

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

“I love hearing that someone stayed up all night to finish one of my books.”

Now a *New York Times* bestselling author of popular psychological novels, Joy was eight years old when she sent her first story to a magazine. She wrote plays that she and her friends performed for their parents during summer vacation at the cottage. “As a child, I played with cut-out dolls until I was fourteen years old, long past the age when my friends still played with them. I made up elaborate stories with my paper dolls, letting my imagination run wild.” In her last year of high school, her English teacher announced to the class that she was going to be a writer. She loved writing and was a good student. Her mother told her there was nothing she couldn’t do well if she really wanted to do it.

At the University of Toronto, however, Joy decided she wanted to be an actress. She performed in campus productions and starred in the student movie *Winter Kept Us Warm*. When she graduated in 1966 with a BA in English Literature, she went into acting full-time, played the lead in CFTO’s *Rumble of Silence* and appeared in *Twelfth Night* at Stratford; she moved to Los Angeles and landed a role in an episode of *Gunsmoke*. She also travelled to Las Vegas where she got to kiss Elvis Presley. She stayed there almost three years, acting, working in banks, and starting a novel; but eventually returned to Toronto and her first love, writing. The acting background enriches her novels. “I approach the heroines as if I were a Method actress.” Her theatre training taught her to see scenes, build structure, and “go for the drama”.

Her first novel, **The Best of Friends**, was written at her parents’ kitchen table within the first five weeks of returning to Toronto. Publishers in both Canada and the U.S. saw potential, and it was published in 1972. Less than ten years and several novels later, **Kiss Mommy Goodbye**, called a ‘knockout’ by the *New York Times*, was published all over the world. In 1995, her novel **See Jane Run** was adapted into a television movie and sold 1.5 million copies in Germany alone. With the publication of **The First Time**, a love story, and **Grand Avenue**, which follows the lives of four women over the course of twenty years, she allowed herself the luxury of focusing more on how human relationships develop over time.

She still lives in Toronto but has a house in Palm Beach, where she spends as much time as possible. “I think I have a fairly American sensibility, although this is very much tempered by my Canadian upbringing.” She works on her golf handicap, plays bridge, and travels when she has time. She has been married for 30-plus years and has two daughters, one an actress and the other working behind-the-scenes in film.

She usually writes for four hours each day, after letting ideas percolate in her subconscious for a while. She starts with the characters and a theme, then writes

an outline; halfway through, the book usually has its own momentum, although there can be surprises, such as when a minor character ends up having a key role in the book. “That’s always part of the fun: being surprised.” Readers find it easy to relate to and identify with her characters, so developing their background, why they act the way they do, is the most important thing. In spite of their different situations, she tries to put herself into their shoes and thus sees a lot of herself in her main characters.

Fielding’s terrain as a writer is the day-to-day problems facing modern women. Often, her characters are forced to face their worst nightmares, when sudden discoveries change their seemingly untroubled lives. In the suspenseful **Don’t Cry Now**, a woman with a rewarding job, happy marriage, and large suburban home finds her secure world crashing around her when her three-year-old daughter’s safety is threatened. A destructive ex-husband leaves a woman in terror when he kidnaps their children in **Kiss Mommy Goodbye**. Seemingly fragile heroines face the challenge of a lifetime, and often fight back ferociously.

Although her primary concern is telling a good story, she consciously tries to raise awareness of issues that affect women’s lives, such as domestic violence and sexual harassment, disease and infidelity. “Occasionally, I get letters from professional social workers and doctors, telling me that they’ve used or recommended my books to their patients.” Showing how a character deals with a situation is often more effective than giving people advice on things they’re afraid to confront. As a popular author she would like to help show people why they do things, understand each other’s fears, and become more compassionate.

She is also committed to creating more believable female characters in commercial fiction. “I think I’m successful at depicting real women because I understand women, mostly because I understand myself quite well... You can tell a pretty fantastic tale, but if you populate it with real people feeling real emotions, your readers will follow you anywhere.” She appeals to people of all ages from teenagers up, and though set mostly in American cities, her books are sold in more than twenty languages all over the world. “It strikes me increasingly that as long as one is writing about the basic human emotions we all share, then it doesn’t really matter where one is from.” Although most of her readers are women, she recommends her books to men — especially if they want to understand what women want.

*Publishers Weekly* has regularly called her books perceptive and affecting. Of **Whisper and Lies** it writes: “An ending worthy of Hitchcock rewards readers able to weather the false clues and emotional angst of Fielding’s latest page-turner. Once again, the bestselling author...tests the complex ties that bind friends and family, and keeps readers wondering when those same ties might turn deadly.” Of **Mad River Road**: “Packed with breathless twists and turns, Fielding’s latest set of women in jeopardy excite and delight.”

