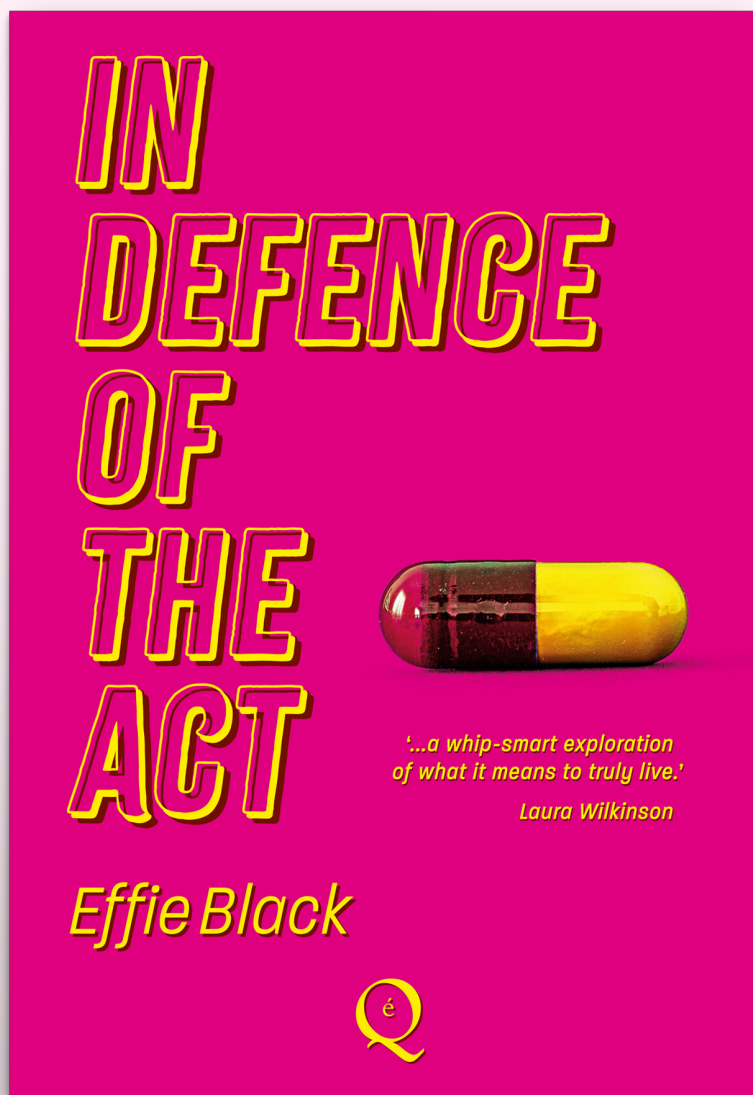


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BOOK CLUB AUTHOR Q&A
IN DEFENCE OF THE ACT
BY EFFIE BLACK



Our authors would be delighted to participate in any book club discussions you have arranged, either in person or via a video link. Should you choose one of our titles for your book club we are also happy to provide copies directly at a 40% discount. Please contact us at info@epoquepress.com for all enquiries.

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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?

The book follows Jessica, a scientist who secretly believes suicide is a good thing, evolutionarily-speaking. We learn why she might think this, and what might make her question her theory. Once I'd imagined the character, she intrigued me. I wanted to get to know her, and I hoped readers would feel the same.

Through learning about Jessica and her life, the book becomes about the impact suicide in particular can have on those left behind. I started writing it at a time where there seemed to be a lot of death happening in my various social circles, and I could feel the heaviness of it everywhere, so that was a key motivation for me. It's also about guilt, I think. The guilt we can feel after someone passes away, for all the things we did and didn't do while they were with us, but also for all the ways we might feel about their passing. And it's about family, and the guilt we may carry in and around those relationships too.

That all sounds rather depressing, doesn't it? But despite the dark subject matter, for me the book is fundamentally about resilience. It's about the stories we tell ourselves, and how they can shape our lives, negatively but also positively. So there is humour and hope in the mix too.

2. What is the significance of the title?

It's called *In Defence of the Act* because Jessica, the main character, has dedicated her career to trying to prove the act of suicide is a natural and positive thing for the human race. It's also because of how the entire piece may be viewed, but that's probably up to the reader to decide...

