



## The Exclusives

*Rebecca Thornton*

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## **The Exclusives** Rebecca Thornton

In 1996, Josephine Grey and Freya Seymour are best friends and on the brink of great success. Both are students at the elite private school Greenwood Hall and Josephine, the daughter of the advisor to the Prime Minister, is heading for everything she has ever worked for: Head Girl, Oxford, the demons of her mother finally abated once and for all.

But in 2014, Josephine is hiding in Jordan — and has been for eighteen years since those catastrophic events in her last year at school. And then one day she is found. Freya, whom she has not seen since those fateful four months, insists on meeting to revisit their difficult past once and for all and finally lay to rest the events that have haunted their adult lives ever since. But Josephine can't bear to — it only took one night for their whole lives, friendship, and even selves to unravel beyond comprehension. They have done truly terrible things to one another in the name of survival. She most of all.

All she has ever wanted was to forget, but Freya is no longer willing to let her and now at last, Josephine is to meet her reckoning . . .

*The Exclusives* is a gripping and emotional thriller that explores the power the past can have on our present and confronts how far we are willing to go when everything we prize is threatened.

## **The Exclusives Details**

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Author : Rebecca Thornton

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## From Reader Review The Exclusives for online ebook

### Cathy Ryan says

3.5\*

The story opens in 2014 with Josephine who is an archaeologist working in Jordan. When she gets an unexpected email from Freya Seymour insisting on a meeting she's thrown into a panic. It's obvious from then on that something dreadful happened between them. Josephine and Freya were best friends throughout their school days at Greenwood Hall. Josephine was head girl, Freya a prefect and they both had their sights set on Oxford. That is, until a celebratory night out turned ugly, the consequences of which changed both their lives irrevocably. The events of that night are unclear and remain so for much of the narrative.

The chapters alternate between 2014 and 1996, both time periods told from Josephine's point of view and in the present tense, which was a little confusing at times if I didn't take note of the chapter heading.

Personally, I would have preferred the schooldays storyline coming from a third person omniscient narrator, giving more understanding of, and depth to, the characters and so enabling me to experience the story through other eyes, rather than solely from Josephine's perspective.

Josephine in 1996 is single-minded and focused, determined that nothing is going to get in the way of her goals, including listening to and helping her best friend who is obviously suffering. The fear of ending up like her mother affects Josephine's attitude and personality immensely, as does the fact her father works closely with the Prime Minister, making her dread any hint of scandal.

Eighteen years later Josephine is tormented by memories and mood swings, after years of trying to bury the actions and disloyalty of the past. It's brought to the fore again by Freya's need to say the things Josephine refused to hear all those years ago. The plot is slow and steady with the alternating timeline. Both girls are damaged, and not only from the repercussions of that fateful night in Josephine's case.

It's a fascinating insight into an all girls environment, with the dynamics and interactions. I like the fact this story shows the darker side of boarding school life and the lengths pupils will go to achieve their aims. It's interesting as well, to see how different people react to certain situations and how it impacts on them. And although I couldn't warm, or relate, to the characters, I did feel some sympathy for Freya and her feelings of betrayal. The trauma suffered by the two girls was easy to guess, as was Freya's part in it, but the storyline shows how the past can shape the present and hold sway.

This review is based on a free copy from the author/publisher. This does not affect my opinion or the content of my review.

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### Blair says

Very simple but quite gripping suspense novel - felt like it needed an edit, and I didn't think it was worth taking the time to read the whole thing, but I was interested enough to skim-read it until I found out What Happened That Night All Those Years Ago. The payoff wasn't worth it, tbh. Had the (actually quite nice and comforting) feel of a kids' book, though it isn't one.

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## **mikhaela says**

(3.5) i enjoyed this but the messy narrative certainly diminished the experience. still, a solid debut and i thought the cover was absolutely gorgeous.

