



Clare Briggs is in her early twenties. She's a teacher at a Roman Catholic primary school in East London where some of the children love her because she's gentle, while others take advantage of her for the same reason. One day, a statemented child called Terell throws a blackboard duster at her, catching her behind the ear. She is upset by this, but not as upset as when the Deputy Head falsely accuses her of being late for work. Riled by this insult, she discusses what to do with her boyfriend.

Clare is a character in my first novel, *'In the Shadow of the Mountain'*. I don't know if this description makes her sound appealing or not. I hope it does. I think she's grounded in reality: people often have problems at work and discuss them with their families. Later in the story, the boyfriend will reciprocate; unburdening himself about a difficult subordinate in his team. She will repeat the advice she was given about Terell. The boyfriend will act upon it and find he can unlock the interpersonal dynamic he has been struggling with (though to his shame, he will imagine his success to be a function of his own initiative rather than hers). In other words, Clare provides the key to the protagonist's story.

This makes her crucial to the plot and in being so, I want readers to care for her, even if her boyfriend does not. Despite all her failings, I want them to recognise that she's *real*.

But I keep being told that readers have a problem with her. They say she's unappealing, that her behaviour's uneven, or that she's weak. Women are not like that, I am told. I can only say that I humbly disagree.

She is what she is: a lumpy, insecure individual clinging on to a dying relationship.

I do not give her a particularly happy ending because it wouldn't happen in real life. I make her contradictory for the same reason. What matters in my writing is the coarseness of *reality*: the tactility of Velcro or the awkwardness of using a public toilet after someone has just vacated it.

The emails I get about Clare are interesting. Readers want her to be charming, bright, pretty and to enjoy a happy ending. I think this says something about our society. People do not comment as much about the lead character, who is male, and hence the problem is not in Clare per se, but in her gender and people's expectations of it. Whereas male characters are allowed to be smelly and shy, we seem to want a level of unreality in our



females. There are no stories, or none that I can think of, in which a woman is allowed to be indecisive, vague, or dim-witted, or where a man is allowed to be misogynistic to the end.

In '*Mountain*' I chose, deliberately, to break this convention. I think it dangerous. Pretty, slim-waisted twenty-somethings do not, in reality, run their own multi-million dollar investigations into international terrorism. Nor do they just make tea for people who do. John McKee tells us that stories are metaphors for life, a means to communicate a way of being in the world. I would add that as such, stories carry more weight and applicability if they are grounded in the truths of existence. It does not matter that Clare is not a pert-bottomed beauty, nor that she is not particularly bright.

What matters is that she has fine black hairs on her forearms, an attribute that she finds slightly embarrassing. I would ask readers to respect her for that.