

“[A] nail-biting page-turner.” —*Woman’s World* on *A Girl Named Anna*

# OUT OF HER DEPTH

*A Novel*

**READERS'  
GUIDE**

**LIZZY BARBER**



# QUESTION & ANSWER

**? America has Mexico; we have Italy. A not-so-far-away place of dreams and romance and escape. Could this novel have been set anywhere else but the hills behind Florence?**

From the moment I first stepped foot in Florence aged 18 I knew it was the perfect setting for a thriller. It is a city of contrasts: of sun-drenched piazzas showcasing jaw-dropping Renaissance architecture and shaded cobbled passageway where you will feel a chill on the hottest summer's day. It is *A Room with a View*, yes, but it is also Dante and Hannibal. The city even has its very own serial killer: 'The Monster of Florence,' who roamed the hills in the late '70's and early 80's looking for his next victim. The glamour of the place is underpinned by this darkness, and it was this I was drawn to in *Out of Her Depth*. I couldn't imagine a more perfect setting for my cast of beautiful but cruel characters.

**? Rachel walks into her summer job with all the naivety and innocence of the girl from an unfashionable London suburb that she is. Did you feel sorry for her as you pitched her into her dazzling new world?**

I owe a great debt to Patricia Highsmith's Ripley series for this book, and particularly to the titular Tom, who I think is one of the greatest literary antiheroes. Rachel shares many of Tom's qualities: you root for her, but at times you can't help but dislike her. Yes, I felt sorry for her awkward fumbblings and her intense desire to be part of the new world she is thrust into – it is so palpable! – but I don't think that excuses her poor choices, and, at times I felt downright irritated with her. As an author, I think it's important to show characters who are multi-faceted, who behave and act just like we do – which means even a main character can't always be lily white!

**? You write about dishonesty and casual betrayal with real perception. It strikes us that you must have experienced both?**

I think it is difficult to grow up as a young woman in London without experiencing the full highs and lows that that throws at you. I spent the majority of my education in a single-sex school, and that palpable feeling of wanting to belong, to be exactly like your peers, becomes hard wired.

I consider myself incredibly lucky to have a strong core group of female friends (unbelievably some of which have lasted for nearly thirty years!) but inevitability with the 'intoxicating' feeling that close female friendship brings, a betrayal of that friendship can have a devastating effect. It rips the scales from your eyes to discover that someone you have so keenly admired – loved, even – can be fallible and hurtful.



The time of life that readers first encounter in *Out of Her Depth*, when Rachel arrives in Florence, is really fascinating to me. At eighteen you are in a weird hinterland between adolescence and adulthood, forming thoughts and ideas as an independent person and yet still so wildly impressionable. When we see Rachel as an adult, we see the lasting effect that such friendships – and their betrayals – can have, and how they affect her ability to form relationships even in the present day.



**This is quite some novel. Has it been simmering away inside your head for long?**

*Out of her Depth* has been somewhat of a ‘difficult second album’ for me, but one which I hope will reap the rewards of time and thought. I studied in Florence when I was 18 and have been back there every year since – I was even married there in 2016 – so a Florence-set thriller has always been in the back of my mind, particularly one reflecting the intoxicating feeling of being young, wild and free I had experienced so fully there. As I have mentioned, I was hugely influenced by Highsmith’s Ripley novels, and had in my mind’s eye a complex love triangle experienced through the point of view of a ‘fish out of water,’ someone who is thrust into a world of glamour that they know nothing about but so desperately wants to be part of.

My first novel, *My Name is Anna*, was published ten days before the birth of my son, Marlowe. I had begun to put pen to paper prior to this but had grand delusions of prancing through a first draft on maternity leave, which quite quickly went out the window once sleepless nights addled my brain and I could barely form words let alone write sentences! I did in fact finish it – at many points with a sleeping baby draped across my shoulder or in fits and spurts when my very patient husband came home from work – but something didn’t quite work and in particular the present day plot wasn’t pulling its weight.