Her latest novel, **Heartstopper**, was released in 2007 to rave reviews. According to *Booklist*, “Fielding crafts a suspenseful plot, with a stunner of a twist, while giving her characters a depth of humanity not frequently found in formula fiction. Exciting and unexpectedly touching reading from the talented Fielding.”

## FOR DISCUSSION

### Heartstopper

1. In the first journal entry, the killer writes: “I think it was Alfred Hitchcock who best summed up the difference between shock and suspense. Shock, he said, is quick, a jolt to the senses that lasts but a second, whereas suspense is more of a slow tease.” How does the narrative itself tease the reader? Did it shock you as well?
2. Did you guess the killer’s identity before the final reveal? If so, what clues did you draw upon? If not, how did you respond to the discovery? Which other characters were on your shortlist of possible suspects?
4. Is the killer insane in your view? What elements of the character’s background help to explain a propensity for murder? Why were only women singled out as victims?
5. How does the novel’s setting—“the middle of Alligator Alley...the middle of nowhere”—suit the story and enhance the aura of tension and unease?
6. “The girl filled the room like a stray cloud, her very presence threatening to ruin everyone’s fun.” Did you know someone like Delilah back in high school? Why do you think people like her get picked on?
7. Discuss the theme of bullying in the novel. There are several levels of bullying going on. What are they, and how do they interrelate?
8. “When had looking like a real woman ceased to be a viable option?” What does the novel have to say about the pressure placed on women to be attractive? How do Kerri, Delilah, Sandy, Megan and Amber each deal with this pressure?

## Missing Pieces

1. The *School Library Review* describes **Missing Pieces** as a “novelistic version of *Ten Stupidest Things That Women Do To Mess Up Their Lives*.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

2. Why is Jo Lynn hell-bent on marrying Colin Friendly? “Publicity, loneliness, a martyr complex” are reasons offered by the psychologists commenting on the case. What’s your theory?

3. Why is Kate drawn to Robert, a man she doesn’t particularly like?

4. As a parent—or as someone who was once a teenager—do you identify more with Sara or Michelle? Do you think Kate plays favourites? If so, do you blame her?

5. Does Colin Friendly share any traits in common with other Fielding villains, say, Ralph Fisher in **Mad River Road** or the killer in **Whisper and Lies** or **Heartstopper**?

6. The novel is written in the first person, past tense, except for the first chapter, which uses the present tense. Why, dramatically speaking, does the author use the present tense in the first chapter? Why does the first-person perspective suit the story as a whole? How would the novel be different if Fielding had used the third-person perspective instead?

7. Kate is a therapist who doesn’t always deal very well with the problems in her own family. How are her familial relations similar to or different from those in other Fielding novels, e.g., **Heartstopper** or **Mad River Road**?

## Mad River Road

1. **Mad River Road** begins with a prologue in which we meet the novel’s villain. What dramatic function does the prologue play? How would the story be different without it?

2. From Ralph Fisher's perspective, what makes Jamie ripe for the picking? As a reader, do you find Jamie sympathetic in spite of her irresponsible behaviour and poor judgment?

3. Jamie mistrusts her instincts; she stills that little voice in her ear that seeks to protect her from danger. Has this ever happened to you?

4. What's holding Lily back from becoming a writer?

5. How did your feelings for Emma change over the course of the novel? Why do you think she feels compelled to lie her way through life?

6. **Mad River Road** leaves Jamie's fate unresolved. What criminal offenses—if any—do you think she should be charged with?

## **AUTHOR Q & A**

1. The bio on your web site reads: "My main characters are all aspects of my own personality, although their stories are very different from my own. Still, I find that I approach the heroines as if I were a Method actress." Could you give us an example from one of your novels, say, **Missing Pieces**?

The best way to get readers to become emotionally invested in a character is to get them to identify with that character. To do that, you have to make the character as real and believable as possible. I don't think I'm all that different, on a basic level, from most women, so in order to make my characters more real, I try to think what I would do were I in their position, how I might react if this were happening to me, or somebody was talking to me in a particular way. As with "method" acting, it's not so much you becoming another character as it is making the character you. In **Missing Pieces**, for example, this was relatively easy because Kate was a character not that much different in age than I was at the time and she was going through a lot of the things I was dealing with, including teenage daughters and hot flashes. I was able to draw on many things from my own life, and that made it easier to extrapolate on how I might react to the more farfetched and frightening things happening in Kate's life, such as mothers with Alzheimer's and sisters falling in love with serial killers.

2. You once said “the whole act of creating characters is an act of love.” How does this apply to abusive, evil, or criminally insane characters? How do you relate to your villains and antagonists?

