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## BOOK CLUB AUTHOR Q&A THREE GIFTS BY MARK A RADCLIFFE



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Please see detailed below some questions and answers provided by the author in relation to their book.

## 1. How would you summarise the book and your motivations for writing it?

It is about a young boy from a single parent family who is offered the absurd and magical opportunity to exchange years from his life expectancy in order to save his mother's life. In accepting the offer he is bound to a sense of himself as someone who's capacity for sacrifice and responsibility is accentuated.

I was interested in the idea of a magic that is both salvation and an act of cruelty crashing into the unlikeliest and most ordinary of lives and being held, lived with.

## 2. What is the significance of the title?

There are three gifts offered in the story. The second being the absence of a something that demands Francis has to take responsibility to save his dying mother because... what sort of son would choose not to save his mother?

## 3. What are the main themes of the book? What do these themes mean to you as the author?

I became quite preoccupied – in part perhaps post COVID – with gratitude and relief and I have long been really interested in what I think of as the trope that is men craving 'freedom' from responsibility (I think as characterised by the likes of John Updike but plenty of others) The idea that responsibility (or enacted and on going love for other people) is a trick or a trap or something to escape from feels strange to me and I wanted to explore it.

The idea of exchanging years of life – and the darkness that underpins that – seemed a really interesting way of pursuing the themes.

I also believe there is something significant about the poverty Francis emerges from. That gratitude would always be in him, as long as he has food or comfort or the absence of particular worries that go with being born poor. And I am not sure that sort of sensibility is written about very often.

## 4. Did you decide on a specific style of writing for this book, and if so, why? What are you trying to convey through your style?

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Yes. I decided early that the story needed to be told with pace and that it needed to contain humour. I think (I may be wrong) that books that are considered broadly to sit in the genre of magic realism tend to not be funny, or at least witty. I wanted to use wit as a counterpoint to both the magical element but also to the challenges the characters face (poverty, cancer, car crashes, death). However, it seemed important to me that the wit sat with the characters rather than the narrative voice or at least when it emerged from the narrative voice it was when that voice was closest to the characters so we could borrow their tone.

## **5. Was the structure and layout of the book an important consideration? If so, why?**

The structure, which is essentially a life story, did feel very important. Indeed I was advised, recurrently and strongly to change that because life stories are not popular currently. I was interested (still am) in how people accumulate not just life experience but their own deeply personal and very messy emotional map. I was quite committed to that being the structure of the story.

Once that was established I wanted to build the layout around the three gifts that dominate Francis's life.

## **6. What would you highlight as some of the pivotal scenes of the book, what is their importance to the narrative and to you on a personal level?**

I think the first act of sacrifice; the fact that in so many ways Francis had no real choice but to say yes, take 20 years of my life and yet in signing the contract he is forever changed – all without any hope of insight or thought... I think the loneliness of that, and the poignancy, is quite pivotal.

And I think if we set that against the desperate man who will beg to give up his years for his daughter, with all the awareness in the world... I like to think we get a view on the nature of love and how 'need' (please save my mum because I am alone and frightened and 12 if you don't then please save my daughter because her life means more to me than mine) evolves.

## **7. How important was the time period or the setting to the story? What were you looking to evoke through this?**

The book begins in 1960's and comes to the present day but I tried not to be

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overly specific about that. I wanted it to be as transferable as time can be in an age where technology marks the decades so clearly. I didn't want to overly locate it and I tried to keep most of the settings relatively empty because it felt like it needed to be a very human story that was not tied to an age or era.

## 8. Which location in the book would you most like to visit and why?

I visited them all in order to write the book. However, I purposefully did not 'map' the beach area of the first section of the book. I wanted to retain a vagueness to it (Indeed when I went back to check I found I had moved one of the entry slopes about 50 metres west) because I wanted those sections to retain the dream like underpinning that childhood can. I would like to go back to the garden that Francis visits in New York but full disclosure, it is not in New York!

## 9. What emotions are you hoping to evoke in the reader?

One reviewer said, 'This book broke my heart and then put it back together again.' That is pretty much what I was aiming for.

## 10. As an author you are very close to your characters. Reflecting back on the book, which of your characters would you like to meet in real life and why?

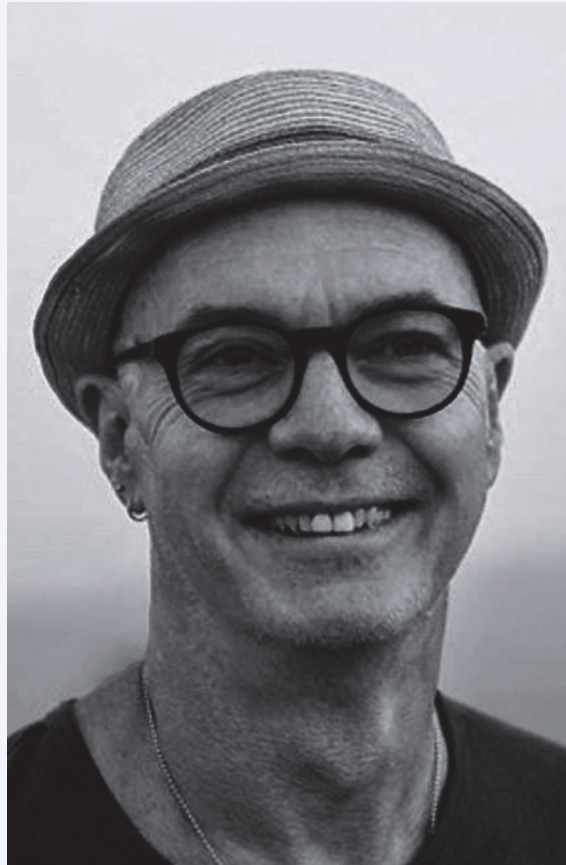
Ben and Joy. Another reviewer commented 'those are the friends we all wish we had'.

## Additional questions your book club may wish to consider:

- Who might it be who creates the Gift of reprieve for Francis? (there are clues)
- 'Is there a paradox in giving up life for the person, who in the literal sense, gave you life?'
- 'Who is the bravest person in the book?'
- 'What is it with the trees?'

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mark A. Radcliffe is the author of two novels, *Gabriel's Angel* (2010) and *Stranger Than Kindness* (2013), both published by Bluemoose and a collection of short stories, *Superpowers* (2020) published by Valley Press.

He is currently the Subject Lead for Creative Writing at West Dean College of Art and Conservation. Prior to that he worked as a nurse, a health journalist/columnist and a senior lecturer in mental health practice and nursing.

Mark lives in Hove with his wife Kate and swims in the sea a lot.