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What She Knew: A Novel



Synopsis

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER In her enthralling debut, Gilly Macmillan explores a mother's search for her missing son, weaving a taut psychological thriller as gripping and skillful as *The Girl on the Train* and *The Guilty One*. In a heartbeat, everything changes.

Rachel Jenner is walking in a Bristol park with her eight-year-old son, Ben, when he asks if he can run ahead. It's an ordinary request on an ordinary Sunday afternoon, and Rachel has no reason to worry until Ben vanishes. Police are called, search parties go out, and Rachel, already insecure after her recent divorce, feels herself coming undone. As hours and then days pass without a sign of Ben, everyone who knew him is called into question, from Rachel's newly married ex-husband to her mother-of-the-year sister. Inevitably, media attention focuses on Rachel too, and the public's attitude toward her begins to shift from sympathy to suspicion. As she desperately pieces together the threadbare clues, Rachel realizes that nothing is quite as she imagined it to be, not even her own judgment. And the greatest dangers may lie not in the anonymous strangers of every parent's nightmares, but behind the familiar smiles of those she trusts the most. Where is Ben? The clock is ticking...

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

View larger Author One-on-One: Mary Kubica and Gilly Macmillan Mary Kubica is the New York Times bestselling author of *The Good Girl* and *Pretty Baby*. Mary Kubica (MK): What *What She Knew* is about the abduction of an eight-year-old boy, which is a mother's worst nightmare. I have my own eight-year-old son at home, and thought of him quite frequently while reading the novel. I know that you have children of your own. Did this make the novel difficult to write or did having children make it easier to bring the character of Ben and his mother's agony to life? Gilly Macmillan (GM): I do have three children of my own, the youngest of whom was also 8 years old when I began to write *What She Knew*, and I would say my own experience of motherhood definitely informed my writing. From a purely practical point of view it was useful, because I used elements from my own life to build up the world which Rachel and Ben inhabit. I've lived in Bristol for eight years with my young family and all the locations are very familiar to me. I often walk with my children and dogs in the woods where we find Rachel and Ben at the beginning of the book, and we've all swung on the rope swing where Ben goes missing. I also know well how eight-year-old kids talk and behave and what's important to them, so I hope I've been able to make Ben's world one that feels real to the reader. Having said that, the challenging subject matter of the book meant that drawing inspiration from things that have happened in my own life wasn't, as I think you've guessed, without its difficulties. To imagine and then depict Rachel's agony as truthfully as I possibly could, I had to remember in uncomfortable detail some tough, and very private, experiences of my own. When one of my children was a baby he was diagnosed with cancer, and although he has since made a full recovery, I do know what it feels like to spend every minute fearing that you will lose a child who you love more than you can possibly describe. It certainly wasn't easy revisiting the memories of that difficult time in our lives, and I often had to break from my desk to escape the intensity of it, but I hope that by doing so I've managed to give Rachel's narrative voice at least some of the emotional authenticity that I think the story requires. MK: Your descriptions of settings, people, landscapes and more are eloquent and vivid. I could see your characters in my mind, and could easily envision myself in the woods by the tire swing, or in Rachel and Ben's home. I've read that you're a photographer, and wonder what, if any, influence this has on your writing. GM: I've worked as a photography lecturer, and I'm a passionate amateur photographer and also trained as an art historian, so I think it's probably safe to say that I'm very interested in trying to convey a vivid visual impression of things! I don't visualize an entire scene when I'm writing but small sensory details always leap out at me: the silhouette of a bird flying over bare treetops

against a white sky, the sound of an old lady's fingernails as she scrabbles with arthritic hands to pick something up from a countertop, the feel and smell of the teddy bear your young son left behind. I think small things such as these can make a large impression on us and often form our memories and experiences more intensely than the bigger picture.

The plot of *What She Knew* is simple on its face. Young Ben Finch suddenly disappears while on a walk through a familiar park with his recently divorced mother, Rachel Jenner, and the family dog. What follows is the harrowing tale of the search for Ben, told directly to the reader by Rachel, and to a police department psychologist by lead detective, Jim Clemo. As the clock ticks, many people in law enforcement and in Ben's family are forced to reveal secrets. Rachel is accused of being a bad mother, which she now begins to believe. After all, if she had kept Ben at her side rather than giving him a taste of freedom, this would not have occurred. She is forced to deal with her ex-husband's new wife, realizing that she has been unfair. When her sister drops a bombshell, Rachel feels that she can trust nobody. When Jim Clemo's girlfriend devastates him with her secret, he is shattered. Ultimately everyone surrounding Ben becomes suspect, and trust issues abound. This is a realistic page-turner. I felt as though I were in the middle of a law enforcement investigation, complete with blog and Facebook posts, and I gained even more sympathy for a family to which this crime has happened. I look forward to Gilly Macmillan's next book.

I liked the premise of this book, a mother makes a snap decision that will forever change her and her family's life. It is something we do as parents often, just turn your back for a second, and something similar can happen to your child. The book was interesting and there are times it keeps you guessing who may have taken her son. I would have liked the author to have developed the possible suspects a little deeper so that we were truly invested in thinking it could have been each different character such as the aunt, or the mother, or even the step mom. I think in a sense, the background and/or behavior of each of the suspects was lacking so that you never truly felt it could have been one of those characters that had taken Ben.

The book kept the plot moving with some big twists. It was an easy read and kept my interest and me wondering!

I decided early on who it was, although I did suspect the right one now and then. It was a very enjoyable read.

It had a slow start with an exciting 2nd half. I enjoyed the book for the most part. Good story.

This was an excellent, riveting book, despite the fact that the subject matter is heart-rending. I really liked the structure. I thought Rachel's thoughts and reactions were very believable, and I really could feel her pain and totally empathize with her. I could also empathize with Jim (the police officer) and I thought all of the characters were well-developed. I do agree with a friend, up to a point, about the ending. I agree there weren't a lot of clues leading to the real perp, but if you look at it from a Christie viewpoint, it could be figured out.

Although this read is close to the way people react, treat, criticize and generally be mean because they judge. Media are worse than leeches and constantly miss judge for the convenience of selling rag print. The read is slow and tough to sit through. Will not re-read this one...

So well written, I put myself in Rachel's place, I felt her pain, but she never gave up, she felt her son's presence. The detective suffered too, the case got to him, it affected his life. I recommend this to all the fans of mystery stories.

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