It's funny, I don't remember saying that, but I guess it's true. I love the whole act of creating, and villains are no different in this respect than heroes and heroines. In fact, sometimes they're more interesting, and usually they're a lot more fun. You don't actually have to love the character or what he/she is doing, but you have to be true to them. You have to understand them and where they're coming from, the things that made them the way they are. This usually has to do with their childhoods and the way they were raised, so you have to know everything about them. Generally speaking, people don't start out bad, although there are genuine sociopaths who lack the empathy gene. So, I always find my villains interesting and complicated individuals deserving of my respect, if not my love. And I can't wait to see what they'll do next.

3. Do your characters ever appear in your dreams? Have you ever been creeped out or haunted by any of them?

Thus far, my characters have never appeared in my dreams — what an interesting concept — and no one has jumped off the page to haunt me, although I do occasionally find them creepy.

4. You've said that you reach a point in the writing process where the characters tell *you* what they're going to say or do. Could you elaborate on this?

It's very hard to explain this to somebody who isn't a writer. It's like asking writers where they get their ideas. The simple truth is that's just the way our minds work. We see ideas for books everywhere. The hard part is figuring out what to do with those ideas. Similarly, once you start writing, the first half of the book is always trickiest, at least for me. That's where you're putting all your ducks in the water, and getting them all in a row. Once you've set things up, once you've started the ball rolling — pardon the mixed metaphors — it gets a little easier. If you've created real, believable characters, things just start falling into place. It's a lot like having children in this respect. You create these miraculous little people, you raise them with your values and ideas, and then at a certain point, they start thinking and doing for themselves. They stop listening to you. When you create a fictional character — particularly one of the more important characters — you have to know everything about them. You have to know their histories from the moment they were born, what kind of upbringing they had, what their parents, and even their grandparents, were like, what kind of schools they went to, the kind of friends they had. Even if not a word of this is in the book itself. If you don't, if the character is essentially born the age she is in the novel, she won't make sense. The character won't ring true. You see this all the time. Writers, like

everyone else, are very fond of shortcuts. But they don't work in the long run. And the more you know about your character, the more they know about themselves, and the more independent they become. So, yes, at a certain point in the novel, particularly in the last quarter, the character starts thinking, speaking, and doing for themselves. You are no longer in charge. You may have envisioned a chapter to go a certain way, with the heroine acting in a certain manner, but by the time you get there, it no longer works. Whether that's the character or your subconscious talking, it doesn't really matter, but when it does, it's a great relief.

5. Several of your novels—including **Missing Pieces**, **Whispers and Lies**, and **Heartstopper**—feature menopausal or perimenopausal women. What issues are you exploring with respect to how society treats women over forty?

I didn't set out to explore these issues, and to be truthful, I've never really experienced this feeling of "invisibility" that a lot of my post-forty heroines do. I've always felt pretty visible, although it is a bit of a shock when you realize that the young men you find attractive don't really notice you, or if they do, it's certainly not in any kind of sexual context. But as I've gotten older, and more interesting, I like to think, I naturally gravitated toward older characters. They give the books a different kind of energy and point of view, although I think it's important to represent all the generations. I do think that in general, once a woman passes a certain age and is no longer viewed as a sexual object by the masses, she does lose some of her power — unless she's rich. And as I've said in at least one of my books, if you aren't seen, you aren't heard. And that's the real danger. Nobody wants to lose their voice. It's what makes us human. It's what makes us individuals. I think women over forty have a tendency in our society to be passed over, to not be treated with the respect they deserve, to not be taken seriously. Our opinions are not sought or respected in the same ways as are men's.

6. **Whispers and Lies**, **Mad River Road**, **Missing Pieces**, and **Heartstopper** all explore difficult relationships between mothers and daughters. What draws you to this subject?

I've always been drawn to the mother-daughter relationship, which I consider the most complicated relationship there is. It's so "fraught." With everything. I had a wonderful relationship with my own mother. She was a fantastic, strong, kind, fabulous woman who was truly my best friend, and she died at 62, the age I am now. I was only 31 at the time and had just given birth four months earlier to my own daughter. I still think about my mother every day. She was the guiding force of my life, and for a long while, in my writing, I couldn't write an unsympathetic mother-figure. As I got older and my own two daughters grew up, I began to realize how difficult the role of mother really is, what a fine line we always have to walk. I had a deeper appreciation of the things I put my mother through, and I could see things from both perspectives. Also, I now had a wealth of material.

7. Are there any themes that recur in all — or most — of your works?

Two themes recur on a regular basis, although this wasn't something I deliberately set out to do. You only see themes surfacing through hindsight. Looking back on all my books, I can see they all contain the same two elements: a woman finding herself through adversity, and the whole mother-daughter theme discussed in the last question.