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

Suicide is obviously a pretty central theme. Because of this, and because of Jessica's controversial stance, it might be considered by some to be a fairly challenging book, but that was deliberate. Suicide is common, yet it can still be a taboo subject, and I think this tendency we have to shy away from it can have a detrimental impact on those affected by suicide. We should feel able to

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talk about it more freely, to explore it fully, even if some of that exploration is tough and unpalatable.

Grief is a key theme. Writing this book was a way for me to work through various types of grief I was feeling at the time, and some of that essence is captured within it. How we move on from grief, or any kind of trauma, is also a theme. How can we pick ourselves up and make the best of the hand we've been dealt? That's something we all have to grapple with pretty much every day, and it really interests me.

There are also strong queer themes within the book, especially what it means to be a queer member of a family, and to build one's own queer family. I was excited when I realised I could use writing to express things I had experienced as a queer person but not seen documented in much of what I was reading, so some of that is in there too.

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?

Once I'd imagined Jess, it felt obvious I had to inhabit her, to tell her story in the first person. She holds views that might shock some people, at least at first, but I wanted the reader to have the chance to fully understand her point of view, and to sympathise with and even like her. To achieve that, it was best they saw through her eyes.

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

This isn't a crime novel or a racy thriller. (Apologies!) It's a journey through one woman's life to date. But I still wanted it to have a good pace and some sense of urgency about it. I therefore peppered the "A Black Day" chapters throughout the book, providing little snippets of a certain occasion, but not the whole picture, in the hope of propelling the reader onwards to find out more.

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 don't want to give too much away for those who haven't read it yet, but there is a scene near the beginning of the novel that has echoes in a later scene.

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These are both pivotal moments in Jessica's life and story, and therefore the book, and this echoing is kind of a neat narrative device, but I also wanted it to express something more about the repetition of patterns and traumas we might see in our lives and in our families.

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

The bookgroup! I've been a member of various bookgroups over the years, including queer ones, but none that looked quite like the one in the story. If that bookgroup existed, I'd be there.

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

Initially, I want the reader to feel intrigued, and maybe even affronted, by Jess's ideas on suicide. I like a novel that provokes discussion, so even if someone can't stand Jess's views, I hope they'll still stir something in the reader, some further thought on the topic.

I felt fairly emotional writing some of the heavier scenes, so I'd love it if the reader could feel some of that emotion. And I cracked a few jokes here and there, so it would be nice to know readers appreciate them.

9. 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?

I'd love to meet all of them, if only to ask if they're happy with their names! All my short story characters have remained happily nameless thus far, so I didn't realise I utterly hate naming characters until I came to write this longer piece. The names still all feel somehow wrong and alien to me, so I'd like to know how they sit with the characters themselves.

In terms of their personalities, I'd most like to meet Freya and Rachel (even though Rachel is only mentioned in one scene). I have a lot of fondness for them both, plus I think they'd be great company on a night out! I'd also like to meet Jamie. We only see her through Jessica's rather rose-tinted gaze, and it would be nice to get to know her beyond that, warts and all.

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Additional questions your book club may wish to consider:

- How did you feel when Jessica first introduced her evolutionary theory of suicide? Did your feelings change at all during the course of the book?
- How do you think Jessica felt about suicide by the end of the novel? And what do you think the author might have been trying to say?
- What did you think about the fable of the carrot, the egg, and the coffee bean that recurs throughout the novel? How did this link to the wider themes for you?
- Jessica is telling her story partly out of a sense of guilt. What reasons does Jessica have to feel guilty?
- How did you feel about the more scientific and history-of-suicide sections? Why do you think the author added these? And did you assume these details were all based in fact? [They were...apart from Jessica's spiders, which were fictional.]
- How did you react to the mode of storytelling, which was very episodic and often present tense?



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Effie Black is a London-based writer with a background in science. She enjoys writing from a female and queer perspective, using fiction as a way to explore ideas and challenge her own ways of thinking.

She studied and worked in molecular biology, so she likes bringing a spot of science into her writing too. Effie's short stories have appeared in Litro and the époque press é-zine.