

The Woman in the Window: Behind the Book by A.J. Finn

The Woman in the Window draws upon a lifelong love of suspense fiction, on both the page and the screen.

Even as my parents relocated their brood down the Eastern seaboard, from New York through Virginia to North Carolina, we returned every summer to our homestead in East Hampton, New York. My mother's 'people' had first ventured out to Long Island in the nineteenth century, colonizing Shelter Island (on her mother's side) and East Hampton (on her father's); many decades before I was born, the united clan bought a sprawling Victorian mansion on Ocean Avenue, down the block from Main Beach, and that's the house I first came home to.

That might sound grand. Ah, but it wasn't: From the get-go, the place was a wreck — dilapidated, drafty, full of forgotten rooms and mouse carcasses. You couldn't call it a money pit, because that would imply that money was spent. The pool bristled with stucco so gritty that we'd emerge bleeding from the briefest of dips. An ancient and asthmatic Frigidaire in the kitchen — the kind with a built-in icebox instead of a proper freezer — wheezed loud enough to be heard upstairs. In one wing nestled a tomb of a room so dark, so airless, that my grandparents dubbed it 'jail' and sent us there when we misbehaved. Us and the dogs. I spent a lot of time in jail growing up.

I loved the place. Loved the cut-glass pool; loved the attic, littered with dead vermin; loved the back staircase, pitched at such a steep angle that over the years four of the eight resident grandchildren broke assorted limbs tumbling down it. I've still got the scars.

What I loved best of all was the library, panelled in flaking wood, stuffed with ranks of broken-backed paperbacks and worn hardcovers, most of them mysteries and thrillers: Dick Francis, P. D. James, James Clavell, Ian Fleming. Entire shelves housed nothing but Golden Age doyennes — Agatha Christie, Josephine Tey, Ngaio Marsh. There was a complete cloth set of vintage Hardy Boys mysteries, and it was in this room that I discovered what was to become (and what remains) one of my all-time favourite novels, Ellen Raskin's thriller-for-children *The Westing Game*. I would read the book several times each summer, gulping it down, then tuck it behind a chunky James A. Michener novel so that no one could make off with it.

My grandfather read mysteries. My grandmother read mysteries. My mother and her four siblings read mysteries. My oldest cousin — who on a given night would steal up to the attic and slowly tread the floorboards, so that we younger kids might hear the creeping footsteps and assume that the ghost (Frederick, we called him) was on the prowl — even he read mysteries. Maybe this particular strain of bibliomania is hardwired into our DNA.

Well before matriculating at Oxford, and having committed many Agatha Christie books to memory, I began feeding myself a steady diet of old thriller films. My family lived, during my teen years, down the street from an arthouse cinema that routinely hosted film-noir retrospectives and Classic Movie Nights; it was there that I first thrilled to *Laura*, *Out of the Past*, *Charade*, *Les Diaboliques*, *The Night of The Hunter* — and latter-day movies that revived the tradition of classic suspense cinema: *Diva*, *Body Heat*, *The Last Seduction*. I spent every Friday night of my high-school career at that cinema. (On a related note, I didn't drink my first beer or get my first kiss until I was 21 years old. Cause and effect.)

Best of all was Hitchcock. The style, so luscious in *To Catch a Thief* and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. The urgency — see *Shadow of a Doubt*, in which Teresa Wright begins to suspect that her uncle and upstairs boarder might be a notorious killer. The wit — here I'm thinking of that errant windmill in

Foreign Correspondent, the crisp dialogue rattling through *The Lady Vanishes* and *The 39 Steps*. The technical virtuosity on showy display in movies like *Rear Window*, filmed entirely on a massive soundstage, and *Rope*, which splices ten long takes into what appears to be a single shot. The magnificent set pieces: the chase across Mount Rushmore in *North by Northwest*, the merry-go-round finale of *Strangers on a Train*, the crows congregating on a jungle gym in *The Birds*.

But most of all, I loved — and love still — those gutsy plot twists that pull the rug out from under the viewer ... plot twists so distinctive and iconic that today we describe them as Hitchcockian. The filmmaker blindsided his audience effortlessly, even ruthlessly, in *Psycho* and *Vertigo*, of course — but to splendid effect in many other films, too.

In writing *The Woman in the Window*, I wanted to tap into my love for, and schooling in, both suspense novels and thriller cinema in the Hitchcock tradition. I've tried to craft the book as lovingly as the director fashioned his movies (the book is capped at exactly 100 chapters, which I find sort of elegant); I've attempted to summon some of the moody atmosphere of black-and-white films; I've staged virtually all the action in a single setting, as did Raskin in *The Westing Game*, Henri-Georges Clouzot in *Les Diaboliques*, and (of course) Hitchcock in *Rear Window*.

So there you have the creative context for my book; that's HOW I wanted to write. WHAT I wanted to write was informed by a different experience, one rather darker and sadder: When I was 21 years old, I was diagnosed with severe clinical depression. Over the sixteen years that followed, I enjoyed only brief periods of relief, despite countless efforts to combat my symptoms: I cycled through various medications; I attended several meditation summits; I submitted to hypnotherapy; I endured a battery of ECT treatments; I saw my therapist weekly. And all the time I was trying to complete my graduate work, and develop my career on both sides of the Atlantic, and forge/sustain relationships and friendships ... none of which I found remotely easy, although to the outside world, mine probably seemed a charmed life. I present well.

Not until 2015, on my 36th birthday, was my diagnosis adjusted: A psychiatrist listened to me describe my experience for ninety minutes, then told me that I likely suffered from bipolar disorder. Sure enough, the pills he prescribed soon did the trick. Although depressive episodes and anxiety will likely dog me as long I'm alive, I feel better able to handle them these days.

And if nothing else, my experience with mental illness has endowed me with real empathy for others. In her landmark book *An Unquiet Mind*, which twenty years on remains the most accessible and inspiring first-person account of depression ever published, Kay Redfield Jamison notes that a severe mood disorder 'gives you the experience of how it must be to be old [or] to be slow of mind; to be lacking in grace, polish, and coordination; to be ugly; to have no belief in the possibilities of life ... or the ability to make yourself and others laugh.'

In *The Woman in the Window*, I try to view mental illness and its miseries through the lens of a thriller. The protagonist is a woman whose sanity seems to be unravelling — an experience painfully familiar to many depressives — as she endures the aftermath of an unnamed trauma. (Unnamed until two-thirds of the way through the story, that is.) I found it both purgative and reassuring to adapt my experience with mental illness for a suspense narrative; and I came to appreciate that whilst a blow-by-blow account of depression might put off readers, I could smuggle those lows into the audience's heads by folding them into a fast-moving plot.

I began writing the book in September 2015, after submitting an outline to my agent — so I knew the beginning, middle, and end of the story before typing the first sentence. The finished book hews closely to that initial outline.

My agent sent it out exactly one year later. Hand to heart, I didn't expect that anyone would want to publish it — yet, very gratifyingly, many editors and publishers responded to the emotional substance of the story.

So here we are. My hope is that *The Woman in the Window* can be enjoyed as both a swiftly paced thriller and an earnest account of grief and trauma, resilience and redemption.