8. **Mad River Road** is written in the third person from multiple perspectives. **Heartstopper** alternates between a first-person journal written by an anonymous killer and multiple third-person perspectives. **Missing Pieces** and **Whispers and Lies** are both told by a single first-person narrator. Which of these narrative approaches did you find the most challenging? Does the story dictate your choice of point of view? Or do you decide on voice and perspective *before* you've fully worked out the story line?

These are complicated questions. You're really making me think. I find all narrative approaches equally challenging because they all accomplish different things. Each has its advantages and its limitations. Obviously a first-person narrative is more limited in scope and perspective, and yet it's the most personal and I find, the most freeing. It's really when the author and the character become one, and there's something quite exhilarating in that, although clearly, you never know more than your character. The third person allows greater freedom. You can introduce more things, jump around a lot more. I usually let the story dictate my point of view. Certain stories need different voices, i.e. **Mad River Road** and **Heartstopper**. They couldn't be told from a single perspective. Other stories, like **Whispers and Lies** have to be told in the first person or they don't work at all. As evidenced by the way I routinely change the way I tell my stories, I like to change things around a lot, mix things up. This keeps me from getting bored, and hopefully keeps my readers from getting bored as well.

9. Your books are true page-turners. Could you give us some examples of the literary techniques you use keep us up until the wee hours?

The techniques are relatively easy. You introduce an interesting character — if we believe in the character, we'll follow them anywhere — and put them in an interesting or perilous situation. Follow that character for a while along a certain path, and then that path should take an unexpected turn. Along the way, introduce other interesting characters and situations. Then leave one character at a particularly interesting moment and pick up on one of the other characters. So you're constantly threading, weaving different elements of the story together. Drop one thread, pick another up, etc. etc. Also, in suspense, you always have to keep building. You have to constantly be upping the ante, escalating the tension.

You have to keep moving your story along. Don't get too complicated. Keep it simple. And as I believe Jim Hensen once said, "If you're telling the story of Goldilocks and the three bears, bring on the three bears!"

10. In the preface to **Mad River Road** you explain how you chose your title. What about **Whispers and Lies**, **Missing Pieces**, and **Heartstopper**? How did you select those titles?

Titles are often the most difficult part of the book. The title has to set the tone, say something about the content, and make people want to see what's inside. It should be succinct, informative, and inviting. A real tease. Sometimes you see or hear something that you know would make a great title for a book and you hope one day you'll get an idea where you can use it, as was the case with **Mad River Road**. Sometimes, you write an entire book not knowing what it will be called, as was the case with **Whispers and Lies**. And sometimes the title appears to you as you're writing, as was the case with **See Jane Run**. **Whispers and Lies** just seemed to sum up what the book was about, how lies and half-truths can take on a life of their own, and the effect those whispers and lies can have on people's lives. To be honest, I can't remember how I chose the title for **Missing Pieces**. As for **Heartstopper**, my older daughter, Shannon, was visiting us in Florida a few years ago and we took a Yoga class together. At the end of the class, one of the older men present came up to me and said, "Wow. Your daughter is a real heartstopper!" I thought, what a great title for a book. As I said earlier, it's just the way my mind works.

11. At the end of **Heartstopper**, the killer writes: "What's that old song? *I've got a lot of living to do?* Stayed tuned." If a movie ended with those lines, the audience would fully expect a sequel to be in the works. Do you think you might pick up where you left off one day? Would you consider writing a sequel to any of your other novels?

I've often been asked to write a sequel to some of my books. So far I've avoided the temptation, although I'm not ruling out anything. I may one day want to go back and follow up on the lives of some of the characters I've created. But at the moment, I prefer to let sleeping dogs lie, as it were. Where the books have ended happily, I prefer to believe things stayed that way, and I don't want to go back and start causing more trouble. Where things have been left hanging, well, maybe one day.... Generally speaking, I enjoy creating a whole new situation with an entirely new cast of characters, just as I enjoy changing the locales. Occasionally a character from one book appears in another, if I can accomplish this seamlessly and subtly. I'm not sure that all my readers have even noticed. I don't do it often, just when I think it will work.

12. Your readers know that you like to mix things up. Could you give us a hint about how your next book might be different from your previous work?

My next novel is entitled **Charley's Web**. It's told from a single perspective, and it's about a young woman with the unlikely name of Charlotte (Charley) Webb, who writes a weekly column for the *Palm Beach Post*, and who one day receives a letter from a convicted child-killer in prison, asking Charley to write her life story. It's part thriller, part family drama, part journey of self-discovery. It's very different from **Heartstopper**, although yes, there's a mother.