before You](#), you put a mental block in the way and a physical block in the way, and you also put her boyfriend, her mindset, his mindset, and his determination to do something completely different. So you have all these obstacles to their love, and it becomes a very different sort of love story.

In [The Girl You Left Behind](#), you have a couple in one situation separated by war. If you look at Sophie and the Kommandant, they're separated by being on each side of an enemy line. Then you see Liv and her husband are separated by death, and Liv and her potential partner again are being separated by being on opposite sides of a court case. As a novelist, I'm finding it harder and harder to find ways to keep these people apart. It gets tricky.

I expect to have an interplanetary romance in a future book...I'm kidding.

GR: We had a lot of questions about your best-selling novel, [Me Before You](#). Goodreads member [Zoe Benford](#) says, "I'm very intrigued by Jojo Moyes. Is the choice of cover designs in relation to the story itself? Having read [Me Before You](#), the covers lead me to believe they are, I hate to say this, chick lit. But the content of the storyline are far more serious than usual chick lit and far more thought provoking."

JM: I'm guessing she's talking about a British cover, because the U.S. cover is just tight. I have to say that publishers found [Me Before You](#) to be a very difficult book to jacket. If you describe the book as follows, which is how I initially described it to my hairdresser: "This is a book about a quadriplegic who wants to die." My hairdresser kind of just looked at me like, "Okaaay..." This is the problem they had with the jacket. You have to basically say to the reader, "Come along for this ride. We can't say what it's about, but we promise you it will be worth your while." As a result, you can't say too much about what

the story is and you can't demonstrate too much either. I would say the big difference between U.S. and UK covers is that in the UK, women's fiction is all destined to look like chick lit. It's a source of some frustration to me and a lot of other writers. That said, we've sold over half a million copies, so I can't bitch too much. Whatever they did, it worked. At the very least it didn't put readers off. I have to say I adored the American [Me Before You](#) cover. It's got a kind of *Love Story*, retro feel to it. It's very clean, red with white type, and kind of an unusual font. I just love it and think it's beautiful.

Interestingly, for my next book in the UK, they are moving me off the chick lit covers because the silhouette type that we talked about in the UK have been so successful that everyone has been copying them. So they have decided to move me on to a different kind of cover, which I'm quite happy about.

GR: Tons of [Me Before You](#) readers want to know: "Did you know that *that* was going to be the end from the beginning of the writing process?"

JM: I kind of want to be careful how I say this because I don't want to spoil it for anybody who hasn't read it. I rang my agent and I said, "I've had second thoughts about this book and what I think we should do is write a book with two endings, then the readers can choose which way they want it to go." Then there was kind of this long silence on the other end of the phone, and then she basically told me to get a grip...write the book that I'd been planning to write. I thank her for that now. Although some people would have preferred a different ending, I think it was the right ending in terms of being true to the characters. There's a lot of quite sugary love stories out there where you kind of know everything is going to be alright from page 30. I just don't like those books. I don't want to have a feeling about where it's going to go. I want to be a bit surprised.

GR: Goodreads member [Cindy C.](#) says that although she loved the book personally, "I am hesitant to recommend it, however, to my friend whose daughter is confined to a wheelchair, and to my former student who is a quadriplegic who gets pneumonia at least once a year. I wonder how you would respond to my hesitancy."

JM: Well, I can tell you that the Christopher Reeves Foundation contacted me not long ago when I was in the States to say that they had read the book and wanted to support it in any way possible. Although, it discusses the right to die, what it also does in much greater depth—I hope—is lay bare the way we treat disabled people as different, when actually they are not. They're just the same as us, but with different physical limitations.

I have a child who was born deaf, so as a mother of a disabled child myself, one of the things I found most frustrating when he was small was not his disability, to which we adapted very quickly. Very quickly it becomes the least interesting thing about someone you love. It was other people's attitudes. I have gotten thousands of e-mails about this book and a lot of them have come from quadriplegics or caretakers of quadriplegics, who have said, "Thank you for reflecting our lives and also for making a quadriplegic male a romantic hero who is sexy!"

