

DON'T FENCE ME IN

Meredith Jaffe's debut novel draws on her real-life experience of new neighbours demanding a fence be built

BELINDA SEENEY

Gwen Hill arrived – fully formed – three years ago, long before she had anywhere to go. Author Meredith Jaffe knew her fictional character was an elderly gardener who enjoyed a cold wine after a long day tending her plants. She knew Gwen had a neighbour called Babs and another called Val, and that they lived in a suburban cul-de-sac. “I knew Babs had to die and someone new had to move in but, beyond that, I didn’t have a story,” the debut novelist says.

The character stubbornly refused to leave as Jaffe, now 51, tinkered with other writing projects and raised four children with her husband on Sydney’s northern beaches. It wasn’t until her own neighbours sold up and a young family moved in, demanding a new fence be built on their terms, that the seeds of Gwen’s story were sown.

“I don’t know if you’ve ever had disputes with neighbours, but it can be very stressful because you can’t avoid them,” Jaffe says. “Rather than stewing in my own juices, I realised I had my story unfolding right before my very eyes and Gwen had her vehicle.”

The unpleasant incident was a springboard for her first published novel, *The Fence*, a tale of simmering suburban tension recounted from the perspectives of both Gwen and her new neighbour, career-focused mother-of-four Francesca Desmarchelliers.

The boundary between their homes becomes the front line in an escalating battle, exacerbated by each woman’s personal struggles. “I became really intrigued about this idea about fences and what they mean to us, as well as their physical structure.”

Jaffe and her family have since moved to a 20ha farm on the south coast of NSW where fences serve an entirely different purpose. “It does make me laugh when I wander around fixing fences (to) keep animals safe or keep foxes out, and I think, this isn’t quite what I thought about them last year.”

To accommodate her farm and family commitments, Jaffe’s literary life takes place before dawn. She rises at 4am to write up to 3000 words before her children, the

youngest of whom is eight, wake up. “Trying to contain that creative flow is really critical to me so I try to write the first draft incredibly intensively,” she says.

Research for *The Fence* involved poring over hundreds of books, magazine articles and gardening blogs to establish an “authentic voice” for Gwen and capture her passion for horticulture.

“I have been an avid watcher of *Gardening Australia* ever since that program started, but there is a very big difference between watching it and doing it,” Jaffe jokes.

An only child, Jaffe read voraciously and took her first tentative steps into the literary world “writing really bad poetry” as a teenager. She studied English literature at the University of New South Wales and jokes its intense focus on analysis and critique was “probably the best way to knock any desire to write out of you”.

This attitude soon changed when she was appointed literary editor of former website *The Hoopla* in 2012.

“One of the wonderful things about writing for *The Hoopla* and reading a ton of great fiction and nonfiction was that it really does inform your own writing.

“You see how well things can be done and you also see things that didn’t work so well, and because you’re reviewing rather than just reading, you have to articulate to yourself why it didn’t work.”

Jaffe is now drafting a new novel – with a manuscript she penned before writing *The Fence* – also under contract. Her other literary credits include having served as program director of the Batemans Bay Writers Festival (NSW), ambassador program coordinator for The Footpath Library initiative, which provides books for the homeless, and coordinator of the national EPIC! writing competition for school students.

“Literacy is really critical to society,” Jaffe says. “You’re only as strong as your baseline or your weakest link, and literacy and numeracy are fundamental to be able to not just survive in our society but to thrive.”

The Fence
Pan Macmillan Australia, \$33

FICTION

THE COUPLE NEXT DOOR

Shari Lapena, Random House, \$33

Looking for the next *Gone Girl* or *The Girl on the Train*? This might do the trick. Anne and Marco are dining with their neighbours Cynthia and Graham. The babysitter has cancelled, so they have their baby monitor at hand and one of them returns home every hour or so to check on their six-month-old, Cora. But Anne is out of sorts, watching Cynthia flirting with Marco, feeling insecure about her post-baby weight and worrying about her daughter. She persuades Marco, who is in a boisterous mood, to leave at 1am and when they arrive home they find the door open. Anne rushes upstairs to discover an empty crib. Suddenly their lives are under the spotlight: their drinking, her depression, his financial problems. Detective Rasbach can see the mother is distressed and the father shaken. But the whole situation doesn’t feel right. His investigation is methodical, progress is incremental and, while her prose is simplistic, Lapena builds tension. Anne’s parents offer a \$3 million reward and Cynthia pursues Marco. It’s not so much a whodunit as who will get away with it.



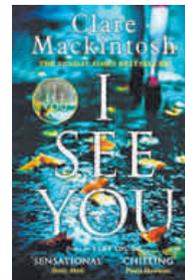
BLANCHE CLARK

FICTION

I SEE YOU

Clare Mackintosh, Sphere, \$30

Here’s yet another book in a long line following the tried and true formula of Gillian Flynn’s blockbuster *Gone Girl*. Mackintosh, who worked for 12 years as a police officer, won a major British crime fiction award for her debut novel, *I Let You Go*. This second novel is also getting rave reviews. Unfortunately, once you read it you will never feel the same about travelling on the train at night. In a frightening scenario, women travelling London’s Tube network are having their commutes tracked and sold to men online. Some of these men have romance on their minds and are looking to engineer a chance meeting with the women, but others have more sinister motives. Zoe Walker finds herself the victim of this evil scheme. She makes the chilling discovery after finding a photo of herself in a newspaper, sending her on a rollercoaster ride where she doesn’t know who to trust. She begins to connect the newspaper ads with local crimes, aided by a detective looking to prove herself after a past indiscretion. It’s an enjoyable read but at the last, *I See You* has a plot twist you could drive a train through.



SHELLEY HADFIELD

FICTION

WHEN MICHAEL MET MINA

Randa Abdel-Fattah, Pan Macmillan Australia, \$19

This young adult novel is warm and funny, sometimes bleak, but mainly sweet, and it has a wonderful cast of characters. The first time Michael notices Mina is at a rally for refugees. Michael is on one side arguing against boat people, Mina is there to support. Michael is a privileged white kid who goes to a private school on Sydney’s North Shore. His parents founded the political party Aussie Values. Mina is a refugee from Afghanistan who wins a scholarship to Michael’s school. To support Mina’s education, her family is moving from the western suburbs to the North Shore, a place Mina calls “Pretentiousville”. Both Mina and Michael have strong preconceived ideas about the type of person the other is. And both have to learn to question those beliefs. Essentially, it’s a love story set against the backdrop of racism and multiculturalism, with nuances that lend the story great credibility. Abdel-Fattah has written nine books, including *Does My Head Look Big in This* and *Ten Things I Hate About Me*.



REBECCA GREEN