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## **Bill Kupersmith says**

Were the narrative better organised & delivered, *The Exclusives* would be a cynosure of stars. I am going to write a long review comparing Greenwood Hall with the American Marin High School in *The Most Dangerous Place on Earth*, which of course will discuss the ending & be intended for readers who have finished *The Exclusives*. Briefly, both schools are intellectual, moral & spiritual deserts where both the staff & students are utterly obsessed with materialistic values. Even after more than a half century I can still recall my total fixation on admission to the right uni (Harvard rejected me BTW). For Josephine Grey & her BFs, it's Oxford. (The practice interviews are called 'mocks' - strangely appropriate given the absurdly silly questions, such as "What do you know about Eisenhower?" & "What do you think about Mad Cow Disease?" - my current answers would be "Wasn't he the bugger who fucked us up over Suez?" & "As a respecter of animal rights, I should think the cows are entitled to their at bat" but then I'm a bit past having to seek university entrance. But as a story of estrangement between BFs, *The Exclusives* is utterly heart-wrenching. If you've ever wanted to be reconciled with an old friend - who's not buying - you'll find you want to strangle Josephine for her treatment of Freya. As Josephine is the narrator, you will also want to strangle her (& the author) for her inept determination to conceal the cause of their estrangement in both the contemporary & back stories. (When we finally get there, we discover that it's not something that would keep real friends on the outs for a fortnight, much less 16 years.) As this book deserves to be treated as a work of grown-up literature, where intelligent criticism requires a discussion of the ending, I'll be posting a full-scale effort on my blog as soon as I can, with suggestions for how it could be much better artistically. But as a school story of estrangement & betrayal, *The Exclusives* is @ the very top level, alongside Simon Raven's *Fielding Grey* (interesting that both main characters share the same surname - coincidence?) & Megan Abbott's *Dare Me*.

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## **G.J. Minett says**

1996:

Josephine and Freya are friends at a top of the range boarding school for girls. Theirs is the tightest of relationships, apparently unassailable from outside – literally exclusive. To some extent theirs is an alliance built on contrasts. Freya is blessed with a bubbly, sunny disposition and looks which turn heads wherever she goes while Josephine is more earnest, less trusting. Freya hopes to get into Oxford but also enjoys letting her hair down now and then while Josephine's future is more or less assured, so driven is she in her quest for academic success and the status that comes with it. Both have been raised by their fathers but in very different circumstances. Freya has lost hers at an early age but is less obviously afflicted by a sense of loss than Josephine, whose mother is still alive but almost inaccessible because of her mental illness. Despite these differences however, the relationship is so strong that each is welcomed into the other's home and regarded as another member of the family. Nothing can come between them, it seems ...

2014:

Josephine is working in Jordan on an archaeological site, showing far more interest in raking over the relics of other lives than she does in coming to terms with her own (an inspired metaphor, this). She is trying desperately to avoid Freya who is equally determined to make contact and talk about an incident in their final

year at school which has driven a wedge between them and kept them apart for the past 18 years.

It's always a delicate balancing act when an author opts for an omniscient narrator who is holding back a crucial piece of information. Give it up too early and the tension is released. Hold onto it for too long and there's a danger that the reader will lose patience and feel the author has gone to the well once too often. But in this case the author has chosen the perfect narrator in Josephine. An outsider, one of the other girls at the school for instance, wouldn't have been in a position to know all the facts. Freya herself would never be able to keep the secret, so deeply involved was she. But Josephine is withdrawn, secretive and has a vested interest in saying as little as possible because she is having difficulties in accepting her share of the responsibility. In addition, it soon emerges that she is not the most reliable of narrators. Even her own account of events occasionally leaves us wondering whether her fears that she could end up as mentally unstable as her mother might not be far from the truth. The mood swings, the tears of frustration, the sudden bursts of irritation over remarks the reader might perceive as relatively harmless – they all hint at an emerging adult desperately in need of support and cut off from it by her mother's absence, her father's work and this mystery which has cost her the one person she's ever allowed to get close to her.

Rebecca Thornton has managed to pull all of these strands together with remarkable skill for a debut author and produced a novel that satisfies on so many levels. It will be fascinating to see what she comes up with next.

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## **Emma says**

There's just something about boarding schools that capture my imagination. Not sure why, because I'm pretty sure I would have floundered in the kind of pressured, oppressive, close knit community Thornton relates in these pages. Yet it is precisely this atmosphere that makes the plotline work so well in this book. The two main characters, Josephine and Freya, are essentially trapped together. At first, as friends, this creates the tightest of relationships. Afterwards, it is one of the motivating factors in the degeneration of their friendship and personal morality.