I am very privileged to have an agent who not only believed in me, and this book, but who also happens to be Italian and shares my profound love of the country. Together we pulled it apart and stapled it back together, and the final icing of the cake was my editor at Pan Macmillan, who so perceptively ‘got’ the novel and what I was trying to say. I am now so excited by the book in its final form and can’t wait for readers to get to know Rachel, Sebastian and Diana with all their eccentricities and delicious flaws!

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

In *Out of Her Depth*, Tuscany is as much a character in the book as are Rachel, Diana and Sebastian. Do you think the sense of place enhances your reading experience? Could this book have been set anywhere else?

2

At the beginning of the book, Rachel says “Before you judge me, remember this: a girl died, but it wasn’t my fault”. Towards the end, she says “I am not entirely innocent in all this; I have always known that” Rachel is thrown into a world that she could only ever dream about, but is she the author of her own destiny, or has she been superbly manipulated? How does her apparent unreliability impact your understanding of the events?

3

Are having unlikeable characters as important as having those you love and want to root for? Who are the most interesting to read about?

4

Female friendship plays a big part in *Out of Her Depth*, but Rachel and Diana’s friendship (and indeed Valentina’s) was always marked by class and education. What part do you think class and education played in the demise of their friendship? Was it always destined to end?

## BONUS QUESTIONS

What do you make of the reason Rachel gives for allowing herself to fall to her death? Is she finally freeing herself from Diana? And how does having Diana’s view point as the ‘final word’ shape this decision?

As we learn, Sebastian is not guilty of the crimes he was committed for. But is he an entirely innocent character?



A vertical photograph of a building facade with two windows and a tall cypress tree in the foreground. The top window has dark shutters, and the bottom window is open. The cypress tree is dark and slender, positioned in the lower left foreground.

# ON PESTO

LIZZY BARBER

My oldest and most profound memories of Italy begin with pine nuts.


For my entire life – and, even before that, my family's lives – we have spent our Summer holidays in a small seaside town on the Tuscan coast called Forte dei Marmi. It is undeniably a glamorous destination, its location downwind from the likes of Nice, St Tropez, Portofino, but step back from the beach clubs and you'll find yourself in the shade of the pine trees, their needles carpeting the ground and lending a soporific quality to the place, a glimpse of more bucolic, less frenetic Italian setting.

As a child I would seek out the fallen cones in the shade of our hotel grounds, prising from their spokes the little seed cases whose chalky black coating made an excellent drawing pencil on the flagstones. If we got lucky with the heel of a shoe or a correctly angled stone we would manage to crack the cases, holding each individual nut aloft in chalk stained fingers before munching. Growing older, we would run through the Pineta, the pine woods that flanked the town's residential streets, to reach the Luna Park, a small collection of fairground rides where we'd happily spend our afternoons and our lira. These were the same woods that we would cross on bike as teens, fake IDs safely secured, to a strip of not-so-salubrious clubs, on one memorable occasion on a late-night return from a 'foam party,' bikini clad and one flip flop down, as a storm broke out, fork lighting cracking through the air and lighting up the pines as we sped home. These are the same woods I now run through as an adult, mitigating the negronis and pasta of the night before, and which this Summer (all being well) I will traverse with my three-year-old son to reach the Luna Park, starting the cycle anew.

The Tuscan pine nuts of my memories are different beasts to the knobbly yellow ones I am more familiar with as an adult in my kitchen in Islington – longer and thinner, paler in colour, their flavour resinous and faintly medicinal, more instantly relatable to the tree from which they grown.

You can buy this variety (the grandly named 'European pine nut') in certain supermarkets or speciality food stores, only for a premium, so the fact that we would so readily find them strewn on the ground tickles me wonderfully.

Pine nuts of course have their use throughout cookery, both sweet and savoury – an Ottolenghi-inspired scattering has enhanced many a mid-week dish in our house – but for me they are most intrinsically linked to pesto.

A vertical photograph of a building facade. The top window has dark shutters. The bottom window is open, showing a white frame. A tall, dark cypress tree is in the foreground on the left side.

