DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Meredith says she’s happy staying inside her home. Do you believe her? How long do you think she would have been able to keep up that kind of existence?

2. One of the topics explored in the book is mental health. With many famous people opening up about their struggles, the topic seems less stigmatized than before. Do you think this is true for non-famous people?

3. Sadie says that she and Meredith are “like salt and pepper.” They’re different but come together as great friends. Why do you think they fit so well? Is there truth that “opposites attract”?

4. Although Meredith has kept herself confined, she’s able to socialize digitally. Are we different when interacting with people on-screen versus in person?

5. The book depicts an unstable childhood environment for Meredith and her sister. What coping mechanisms did they develop? Did that past life prepare Meredith for her present-day life? How?

6. What circumstances would lead you toward a self-imposed solitary lifestyle? Meredith has her survival kit to keep her going—there’s Fred, jigsaw puzzles, Emily Dickinson poems, and cooking. What are your essentials (family is already included)?

7. Fred the cat is a great companion. Would another kind of animal have suited Meredith’s needs? Is there symbolism in the fact that he was a rescue?

8. Has this book altered your views on human bonds? Has living in a pandemic made you think differently about living in isolation?
A Q&A WITH CLAIRE ALEXANDER

What inspired your creation of Meredith and her story?
I’ve always been interested in the distinction between loneliness and being alone. I’m someone who tends toward introversion, and I cherish my alone time. I think there’s also a fine line between protecting your alone time as a self-care measure, and withdrawing so much from the rest of the world that it has a negative impact on your mental health.

I was thinking about all of this around the time I started an online writing course in October 2019. I didn’t have a single word written before the course, so I vowed to at least have a character! And then Meredith—a woman who hasn’t left her home for more than three years—arrived in my mind. She simply refused to leave. I had to tell her story.

I’ve always been an observer of people—I love trying to work out what makes them tick. So it’s no surprise that character always comes first for me. I let them in, and I have to draw their stories out of them. On good days, they run off at the mouth! On not-so-good days, it’s a slow drip.

How has living through the coronavirus pandemic impacted your perspective on Meredith’s solitary lifestyle?
I still find it surreal that six months before we first went into lockdown here in the UK, blissfully unaware of the restrictions and difficulties ahead of us, I was writing a book about a woman who was self-isolating. Meredith came before COVID-19, but my own experience of living through the pandemic definitely affected my writing.

For starters, it gave me a much clearer picture of what Meredith’s everyday life would be like. During the first UK lockdown, when we were instructed by the government not to leave our homes unless it was absolutely necessary, and to limit our daily outdoor exercise to one hour, I could relate to Meredith on another level. I would think, “What does Meredith do?” Unfortunately, I don’t share her skill for baking or jigsaws. Speaking of which, it made me laugh that the entire world appeared to be buying jigsaws, six months after Meredith sat in her living room piecing together Gustav Klimt’s The Kiss.

Do you have your own Sadie in your life?
I’m very lucky to have a couple of Sadies. In fact, my two best friends have been in my life since I was age three—too many years ago to count! I also have a Celeste, of sorts. One of my fellow students on the 2019 writing course is now one of my best friends, and we’ve finally met in person for the first time at my launch event in Glasgow. We chat every day, and she knows all my deepest, darkest secrets...
Meredith, Alone tackles dark topics and yet has plenty of humorous moments. How did you balance writing the dark with the light?

It was important to me to portray Meredith as a multilayered person—like all of us. She’s living in a very unique situation and has mental health issues, but there’s a lot more to her than that. I’ve had my own struggles with mental health but I don’t want that to define me—it’s one of many parts.

I definitely found myself rewriting more of the “darker” sections—I really wanted those parts to be authentic while not making Meredith too much of a “woe is me” character. Speaking as a reader, there needs to be nuance for me to feel that emotional connection. So I spent a lot of time trying to make sure I didn’t spend too long on Meredith’s darkest experiences, and also that the lighter moments didn’t become flippant.

It really does take a village to bring a book to fruition and I have my top-class agent and editor to thank for well-timed prompts to inject some humor to stop things from getting too dark.

How much research did you do on mental health and the effects of trauma?

I drew a lot on my personal experience of mental health issues and my time as a volunteer for a UK-based mental health charity. I also relied on the expertise (and generosity) of a wonderful therapist, GinaMarie Guarino. What I’ve learned about trauma is that it’s not the same for everyone. And the process of dealing with it is hugely personal too.

What do you hope your readers will take away upon finishing this book?

That there’s always someone there to help us through dark times—whether that’s online or in person. That it’s possible to move on from difficult times and create the life you want. That the simple things in life are what really matter. That showing vulnerability is vastly underrated. That love comes in many forms.

Tell us what you do when you’re not writing.

