

BOOK REVIEW

Behind the Best Sellers: ‘Girl Before’ Author JP Delaney on Pseudonyms and the Limits of Marie Kondo

By GREGORY COWLES FEB. 3, 2017



JP Delaney

The Life-Changing Terror of Tidying Up: “He may be an insufferable, affected, narcissistic creep, but he’s also a genius.” That’s how Chip Kidd summed up the architect villain of “Death by Design,” his 2012 Batman story with Dave Taylor, in what’s surely a nod to all the insufferable, affected, narcissistic architects in literary history — even the heroes: Howard Roark, anyone? Certainly the description fits Edward Monkford, the tightly wound minimalist at the center of “The Girl Before,” a psychological thriller by JP Delaney that debuts at No. 5 on the hardcover fiction list. Monkford rents his showpiece house only to alluring young women (who don’t always survive), and he rivals Marie Kondo in his aversion to clutter: The review in the daily New York Times was headlined, ominously, “He Doesn’t Like It When You Leave Your Shampoo Out.”

Delaney is actually the British adman Tony Strong, he told me via email. “There are some big advantages to using a pseudonym,” he wrote. “The first is that people can’t tell from the initials if I’m a man or a woman — and I’ve been really gratified that many readers have assumed from the way I’ve written from two female perspectives that I’m actually a woman. (In that

respect pen names have come full circle from the days when Emily Brontë had to publish under the name Mr. Ellis Bell.) The second is that you know people are responding to something in the story, not to a name. . . . To write under a completely new name is to free yourself from expectations.”

In this novel, he added, he wanted to explore the “weird and deeply obsessive” psychology of minimalism, evident in the fad for Kondo and her KonMari system of organizing. “On the face of it,” he wrote, “the KonMari trend is baffling — all that focus on folding and possessions. But I think it speaks to something that runs deep in all of us: the desire to live a more perfect, beautiful life, and the belief that a method, or a place, or even a diet, is going to help us achieve that. I understand that impulse. But my book is about what happens when people follow it too far. As one of my characters says, you can tidy all you like, but you can’t run away from the mess in your own head.”

Circus Maximus: Throughout the presidential campaign, the journalist Matt Taibbi offered a reliably lucid, skeptical and independent perspective in his dispatches for Rolling Stone magazine. Now he gathers that reporting in a book about Donald Trump, “Insane Clown President,” which enters the hardcover nonfiction list at No. 15. Taibbi discussed the book on PBS shortly before the inauguration. “If the president-elect and his followers have complaints about the title,” he said, “they should really blame Trump himself. Because I actually learned a lot about marketing watching Donald Trump over the last couple of years. There is no reason to be subtle at all in the current environment.”

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(taken from nytimes.com)

Dark thriller inspired by decluttering

JP Delaney's *The Girl Before* features a minimalist house — and a neat freak landlord willing to spay — at the centre of an unconventional, intimate story

The Girl Before, by JP Delaney, Doubleday, 352 pages, \$25. (DOUBLEDAY CANADA)

By **SUE CARTER**

When JP Delaney's agent showed two top New York editors the first 50 pages of his new psychological thriller, *The Girl Before*, little did he know the fervour it would cause in the publishing world. Within a week, the manuscript sold in more than 25 countries (now 35 and counting) at the Frankfurt Book Fair. "At that stage, the foreign publishers didn't even know what happened on page 51," says Delaney, a not-so-secret pseudonym for Tony Strong, a London advertising copywriter and author of four previous novels under other names.

Within a month, there was an auction for film rights involving four Hollywood studios, all hungry for the next blockbuster *Gone Girl* or *The Girl on the Train*. In the end, it was Universal Pictures that snagged the dark, twisted tale, with Ron Howard signed on to direct. "Ron Howard expressed a desire to be attached to it. He told me he'd been looking for an unconventional psychological thriller for some time," says Delaney. "He's brilliant with intimate stories about characters who play cat-and-mouse with each other."

Following in the footsteps of those other famous girls, Delaney's novel features two unreliable narrators whose stories twist and morph over time. There's Jane, an emotionally wounded woman who lost her baby while in utero. Jane believes she'll find a fresh start and peace of mind moving into One Folgate Street, a sleek, minimalist home designed by a world-renowned architect, Edward Monkford, whose cool, controlling demeanour recalls shades of E.L. James's Christian Grey. Jane's story alternates with that of Emma's, a previous tenant who moved into Folgate while recovering from a violent attack. When Jane

learns that Emma died under suspicious circumstances in the house, she becomes obsessed with the women's life and possible murder.

