



*Before I Go to Sleep* has its origins in an obituary I read.

The start of my Faber Academy course was imminent and, determined that I wanted to be working on a brand new project, I was casting out for ideas. I read a short piece about Henry Gustav Molaison, who until his death had been known only as “patient H.M.” He had died in 2008, but since undergoing surgery for epilepsy in 1953 had been unable to form new memories and so lived constantly in the past. His obituary described how Molaison, despite having a longstanding relationship and regular meetings with his doctor, would have to be reintroduced to her every time they met. I wondered how it must feel to wake up every day thinking it was 1953, and was struck immediately by a mental image of a woman looking in a bathroom mirror in a strange house to find that, instead of a teenager reflected there, she had become a middle aged woman, and the house was her home.

I knew then that I had my subject, and the character of Christine came almost immediately. I felt strongly that, in order to achieve the emotional intensity that such a subject deserves, the book needed to be written in the first person, despite the technical challenges of writing an entire novel from the point of view of a person who remembers nothing from one day to the next. I felt that the novel should explore more than just memory, however, and wanted to write about identity, and our sense of selves, of what makes us who we are. I also wanted to explore marriage and domesticity, especially from a female point of view, and so decided that she should be living with a husband, in a home they shared. It was important that Christine not be reduced to victimhood – I wanted her to be a complex, rich character, and for the reader to be discovering her past and her personality almost as she is – and so I decided that she would also be leaving the house to see a doctor, and that furthermore these expeditions would be without her husband’s knowledge.

I made the decision to do as little planning of the story as I could. I wanted the book to evolve organically, the characters to tell me where they wanted the story to

go. I took my opening chapter to my colleagues on the Faber Academy course and they were very positive about the ideas behind the novel, and enthusiastic about the directions in which I could take it. Enthused, I began to research memory and amnesia, and was particularly struck by the story of Clive Wearing, a British conductor and musician who has suffered severe amnesia since contracting a virus in 1985. Again and again I was struck by how disabling a lack of memory is, how fundamental to our sense of self is the ability to recall our experiences, how bewildering it must be to be stranded in time, with no knowledge of one’s past. I realised that I had not chosen an easy subject to write about, and felt very strongly that I owed it to these people – real people who were suffering terribly through their inability to remember – to write the book as well as I possibly could. A few weeks into the writing I realised that the book could not only be a meditation on memory, that it also needed the engine of a strong plot to drive it forward. Almost straight away – and to my very great surprise – I saw the final scene of the book, and it was then that I sat down and plotted how my characters would evolve. There were still some surprises along the way, some odd twists and turns which my characters seemed determined to take, and following them proved to be one of the most enjoyable things about writing the novel. I benefitted enormously from the help and insight of my colleagues on the Faber course, who read and commented on some quite long sections and helped me to keep a firm hand on the tiller when the complexity of the plot threatened to prove overwhelming, and by the time the six month course finished I had built up enough momentum and belief in the book to finish the first draft quite quickly. The characters have remained with me, however – Christine in particular – and the recent story in the UK news of a woman with a very similar condition has been a startling reminder that although I was writing fiction there are many people who suffer amnesia and for whom the issues I touch upon in the novel are very real and very frightening.