

## Whisky Charlie Foxtrot

Annabel Smith

### About the Book

*All the times he had thought about the demise of his relationship with Whisky, it had always been Whisky's fault. In Charlie's version of events, any bad behaviour on his part had always been justifiable as a response to a graver misdemeanour on Whisky's part. But now that Whisky was in a coma it no longer mattered whether or not Whisky had been a bad brother to Charlie. The moment that car hit him Whisky entered the realm of the blameless, a state in which he was responsible for nothing and nothing could be held against him. Their relationship, or lack thereof, was now Charlie's responsibility entirely.* (pp. 153–154)

Whisky and Charlie are identical twins. But everything about them is poles apart. It's got so bad that Charlie can't even bear to talk to his brother anymore – until a freak accident steals Whisky from his family, and Charlie has to face the fact he may never speak to his brother again.

While Whisky is in a coma, Charlie revisits his and his twin's shared memories – from their childhood in England, through the family's move to Australia and the boys' high school years, and all the way to adulthood when their differences finally eclipsed what things they had in common.

The exchange between the past and present is at the heart of this novel. Its episodic structure is based on the phonetic two-way alphabet, each chapter themed around a letter and told in the past tense. Woven through these are present-tense scenes depicting the family's actions and reactions as they adjust to the accident.

The push-and-pull of family life plays out through a cast of characters that includes Whisky and Charlie's mother Elaine, their father Bill, Aunt Audrey, Whisky's wife Rosa, and Charlie's girlfriend Juliet. When Mike – a Canadian half-brother who was adopted out in infancy – makes contact and announces his intention to visit, the family dynamics shift again, the past insistent on asserting its presence.

This is a book about making mistakes and facing up to them, and a book about forgiveness and love. *Whisky Charlie Foxtrot* is a marvellous family drama, with depth, substance, humour, an intriguing structure, and a big heart.

### From the Author

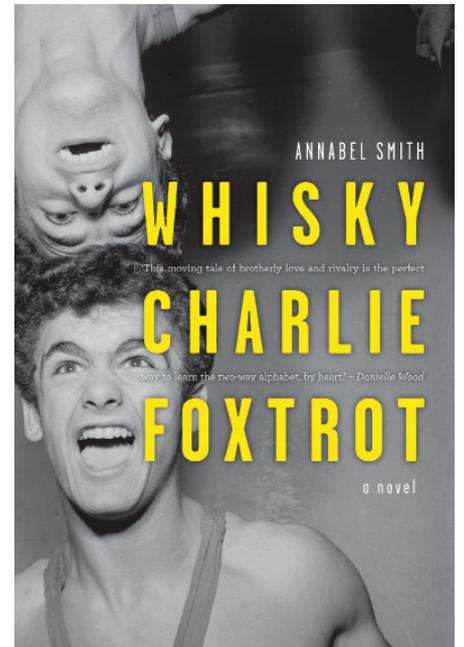
*What gave you the idea for writing Whisky Charlie Foxtrot?*

I had an idea for a novel about two brothers who were obsessed with getting into *The Guinness Book of World Records*. Thinking about their first encounter with the book, in October 2002 I wrote a sketch about a woman in a toyshop, looking for a Christmas present for her nephews. But at the end of the sketch was a note saying 'twins' – so I obviously got off track pretty quickly.

*How early on in the writing process did you introduce the structure of the two-way alphabet into the story?*

The structure was there right from the start. My boyfriend's brother had taught me the alphabet and I was practising it constantly and the thought came to me of writing a book around that. There was never a version without the alphabet.

*Did you encounter any difficulties in applying this structure?*



Many difficulties. Sometimes the idea for a chapter was easy, for example the ones with names (Juliet, Mike, Oscar etc) all became characters. But then fitting their story into the overall structure, and being hampered by the chronology of the alphabet, was difficult. It gave me a few headaches. Others seemed unworkable from the start. Yankee gave me nightmares. I had no idea what to do with it. Luckily it came near the end so I didn't have to worry about it for a long time.

*Whisky Charlie Foxtrot contains a wonderful range of characters who are easy to connect to and identify with. It is a family drama that reads as if it was put together with great affection and enjoyment. Is this correct?*

Absolutely. Despite the somewhat dark subject matter, much of the writing was a lot of fun to do.

*Are there autobiographical elements to this novel, or did it come mostly from your imagination?*

My father and his only brother were estranged for more than a decade and though I never intentionally set out to tackle that subject, my subconscious tipped me in that direction. There are other elements which are loosely autobiographical: my family did emigrate from the UK to Australia in the 1980s, though we came by plane, and ended up in Perth rather than Melbourne. But the feelings of alienation Charlie experiences at his new school were very much my own.