Pesto is deeply Italian. The name has roots in the verb 'to crush' or 'pound,' alluding to the humble method production: it has the same origins as the word 'pestle' as in 'pestle and mortar.' It is actually a catch-all term for a number of different sauces or 'pastes' (as a non-red-meat-eater I found this out too late when sampling 'Pesto Modenese' on a trip to Bologna – it's made with garlic, rosemary and lard), the most well-known being 'Pesto Genovese,' made with garlic, basil, pine nuts, parmesan and olive oil. Like its name, the ingredients of pesto are quotidian, easy to source without too much trying, and yet their combination is an elixir, a glossy, perfumed sauce that is both comfort food and just a little bit chic. Trust the Italians to come up with something so nonchalantly elegant. It can be both meritocratic and elevated: simple to bang together at home (even simpler: to buy in a pre-made jar) to swirl through pasta, or, as I experienced on a trip to Portofino, an elegant full stop to a plate of sushi-grade tuna tartare. I've even seen it sold laced with truffle. For a humble sauce, it has quite a powerful 'Proustian madeleine' effect on me. After my childhood holidays on the coast, I spent a Summer in Florence studying Italian, a trip that would become the germ of an idea which grew to become my novel, *Out of her Depth*. I went with one of my best friends

from home and it was May when we arrived, already so hot that we would be drenched in sweat carrying groceries on a three-minute walk from the grocery store to the flat we were staying in in Santa Croce. It was my first time living alone, living abroad, and as a result I had very little knowledge of how to cook, so in a fit of Romanticism I bought the easiest looking Italian cookery book I could find from the bookshop in Piazza della Repubblica. I would learn to cook and improve my Italian, what a boon! The ingredients for pesto looked easy enough, and we even took a short cut, buying a blender we had spied in the window of the one euro we passed on our walk to school. Remember now that I mentioned how hot it was. And that buying a blender from a one euro shop is probably not a sound investment. Having prided ourselves on our ingenuity, back in the flat we watched in horror as the blades whirled, the cheese melted into a stringy mess, the lid popped off and the machine finally gave out, leaving us, and the flat, covered in hot green goo. The first spoonful of pesto will always bring me back to that moment, of thinking ourselves so wonderfully grown up, and messing it up so spectacularly.

It is that time in our lives that I wanted to evoke in *Out of Her Depth*, that feeling of all at once considering yourself an adult who must be taken seriously and, as the title suggests, like you have no idea what you're doing. Indeed, at one point I even turn to pesto to express this:

Proper Ligurian stuff – the viscous green coating my bowl, the weird mix of green beans and potatoes, and that funny, rolled- up pasta, what was it called? Trofie? Diana laughed at me, spearing a piece off my plate and eyeing it up. Darling, it's what you eat here – it's molto tradizionale. And then I tasted it, flavours bursting in my mouth, peppery basil and crunching pine nuts and garlic so pungent it was almost spicy, and she grinned at my facile pleasure. Good girl.

Here, Rachel, a 'fish out of water' who finds herself thrown into a friendship with a group of glamorous British expats, has travelled to Cinque Terre in Liguria, home of the 'original' green stuff. They are at the precipice of everything that turns sinister in the novel doing so, and present-day Rachel is led from an off-the-cuff thought of a jar in her fridge to this charged, visceral memory.

I still make pesto now, all the time, without really thinking about it. Over the years it has taken on different guises – always with good squeeze of lemon juice and grating of zest, sometimes with almonds, or cashews. Never with lard. I make my unwitting son a version with spinach leaves, in the hope that I'm making him big and strong, or at least that he'll grow tough enough not to demand being carried even the shortest of journeys. But those recipes will always be a palimpsest of tastes, of trying and failing, of sophisticated travels or a jar flung in a shopping trolley.

And somehow, they'll always go back to the taste of that first nut.





# LIZZY BARBER

LIZZY BARBER studied English at Cambridge University. Having previously dabbled in acting and film development, she has spent the last ten years as head of marketing for a restaurant group. Her first novel, *A Girl Named Anna*, won the Daily Mail and Random House First Novel Prize 2017. She lives in London with her husband, a food writer, and their son, Marlowe. Visit Lizzy at [lizzybarber.com](http://lizzybarber.com) or follow her on Twitter and Instagram, @bylizzybarber.

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