

THE SHOT

'Riveting, intense'

SALLY HEPWORTH

'You won't be able to
put this book down'

HAYLEY SCRIVENOR

NAIMA
BROWN

READING GROUP NOTES

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BLURB

How much would you sacrifice for another shot at the perfect life?

Producer Mara Bolt is the queen of reality TV. Ambitious to the point of ruthlessness, Mara will do anything for ratings. When she meets Kristy Shaw, Mara is certain she's found the star of her newest series, *The Shot*.

Kristy is languishing in her small hometown and a dead-end job, pining for her first love, Max Irving. *The Shot* offers her a Total Body Transformation – extreme plastic surgery to render her unrecognisable – as a way to recapture Max's affections under a new identity. But there's a catch: if she doesn't secure his heart in thirty days, she must have her surgeries reversed, and go back to her previous life.

As cameras start rolling, Mara and Kristy both feel there is something happening behind the scenes – something that threatens to reveal old wounds and create new secrets. If they are going to keep the show on track, they must repress the truths and desires that lie just beneath the surface.

***The Shot* is a rollercoaster read about our obsession with beauty, the trappings of success, and the desperate, outrageous lengths we will go to for love and ambition, and asks the question: where is the line between entertainment and exploitation?**

ABOUT NAIMA BROWN

Naima Brown holds degrees in Middle Eastern Studies, Anthropology and Religious Studies. Her short fiction has appeared in *Popshot Magazine* and the *Love on the Road* anthology. Her non-fiction has appeared in *Vogue Australia*, the *Guardian Australia*, and more. She has spent over a decade working in news, current affairs and documentary – save for her brief stint in reality TV, which inspired this novel. She was born and raised in Northern California before living and working in Yemen and Afghanistan, and now lives in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales with her husband and her dog. *The Shot* is her first novel.

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A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO THE SHOT

**** PLEASE NOTE, THIS INTRODUCTION CONTAINS SPOILERS ****

Kristy Shaw is a twenty-one-year-old from the small coastal town of Puerto Seguro, Florida. She works in a department store, and even though it's been three years, she still pines for the one that got away – her high school boyfriend Max, a kid from the 'right' side of the tracks, who has moved to New York City in pursuit of college and a career.

Kristy Shaw is from the 'wrong' side of the tracks. While she excelled at track and field at high school, nobody ever picked up on her dyslexia and her academic record is mediocre at best. Kristy feels her life isn't going anywhere – but she loves astronomy, and believes that if things had been different, she could have made something of herself.

Mara Bolt is also from Puerto Seguro, but she left the town behind years ago to begin a career that has seen her reach the glittering heights of reality TV production. She is about to launch a new show that pushes the idea of reality TV to its limits. In *The Shot*, one lucky jilted woman will be given the chance to win back her ex after undergoing a complete body transformation that will render her perfect in every physical way, but unrecognisable to those who know her. If she succeeds, she can keep the makeover and the new identity The Shot provides. If she loses, it must all be given back and the surgeries reversed.

On a trip to visit her mother in Puerto Seguro, Mara and Kristy's paths cross, and Mara sees her perfect subject in Kristy. After dazzling Kristy with the show's offer of a new life and a chance to get Max back, Mara persuades Kristy to take part and they travel to New York City to begin Kristy's transformation.

In due course, Kristy undergoes the surgery that will give her 'the body she deserves' and she is reborn as Imogen Byrne, a beautiful orphan from upstate New York. Imogen is so many things Kristy is not, and her world looks entirely different. With Mara's guidance, Imogen begins to lock Kristy away so she won't interfere with Imogen's newfound opportunities and the relationship she's forging, anew, with Max.

While the cameras roll, Imogen begins to win Max over, but all the while – hidden within her – Kristy is becoming uneasy. As the grand finale approaches – and with it the moment Imogen must tell Max who she really is – Kristy and Imogen have an epiphany: Max and Kristy were just not meant to be, and Imogen doesn't really want Max after all. What she wants is the new life that Imogen's opportunities have made possible for her.

Stuck between an ironclad contract and a painful confession, Imogen runs – back home to her old life, in her new body. There unfolds a chase and a showdown, in which Kristy is shot when Mara’s mother mistakes her for a trespasser. Kristy survives, and is able to avoid having the cosmetic surgeries reversed after a court battle. She writes a book about her experiences and applies to go to college.