Delaney — who has always loved books with a house at their core, like Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* — was inspired by a magazine article about a minimalist London home. "I was immediately struck by just how obsessive and perfectionist an architect would have to be to pursue that kind of aesthetic, where even the tiniest detail could ruin the whole effect," he says. Intrigued, Delaney began visiting similar residences, although he didn't realize at the time it was the beginnings of a novel.

In *The Girl Before*, the women fill out rigorous rental applications that include a series of bizarre psychological and ethical questions. Not only do tenants swear they will keep the home impeccably clean and decluttered in a way that would make Marie Kondo proud, they must also submit to having their behaviour and health monitored by the house's various technological systems. Folgate slowly transforms from a hub of Zen tranquillity into a malicious presence in the women's lives. Delaney also took tips from old 1950s and '60s movies that tried to predict the future, "but got it all wrong," and purposely made Folgate's systems slightly out of date: "The sense that the technology might be unreliable or a bit misguided is partly what makes the house so creepy."

Although the house's control over the women becomes unsettling, Delaney keeps the story's humanity mostly through the journey of Jane, and her grief over the loss of her child. He says it took him a long time to understand why he was so determined to write this book, and why these characters meant so much to him: he was "both attracted to, and repelled by, the whole idea of trying to live a more perfect, beautiful life" and that it connected to his own family story. Delaney's youngest son is autistic, as well as physically disabled, and his older brother died of sudden infant death syndrome.

"At its core, the story is all about the things that people think they need to fill the holes in their hearts, and the importance of embracing the muddle and mess of human relationships, however imperfect they

are,” the author observes. “As one of my characters, Emma, says at one point, decluttering your house won’t do anything to clear up the mess inside your own head.”

Sue Carter is the editor of Quill & Quire.

(taken from thestar.com)

Discussion Questions

1. As you were reading, did you engage with the survey questions alongside Jane and Emma? How would your answers differ from theirs? Were there any questions in particular that stood out to you? Did you surprise yourself with any of your responses?
2. Emma and Jane have a lot in common, but there are also striking differences between the two women. Compare and contrast these two characters, and discuss some of the ways in which their differences and similarities influenced their relationships.
3. How does living at One Folgate Street impact each of the women? In what ways do our environments shape our experiences? If you could make one change to your current living environment that would have an impact on your behavior, what would it be?
4. Describe your personal style when it comes to home décor and architecture. How does that style shape or reflect your personality? Would you want to live in a minimalist space like One Folgate Street?
5. On page 235, Jane finds Edward's discarded sketch—the pentimento image with two overlaid versions of her face. What did you make of that moment? What do you think the image meant to Edward?
6. Discuss Emma's relationship with Saul. What do you think really happened there?
7. Could you forgive Jane's deceptiveness, as revealed at the end of the novel? Were you surprised by her confession?
8. What do you think of Edward's dream to create a community of homes like One Folgate Street? Could such a project ever really work successfully? Why or why not?
9. Which character did you relate to the most in this novel? Why?
10. Describe Simon's relationship with each of the women.
11. Emma inspires passion and obsession in many of the men who fall into her orbit. What quality or qualities make her so compelling? Have you ever known someone like Emma?
12. Make a list of every possession you consider essential to your life.
(Questions issued by the publisher.)

(taken from *litlovers.com*)

Interview: January 26, 2017

[THE GIRL BEFORE](#) is the first psychological thriller from [JP Delaney](#), a pseudonym for a writer who has previously written bestselling fiction under other names. This enthralling novel spins one woman's seemingly good fortune, and another woman's mysterious fate, through a kaleidoscope of duplicity, death and deception. In this interview, Delaney talks to Carol Fitzgerald, the president and co-founder of The Book Report Network, about the mysterious house at the center of the story --- a minimalist architectural masterpiece with secrets of its own --- as well as how the book evolved over the 15 years he spent writing it.

Bookreporter.com: In THE GIRL BEFORE, the house plays a big role; in fact, with the secrets it keeps, it feels like a character. When you were writing, did you start with the concept of the house? And what was your inspiration for its design?

JP Delaney: Yes, the house came first. I came across a magazine article many years ago about a minimalist house in London, and was immediately struck by just how obsessive and perfectionist an architect would have to be to pursue that kind of aesthetic, where even the tiniest detail could ruin the whole effect. I started to visit minimalist houses, even though I didn't know at that stage whether it might become a book. But I've always been a big fan of books with houses at their core --- REBECCA is one that jumps to mind --- and I started to think about the possibility of taking that gothic tradition and switching it around so the house is ultra-modern instead of old and creepy.