I hang out with my three kids, who are currently ages three, eleven, and fourteen, and our two dogs. Swimming in the cold waters of the Firth of Clyde, a few minutes from my doorstep, is a special kind of heaven and a crucial component of my mental health toolkit. A blue campervan named Lottie is a new addition to our family, so we’re looking forward to many road-trip adventures—swimming, reading, exploring, and thinking about my next book.
Meredith's Mix Tape

- We’re On Our Way Now by Noel Gallagher’s High Flying Birds
- Glasgow (No Place Like Home) by Jessie Buckley
- An Ode to Lost Jigsaw Pieces by Enter Shikari
- Here Comes The Sun by The Beatles
- Now I’m In It by HAIM
- Today by The Smashing Pumpkins
- Everybody Hurts by R.E.M.
- Love Myself by Hailee Steinfeld
- My House Your House by Angus & Julia Stone
- Follow The Sun by Xavier Rudd
- Free by Florence + The Machine
- Lean On Me by Bill Withers
- Beautiful by The Lemonheads
- Glasgow Love Theme by Craig Armstrong

Favorite Glasgow Bands

Primal Scream
Deacon Blue
Belle & Sebastian
MEREDITH'S DOUBLE CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES

Chilling is mandatory for this sticky cookie dough. A perfect recipe for a stay-at-home day.

Recipe inspired by Sally's Baking Recipes blog

INGREDIENTS

- 1/2 cup unsalted butter, room temperature
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup packed light or dark brown sugar
- 1 large egg, room temperature
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 2/3rd cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1 tsp baking soda
- 1/8 tsp salt
- 1 Tbs milk (any kind, dairy or non)
- 10 oz. semi-sweet chocolate chips

DIRECTIONS

1. In a large bowl, beat the butter, granulated sugar, and brown sugar together until fluffy and light in color, about 2-3 minutes. Add the egg and vanilla extract, and then mix until combined.
2. In a separate bowl, whisk the flour, cocoa powder, baking soda and salt together until combined. Slowly pour into the wet ingredients and mix. The cookie dough will be quite thick.
3. Mix in the milk, then chocolate chips. The cookie dough will be sticky and tacky. Cover dough tightly and chill in the refrigerator for at least 3 hours and up to 3 days.
4. Remove cookie dough from the refrigerator and allow to sit at room temperature for 10 minutes. If the cookie dough chilled longer than 3 hours, let it sit at room temperature for about 20 minutes. This makes the chilled cookie dough easier to scoop and roll.
5. Preheat oven to 350°F. Line large baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats.
6. Scoop and roll dough, a heaping 1.5 Tablespoons of dough each, into balls. Arrange 2-3” apart on the baking sheets.
7. Bake the cookies for 11-12 minutes or until the edges appear set and the centers still look soft.
8. Cool cookies for 5 minutes on the baking sheet. Transfer to cooling rack to cool completely. The cookies will slightly deflate as they cool.
9. Cover leftover cookies tightly and store at room temperature for up to 1 week.
Meredith’s Bucket List

Meredith has made it to the end of her garden path, and now the world is hers for the taking. Where better to get inspiration for her bucket list than from her beloved jigsaw puzzles? Assembling those pieces in the right order helped Meredith’s mind escape from the confines of her home years before her body was ready to make that move.

The Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, Italy, is Meredith and Tom’s first joint jigsaw project and marks a big step forward for their relationship. In the real world, this Gothic building is one of the largest churches in the world. Meredith is nothing if not determined—she’ll take those hundreds of steps in her stride to make it to the top of the tower and soak in the glorious views of the city.

While Meredith is in the Tuscany region of Italy, she’s sure to want to wander along the Ponte Vecchio (‘the old bridge’), exploring the jeweley stores on either side and seeking out the secret corridor between Palazzo Vecchio and Pitti.

Where better to learn how to cook her favourite recipe, Spaghetti puttanesca, than in pasta-loving Rome?

A train can provide Meredith with the perfect opportunity to see Belgium’s Antwerpen-Centraal railway station (aka the ‘Railway Cathedral’) IRL. After giving the huge glass dome and intricate details the attention it deserves, Mer is in the ideal place to jump on a train to the most picturesque European cities—Amsterdam, Brussels and Paris for starters.

Jigsaws have allowed Meredith to recreate famous works of art. One of the U.K.’s most famous landscape artists, John Constable, painted Salisbury Cathedral in 1823. The painting hangs in London’s Tate Britain gallery—but perhaps Meredith would prefer to travel to the town of Salisbury, an easy day trip from London, to see the 13th century Gothic cathedral up close.

Let’s not forget that there’s plenty for Meredith to explore in her home city of Glasgow. A visit to the city’s Science Centre (with Jacob, of course—who else?) is always a fun way to spend a day.