I understand her reservation and as a parent, only she can judge whether she thinks this is the right book to read. Ultimately it's a book that says just live. That's what I hope it says. If you're lucky enough to have a life, live in a way that you won't have any regrets.

GR: A lot of our members wrote in asking if you knew a quadriplegic before you wrote [Me Before You](#), or if any personal story influenced your decision to write that book.

JM: Not quadriplegics. The thing that really informed it was a member of my family who suffers from a progressive disease. I have been involved in feeding her, taking her out, and that kind of thing. Part of what inspired [Me Before You](#) was just questions I had in my head about quality of life. At what point does the quality become meaningless? At what point do you give someone the right to decide for themselves?

Most people like to fix stuff. If your kid gets ill, you want to fix it. You try to find a silver lining in any situation. What you realize with some conditions and illnesses, there is no silver lining. That's really hard to take because it goes against all your feelings as a human being. Especially as a parent.

With [Me Before You](#), there was [one new story](#) in particular that inspired it. This young rugby player in England, who was about 23 years old, persuaded his parents to take him to [Dignitas](#) after he'd spent several years as a quadriplegic following a rugby accident. I was so shocked by this story, because I couldn't believe a parent would take their own child to this place. I guess I was quite judgmental as well. The more I read up on it, the more I realized that these parents were in an impossible position because this young man had expressed a determination to fulfill his wish by any means. Being physical had been his whole life and some people are just going to refuse to adapt. They're just not going to do it. It became harder and harder for me to say, "Well this is how it should be." I think as human beings we naturally look for black and white. We look for resolution because it's uncomfortable to live with dissidence in our brain.

GR: Describe a typical day spent writing. Do you have any unusual writing habits?

JM: Well, I get up at 6 a.m., which I don't like, but with kids, animals, and a schedule that seems to eat into my writing day, it's pretty much my only choice. My husband gets up first, gets a cup of coffee and my laptop, and shoves them both into my hands. So I do the first hour and a half in bed. I kind of come to in front of my screen. What I've found is, actually it can be quite good for your writing. What happens is, there's no falter in your brain at that point. It's before your brain fills up with all the things that occupy you in the day, like school shoes or fish fingers or the dental appointment at 4:30 or picking up the dry cleaning. What you find is that very early on in the day before that's had a chance to hit, sometimes you can get a really clear run at ideas and problem solving.

I do that most mornings, and two days a week my husband works from home, which frees me up from the school run. Those days I try to work 12-hour days in my office. I'll go from 7 a.m. and come back at 7 p.m., depending on how tired I am and how well it's going. If I get really stuck, I'll take myself away

for three days. I work solidly. I get up when I get up and I sleep when I sleep. My record is 18,000 words in three days on one of my writing stints. I don't get out of my room. I get room service, I wear a dressing gown and don't get dressed. It's a bit disgusting, but it works. I don't think about anything except the book. Sometimes you need to do that.

GR: What books and authors have influenced you?

JM: The very first book I remember being obsessed by was [National Velvet](#) by [Enid Bagnold](#). I was a skinny little girl who was horse mad. I loved that book because it showed that skinny, slightly sickly girls could achieve great things.

I guess the book that changed my feelings about writing as I got older was [Kate Atkinson's Behind the Scenes at the Museum](#). It was a book that has such an extraordinary voice that I kept reading it and I wanted to emulate it. Also I couldn't tell where it was going. It was kind of mad and audacious. It starts with the heroine as a zygote and it ends with this great twist that you hadn't realized you were leading up toward. You suddenly realize that this author has been playing with you the whole time. It's funny, dark, and unusual. I remember being just kind of ignited by it. I thought, "Wow. If she can do this, why can't I do something that makes people feel the way I feel right now?" It made me want to be a better writer.