

This Is How

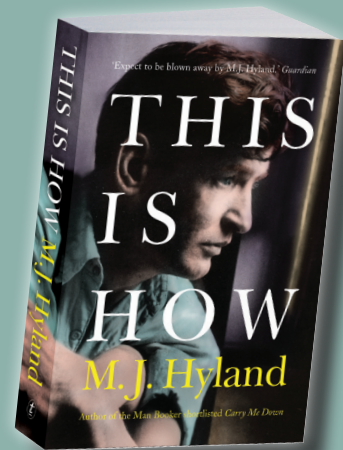
M.J. Hyland

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Fiction



Praise for *This Is How*

'A tour de force. Hyland illuminates this man's damaged soul with such a steely, brilliant clarity that your heart breaks for him.' **Helen Garner**

'Patrick Oxtoby is a damaged, brittle, ordinary man: his actions and their consequences are presented in deceptively transparent prose that balances honesty with integrity, and brutality with a tiny, corrective possibility of hope. A wise and truthful novel.' *Irish Times*

'Hyland's exquisitely crafted prose makes readers care for this emotionally stunted protagonist.' *Financial Times*

About M.J. Hyland

M.J. Hyland is the author of *How the Light Gets In* and *Carry Me Down*, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2006. She was born in London and grew up in Dublin. When she was eleven her family settled in Melbourne. She studied English and Law at the University of Melbourne and worked as a lawyer for several years. She now lives in Manchester, where she teaches in the Centre for New Writing at Manchester University.

A reader's introduction to *This Is How*

When his fiancée breaks off their engagement, Patrick Oxtoby leaves home and moves to a boarding house in a seaside town. But in spite of his hopes and determination to build a better life, nothing goes to plan and Patrick is soon driven to take a desperate and chilling course of action.

This is How is a mesmerising and meticulously drawn portrait of a man whose unease with the world leads to his tragic undoing. Written with breathtaking wisdom and an astute insight into the human mind, M. J. Hyland's new book is a masterpiece that inspires horror and sympathy in equal measure.

'I want to write intelligent page-turners. I want to write novels with substance and weight, but have there be on the surface a great story with good serious tension and traction. My style is so pared back, so plain, so seemingly simple...but really there's richness there, rich drama and major subject matter, tragic weighty stuff going on.'
M.J. Hyland

Questions for discussion

1. Early in the book Patrick's mother asks, 'Why do you have to behave in such a contrary way?' Patrick responds, 'I'm not being contrary. It's just that what you want isn't the same as what I want.' At this point in the novel, what is it that Patrick wants? What do you think he is trying to achieve by moving to this seaside town?
2. Patrick is a very literal character—what you get from his point of view is exactly what he sees. Hyland gives us a fantastic study of this man, taking us deep into his psyche. If you were there, how different would your perspective of events and behaviour be? Why are we prepared to stay inside his mind?
3. There are glimpses of violence right from the beginning of the book—'I wanted to push her down the stairs, make the kind of impression I didn't know how to make with words' p. 4, 'one fucking stupid bitch, two fucking stupid bitch' p. 22, 'just thinking about punching him I can feel the crack of his teeth under my knuckles' p. 67. Are these the sort of internalised bursts of anger that we all experience, or something more sinister? Do you think such thoughts ease off once Patrick is convicted?
4. 'I stand close to the edge and look down at the water. It's about a twelve-foot drop. She links her arm through mine, and as I look at the water, I imagine how she'd sink, and her ugly short dress would float up and surround her head like a jellyfish.' Is this simply a sign of Patrick's vivid

- imagination, his anger about his mother's visit, or does it point to his ability to do harm?
5. Welkin says to Patrick, 'There's nothing false about you. I don't think you know how to hide anything.' Is Welkin honest? Is he trying to get at Patrick? Consider the alarm clock, hot water, flirtation with Bridget...
 6. Patrick constantly talks about his emotions in a detached manner, 'I wanted to get a good mood going' etc. How does this relate to his uncontrollable sobbing in the toilet cubicle at the pub, and at the theatre in University? And what of his constant neck and back pain? How is this related to his emotional state?
 7. 'What Hyland is creating is a character who does not fully understand the world and yet he's a marvellous observer of the world... We get to see the world through his eyes and we get to understand how little he understands of that world simultaneously—an astonishing technical achievement. For the most part we see it scrupulously, with extraordinary discipline, through his eyes and we understand that although he notices the tiniest details of behaviour, of smell, of colour, he can't interpret them. People are blank to him.' David Marr. Discuss
 8. 'Flindall and I have become as thick as thieves. Don't feel as though you're the third man,' Welkin says to Patrick. How do you think Patrick's childhood friendships and experience of being the 'third man' have affected his development? Consider his family relationships also.
 9. 'My father told me he didn't understand me, told me that my brother had a knack for happiness and he asked me why I didn't.' Discuss
 10. Discuss how the author builds tension prior to the night when Patrick kills Welkin. Consider the triple murders in the newspaper, his visit with Georgia etc. Did you see it coming?
 11. In Patrick's trial, it appears that Bridget and Georgia are 'on his side.' Do you think the fact that Patrick's parents and family do not give him the benefit of the doubt speaks volumes, or do you think it's the media and sense of shame that are affecting them?
 12. 'Do you always talk to yourself like a nutcase?' a guard asks Patrick during his trial. Is this a sign of mental exhaustion/degeneration due to prison life, or has Patrick always done this? Did you question Patrick's character the further you progressed through the novel?
 13. Patrick, or Oxtoby as he's referred to in the second half of the novel, seems to elicit some sympathy with the prison wardens (despite their ulterior motives) and cellmates. Did you sympathise with Patrick? Did he get under your skin? Did he stay with you afterwards?
 14. Do you relate to how Patrick sees the world? He wants things to be simple. Consider the passage when he breaks up with Sarah, 'She said she was breaking up with me because I didn't know how to express my emotions. The thing is, I didn't have that many. As far as I was concerned, it was pretty simple. I was in love with her and I liked our life and we laughed a lot and it felt so good to be in bed with her and have her touching me. I liked what we had.' p. 41. Do you think this yearning for simplicity is why he slowly takes to prison life?
 15. Before the trial Patrick says, 'I want my life more than I've ever wanted it. I want another go.' Do you think this is still the case at the end of the novel?
 16. Patrick is not someone who really sets out to murder, but someone nevertheless who does it out of a blankness, a failure to understand his own actions, part of a rage he can't express which has a source which is infinitely petty. And then in Part 2 we live with the consequences. A level of knowledge builds up—we learn so much about him. Compare Part 1 with Part 2 of the novel. Does your sense of unease as a reader wane with Patrick's prison life, or is the tension carried through? Does your understanding of him change? Do you forgive him?
 17. In an interview on ABC TV M.J Hyland states, 'First person present tense... is the only way I can write the way I want to write successfully and seems to suit me. My intention is to achieve that intensely close relationship between the reader and the chief protagonist, akin somewhat to something like mind reading... Also what I'm trying to do is have me the author be invisible... there's no apparent artifice. It is like reading an account by the person in question, so in *This is How* this is like a diary or a memoir of a murderer... it's him to you the reader.' How successful is the author in achieving these goals? Discuss the methods she employs and how they affected you as a reader.