With her show ruined, Mara turns the tables by making it into an award-winning documentary and feigning that this was her intent all along. She goes on to produce ever crueller and more divisive reality TV.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the image on the cover illicit for you? What does it tell us about the story?
2. The epigraph that opens this book reads: ‘*Now, there’s an idea. There’s a part of me, the producer side, that knows it would be epic television, good or bad. It could be like the Hindenburg – the greatest disaster ever – but even then that would be great TV.*’ —American host of *The Bachelor* when asked if he’d consider casting his ex-wife of twenty years as the “Bachelorette”.’ How does this quote relate to *The Shot*?
3. In the prologue, Kristy recalls a time in her childhood where she pretended to be a cat for far too long, losing herself in the identity of Fluffball. What are we meant to understand about Kristy’s sense of self, and of the nature of identity in general?
4. It is clear early on that Kristy and Max, despite both coming from relatively happy, secure families, have very different backgrounds and upbringings. What is the effect of this on the people they become, and the opportunities they have in life?
5. On page 60, after their traumatic experience at the beach, Denise says, “Jesus, Kristy! Shut the fuck up! We weren’t raped! We partied too hard, okay? That’s it! We’ll laugh about it later.” . . . *No, no.* This cannot be a part of her story, [Kristy] resolves. Not this, on top of everything else.’ What does Kristy mean by this? Were Kristy and Denise particularly vulnerable to what happened, do you think? Does their decision not to take it any further make sense to you?
6. At the outset of the project, Mara tells her crew, ‘Ultimately, *The Shot* is about transformation and redemption.’ (page 69) It could be argued this is entirely true, but not in the way Mara means it here. Discuss.
7. Mara Bolt variously describes herself as a shark and a dragon (as well as a dragon slayer), but do you agree? Why does Mara’s long-kept secret undo her in the particular circumstances of *The Shot*?
8. Most of *The Shot* is written in the third person/present tense. What is the effect of this? Do you like this style? What, if any, similarities might this style have to reality TV itself?
9. In what ways are Kristy and Imogen different? In what ways are they similar?

10. The idea of mothering, and what makes a good mother, comes up many times in the book. Kristy and Mara are both only children, and from very different backgrounds, as are their mothers. How has the way they have been mothered affected them? What are some examples from the text?
11. ‘If you let down your guard, precious things can be taken from you. This is the organizing principle of Mara’s life. . .’ (page 191) What are some examples of this in Mara’s life? Is Mara right, do you think? Discuss.
12. When ‘assessing’ Kristy’s body before the Total Body Transformation, Dr. Michaels says, ‘Her hips and butt need a lot of lipo. Because they do not reflect how smart she is, or how inherently classy.’ (page 204) What is Dr. Michaels implying? How does this reflect deeply held and entrenched ideas in Western society?
13. “. . . We have a duty of care.” Not something Mara personally cares about, but stay-at-home mothers constitute the bulk of her audience, and they prefer their cruelty pastel pink and sugar-coated.’ (page 73) What might this statement from Mara suggest about reality TV and its audience? Discuss.
14. The mental cells and padlocks imagery comes up several times in the book. How does this technique help Kristy–Imogen, and how does it harm her?
15. ‘This elephant in the room . . . the winner-take-all, loser-lose-all game Imogen has agreed to play isn’t something they have talked about openly since the TBT. It is the very air they breathe, it is the glue that binds them, but it doesn’t need to be pointed out. Mara has a fleeting awareness, a half-formed thought, that perhaps the taboo nature of the topic points to its inherent wrongness . . . but she quashes it before it can sink in and instead attends to the wavering creation in front of her: her teary, beautiful golem.’ (page 265) Mara senses the wrongness of what she is doing to Kristy. What is it about Mara and her past experiences that allows her to condone her behaviour and live with this, do you think?
16. Kristy comes to the realisation that ‘she wants Imogen’s face and body, her confidence and nerve, and she wants Kristy’s history and family, her self-containment and curiosity.’ (page 378) What do you think of the fact that she wants to keep Imogen’s outward appearance? Do you think appearance matters? And if yes, should it?

17. What can we read into Mara's habit of always finding excuses to avoid her therapy appointments?
18. Mara says, 'At every turn, [Kristy] had choices. And she made them.' (page 408) Did Kristy really have choices? Discuss.
19. How do the very different settings of Puerto Seguro and New York City help define the differences between the characters Kristy and Imogen?
20. The author tells us that 'Puerto Seguro' translates to 'Safe Harbor' – which, at times, is ironic for Kristy and Mara, and at other times, deeply true. In what ways is this expressed for each character?
21. In the epilogue, Kristy tells us: 'It seems that there's no end to the ways in which we are entertained by suffering.' (page 418) Do you think this is true? If so, what are some examples of this?
22. In the epilogue, Kristy and Imogen decide to merge into one identity, Eve. How do you imagine this will work out for Eve? What kind of life do you think Eve might have?
23. The author has said she hoped readers would, at times, feel like they were part of the audience for the reality show, *The Shot*, as much as they were readers of the book, *The Shot*. What role do we have as readers, as audience members, when it comes to content? In the era of true crime and reality TV – what role do audiences have when it comes to the line between entertainment and exploitation?

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