BRC: Are your home and office as stark and severe as One Folgate Street? Do you work better in a minimalistic setting or in a cluttered one?

JPD: Cluttered! (In fact, "Clutter" was at one point the ironic title of the book. Not a very good one, I soon realized.) I can understand --- and even feel --- the lure of a beautiful, empty, perfect house, but to me it's a siren call, like the "cold pastoral" of Keats' Grecian Urn. My house is full of animals and books and people and mess. To me, that's what being human is all about. And, of course, one of the ironies of the book is that --- as Emma says at one point --- the characters can't ever escape the mess that's inside their own heads.

BRC: I found both Emma and Jane becoming more introspective as they moved throughout the house without distractions of physical objects. They both had more time for thinking and dealing with the issues that brought them to the house. Through this, their characters become more revealed. When we strip people of their possessions, do you feel that they focus more on themselves and their emotions?

JPD: Yes, I saw the house as a kind of crucible, where all the layers of pretense that Emma, Jane and Simon had muddled along with got stripped away. But we're never quite sure if it's their true character that's being revealed, or whether the house is actually changing them.

BRC: Choice is a parallel to freedom. Once you have made your choices in this house, they are locked in place for you. Is there a moment that you changed the choice a character made to better suit the story?

JPD: Yes, often. I re-wrote this book many, many times over the course of about 15 years, with the characters of the two women only gradually becoming distinct.

BRC: The architect, Edward Monkford, holds a lot of the cards, and you cleverly help him play them. Which character was the most challenging to write? Emma? Jane? Monkford? Which flowed the most smoothly?

JPD: I would say Edward was the hardest to write, but only because he has to remain both attractive and ambiguous --- we have to wonder what he's capable of, without ever being quite sure. As for the two women, sometimes I was fonder of one, sometimes the other. The great thing about writing in this genre is that --- thanks to Gillian Flynn --- there's no requirement to write one-dimensional characters anymore. People can be both good and evil, likable and hateable.

BRC: The book alternates chapters between Emma and Jane. Did you write it that way as well?

JPD: That was one of the things that most excited me about writing the book. Quite early on I found myself thinking about the well-known theory that sociopathic killers have a "pattern" --- they like to repeat the details of previous killings, almost like a writer retelling a story over and over again. I wondered if it was possible to tell the story of a murder victim as one continuous narrative, even though it's being repeated with a different woman. So my narrators' chapters flow seamlessly into each other as one continuous story, even though three years separates them.

BRC: The title "The Girl Before," immediately implies that something happened in the past and sparks curiosity. How did you land on this title?

JPD: The book had several titles over the 15 years it took me to write it. THE GIRL BEFORE came to me about seven or eight years ago --- so, I suppose, after THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO but before GONE GIRL. I spent a couple of months last year thinking of an alternative, partly because another book was published with the same title, and partly because people were saying that readers were getting fed up with books with "Girl" in the title. But it just felt like the right title for the story.

BRC: Applicants to live at One Folgate Street are given a detailed questionnaire with 200 questions. I loved the survey questions included throughout the book and found myself wondering how I would be judged on the replies. Did you write those all at once or go back to insert them later? I would love to see that quiz all in one place and see how I would score!

JPD: The questions are indeed all in one place at www.thegirlbeforebook.com. (There's no scoring system yet, though.) They were an aspect of the story that the very first readers and publishers all loved, so in the final draft I gave them more of a role. Many are adapted from real questionnaires used by psychologists.

BRC: Technology plays a big role in the book, which has its challenges since what would have been available to Jane, which is the "Now" part of the story, may not have been there when Emma lived in the house. Did you have to keep track of that as you were writing?

JPD: Yes, but I tried to make the technology slightly out of date, as this was a futuristic, cutting-edge house when it was built. But even by the time Emma lives there, it's showing its age a bit. Almost nothing's wireless, for example. And there's no letter box, because when it was built everyone was predicting that email would make letters redundant. The sense that the technology might be unreliable is partly what makes the house so creepy.