The anecdotes of the voyage to Australia are based on my husband's family's emigration by boat, in the 1970s. There are a few specific scenes which are based on my own experiences – our dog being hit by a car, the fancy-dress competition in the village fete; and the character of Oscar is a sort of amalgam of my two oldest nephews.

*Do you have a favourite character?*

For all his faults, Charlie has a special place in my heart.

*One might think of a coma as a fairly static event: a long period of unconsciousness bookended by the initial cataclysmic accident and the regaining of consciousness (or death). How did you overcome the narrative challenge of having created a potential static scenario: the lengthy bedside vigil?*

My research revealed a number of medical complications which added narrative tension to a potentially stagnant situation. The structure, in which the present-day story is interspersed with significant episodes from Whisky and Charlie's past, also provides some drama amidst the stasis. But I think the most important aspect of Whisky's coma is the way it changes those around him, so the real 'action' of the novel happens at a psychological level.

*Thomas the hospital counsellor plays an important role in the articulation of Charlie's responses. Were the seven stages of grief a useful template to apply in your construction of the novel?*

Having never experienced anything like this myself, it was difficult to know where to begin when it came to Charlie's reaction to Whisky's situation. The stages of grief provided a framework, laid a path for Charlie to follow, and provided a kind of narrative arc for his transformation.

## Questions for Discussion

- What is the two-way alphabet? What role does it play in the novel's structure?
- How does the author use the two-way alphabet as a narrative device?
- If Aunt Audrey's gift of the walkie-talkies is the '*beginning of everything*' (p. 13), how does the author use the boys' two-way communication as a broader motif throughout the novel? In what ways does the accident allow Charlie to resume his communications with his brother? Is it possible to say that their connection has never actually ceased?
- What is the effect of the story's movement between past and present?
- *What he couldn't stand was that this moment, this triumph, was not his own. That even when he had overtaken Whisky it was Whisky who had helped him to do it, so the triumph, as always, was Whisky's.* (p. 37) In the Western literary tradition, famous sibling rivals include Cain and Abel, and Romulus and Remus. What echoes, resonances or points of difference did you find in this book compared to other tales of sibling rivalry?
- What are Charlie's perceptions of his brother and how do these change across time?
- More than this, how do his memories – or his attitudes to his memories – change across time?
- In what ways does Whisky's accident enable (or force) Charlie to grow up? Is there a defining moment in Charlie's maturation? If so, what is it?
- Have those around Charlie also been changed by Whisky's accident or does the change lie with Charlie alone?
- Thomas says, *If there's one thing I've learned in this job, Charlie, it's that life-threatening illness doesn't only affect the patients themselves.* (p. 210) What are the different ways in which each family member responds to the uncertainty of Whisky's state? What events in particular upset or encourage each of them?
- Given that Charlie is a primary school teacher, what are the possible sources of discomfort for him in his personal relationships with children in his life, such as Oscar? What is at the heart of his own ambivalence about fatherhood?
- Do you think that this discomfort is related to his own refusal of Whisky and Rosa's request?
- Charlie loves Juliet, yet fears marrying her. What stops Charlie from proposing to Juliet, or accepting her proposal? And what makes him finally change his mind?
- *Well, that's rich coming from you, Charlie,* Charlie's father says. *Jesus. Maybe I could have been a better dad. But you haven't exactly been the world's best brother, have you? This sounds like the pot calling the kettle black, to me.* (p. 175) What is the nature of Charlie's relationship with his father? How has this changed over time?
- How does Charlie's relationship with his brother affect his relationships with those around him, including with his mother, father and Juliet?
- *I had a dream, Charlie said suddenly. Whisky was calling out to me. ... He called out my name. Everyone was there but no one else could hear him. He was out of sight, like in a cave or something. But I could hear his voice. I knew it was him.* (p. 261) What is the meaning of Charlie's recurring dream and what is its significance to those around him?
- What is the role of Rosa in the novel, as a relative newcomer to the family, and in the dynamic between Whisky and Charlie?
- In what way does the presence of Mike's twins Holly and Chloe enable Charlie to revisit his ideas about the way he and Whisky have related to each other?
- What is the role of Mike's character in this book?
- What do you make of Thomas' observation: *[T]here are some things in life we never feel ready for, that it's only by doing them that we become ready.* (p. 245)?
- Does this novel have a happy ending?