Renée Knight Q & A

What was your jumping-off point for writing *The Secretary*?

Over the years there have been a number of cases where a secretary has been in the dock, as a witness or, on occasion, as a defendant. I was intrigued by the details that emerged of the relationship between the powerful and those who serve them, particularly the question of loyalty. How far would you go to protect your boss?

Christine makes sure Mina's days are planned to a T. What does your typical day look like?

I, too, am a creature of routine. Mornings are spent at my desk, and I'll stay there 'til lunchtime. I'll go back for an hour or two after, depending how productive I'm feeling, and then have a walk at some point in the afternoon. I rarely work in the evenings, unless I'm up against a deadline.

In many ways Christine is complicit in Mina's wrongdoings. Why do you think she finds it so difficult to say no to Mina?

Christine allows herself to be defined by Mina's needs. She constructs a tight skin around herself, composed of Mina's demands, and it suits her to bind herself within it. She needs rigid order in her own life; without it, she risks falling apart. It is so much easier for her to say yes.

What would be your advice to Christine, at the point when she takes the job with Mina?

The same advice Jenny Haddow gave Christine: Don't forget that she is not your friend and you are not hers.

What would you say to Mina?

Everyone has their limits. Don't underestimate the danger of a vulnerable person with nothing left to lose.

Much of *The Secretary* takes place in an office environment. What intrigued you about this environment enough to use it as your 'stage' for a thriller? Have you ever worked as a personal assistant, and did you draw any of your own experiences into the book?

What do you do? **It's often the first question that's asked of us. Our work can define us. An office can be an escape from the reality of the messy world outside. I was intrigued by the delicate power structure in the office environment – the ebb and flow of it, the co-dependence of people who work together. I worked as a secretary for years, and I'm sure some of that experience leaked into the book, though not specific incidents. I was more of a shorthand typist than a PA, but I remember the times I had to bite my tongue, smile, nod, and do as I was told.**

Which character has most stayed with you since you finished writing *The Secretary*? And who do you think readers will most relate to or connect with?

Definitely Christine – and I hope it is she who readers relate to and connect with. I don't expect anyone to like her, necessarily – she is undoubtedly flawed – but I hope she will be engaging enough for readers to care what happens to her. Unlike Mina, Christine does have the ability to look herself in the eye and recognize herself. She is her own harshest critic, and for that, I respect her.

Christine's voice is so distinctive and coloured by regret and revenge. Did you find it comfortable to get so deeply into her head?

Writing Christine was an uncomfortable experience. To spend so long digging into her unhappiness and regret rarely left me cheery. Still, there were a few occasions – as there are with writing – when things would fall into place and then I'd leave my desk happy. Having said that, I don't remember ever looking forward to getting back to Christine the following morning.

Christine is devoted to her job, and realizes too late that she has failed at being a mother. Do you think it is possible to straddle professional and domestic roles successfully?

Yes, I do – but not without help. Christine's problem is less to do with an inability to juggle being a mother and a working woman, and more to do with her unease in domestic life. At work, her role is clearly defined. At home, less so. She is a woman who, without the confines of order and routine provided by her job, would unravel. On an unconscious level, she knows that.

The Secretary has such a clever and surprising ending. Did you have a clear idea of where Christine's story would go when you started writing? Did you surprise yourself?

In a way I always knew Christine would seek revenge. How she would do it, though, was unclear to me until quite late on. Did I surprise myself? Perhaps a little at first, but then the more I thought about it, the more it seemed it was the only option she had.