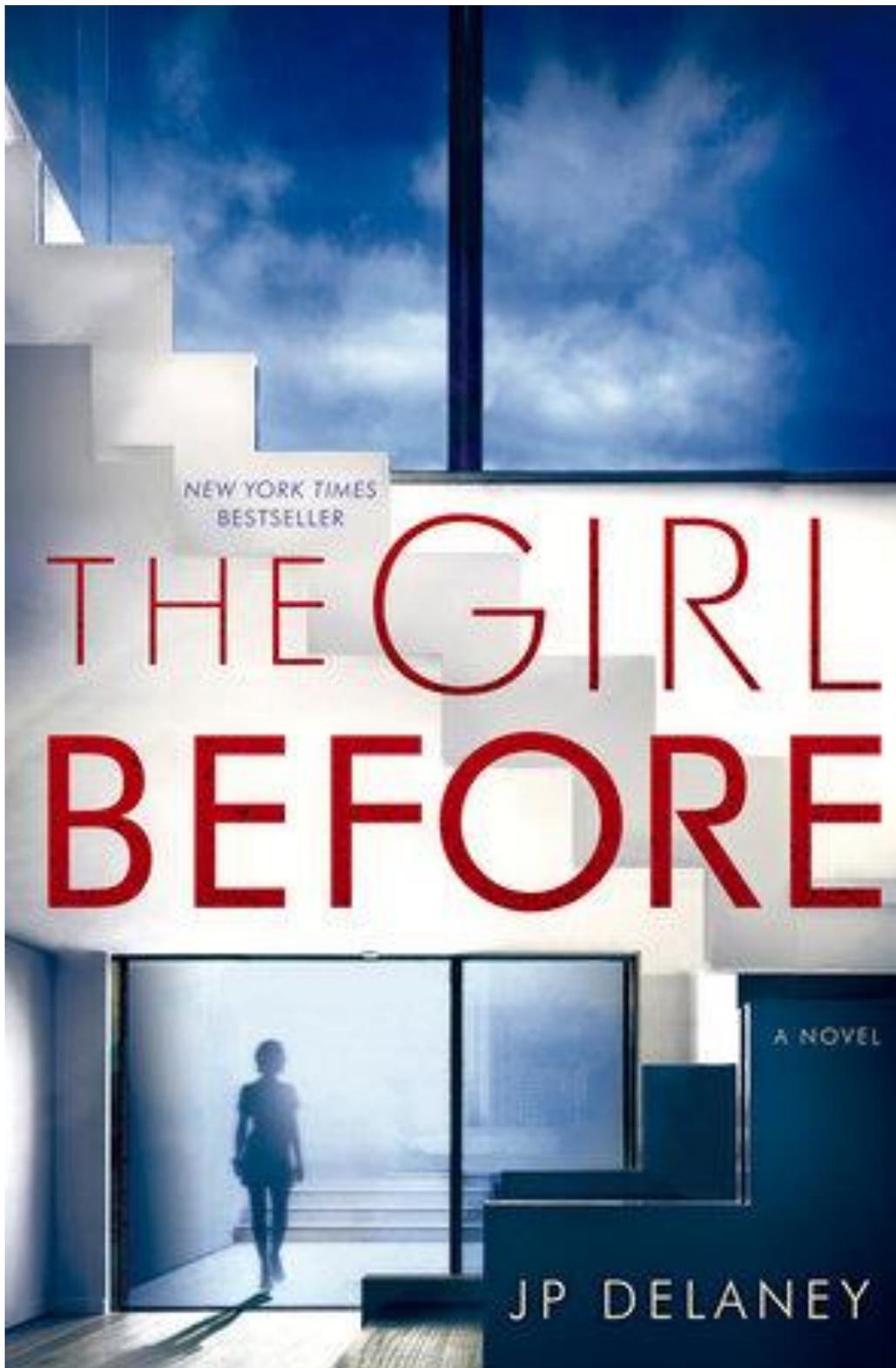
BRC: You have written books under other names, but this is your first psychological thriller as “JP Delaney.” How did this writing experience differ from those in the past? Would you want to explore the thriller genre more in the future?

JPD: I wrote this book over 15 years, partly because I just couldn't make it work. So I wrote other books, in other genres, instead, but kept coming back to this one each time I finished one of those. It only gradually became a psychological thriller, and since my previous books had been very different, it made sense to publish this one under a different writing name. But there definitely will be another JP Delaney book!

BRC: The ending of the story has an emotional twist that I confess I did not see coming, but I have learned that it is one that was very close to you. I do not want to reveal what happened, but did writing that ending feel personally satisfying to you?

JPD: Definitely. It took me a long time to work out why I was so determined to write this particular book, and why the characters and their predicaments meant so much to me. I only gradually came to realize that it was because I was both attracted to, and repelled by, the whole idea of trying to live a more perfect, beautiful life. My youngest son is autistic, and his older brother died of cot death. I eventually twigged that this book is, at its core, all about embracing the muddle and mess and preciousness of human relationships and prioritizing them above all else. If you have walls your kids can't scribble on, you may have the wrong walls.

(taken from bookreporter.com)



NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLER

THE GIRL BEFORE

A NOVEL

JP DELANEY