But this is no schoolyard fall out. What the book is really about is the opposing ways people cope with trauma and tragedy. How such things can ruin lives in the biggest or most subtle ways. Thornton's brilliance is in the way she portrays these fissures in the very nature of the two girls without needing to reveal all the details until the end. The tension was so high in parts that it made me feel uncomfortable. If she hadn't hooked me so hard with Jo, especially, I might have put the book down. In both Freya and Jo, there are thoughts and actions which are understandable; if Thornton had depicted one way as right or wrong, it would never have been such a good story. Instead, she presents the two characters without judgement, save the nature of the consequences that come from their actions. Whatever else comes from the reader.

As a first novel, this is one hell of an accomplishment. Not only for plot, but in the layered characterisation. Impressive.

Many thanks to Rebecca Thornton, Bonnier Publishing, and Netgalley for this copy in exchange for an honest review.

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## **Tracey Allen at Carpe Librum says**

*The Exclusives* by Rebecca Thornton is a dual narrative novel set in an elite all-girl boarding school with the main character Josephine Grey reflecting on the events from her perspective as an archaeologist, 18 years later.

Josephine and her best friend Freya have an irreparable falling out in 1994 and the novel leads the reader through the unravelling of the friendship towards the ultimate 'reveal'.

The dialogue between the teenage girls and the '90s setting are convincingly written. Both characters are extremely relatable, although it's hard not to judge Josephine and the choices she makes, but I think that's the point.

There's definitely a 'mean girls' element to *The Exclusives* and readers of YA, NA and those who enjoy dissecting friendships and their demise will enjoy it.

\* Copy courtesy of Allen & Unwin \*

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## **Corrie Jackson says**

Rebecca Thornton's brilliantly-drawn debut throws a spotlight on female friendship - and all the complexities it embodies. The story follows Josephine and Freya, who were best friends at boarding school until a sinister secret ended their friendship. The story dips between past and present day, providing a deep insight into two girls who will do whatever it takes to navigate the choppy waters of an elite boarding school. The messy, bitchy, desperate, cliquy lives of teenage girls is particularly well-executed and I found myself empathising with all the characters, even those I didn't particularly like. Thornton's rich writing style is very visual, and she teases the reader just enough before dropping the final bombshell. I raced through the book with a growing sense of dread - and, boy, the ending doesn't disappoint. A fantastic debut. I can't wait to see what Thornton does next.

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## **Ayisha Malik says**

What I loved most about this book was the emotional depth of the two friends, which was both unique and universal in its portrayal. The writing is so tightly controlled, providing a wonderful thematic parallel with the main character; how she grapples with her life's events as they unfold and she finally allows herself to reconcile between what she felt she should have and the life she actually ends up having. A beautifully conveyed ending that might well leave a tear in your eye. It certainly did mine.

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## **Celise says**

This book won't be for everyone, and neither will the characters.

The story is told over two different timelines; one in 1996 where Josephine and Freya experienced something horrible "that night", and one in 2014 as Josephine is haunted by her past. The author doesn't actually reveal

what happened to the girls to destroy their friendship until the last 10% of the book which for me killed the suspense a little. You can't exactly predict what happened to them, but what did happen is probably one of many things a reader will consider for a moment or two before moving on.

The characters are pretty ugly towards each other and it's easy to lose empathy for them. There's nothing worse than a main character who treats her friends like dirt and justifies it. That said, Josephine's mother is a paranoid schizophrenic and Josephine herself spends a lot of time wondering if she is like her. This makes for a perspective that I've never actually read before. A lot of Young Adult (this is not YA btw) novels have characters simply go "crazy" or start experiencing hallucinations but this book tackles a real mental illness and I thought that was quite well done.

That said, the main character is a little one-note. She doesn't want to talk about "that night" with the friend, Freya, who she went through it with, in fear of becoming crazy or jeopardizing her academic future. In 1996 she denies it. In 2014 she denies it. Her voice and perspective don't change over 18 years and I think this might bother some readers, like it did me. Josephine never develops, she just comes to realizations and makes big leaps in thought that have little logical support behind them.

The boarding school thing is what attracted me to this book, like many others I'm sure. Throw in a dark plot and you've got me. I absolutely hated the school though. The headmistress put her school's reputation above the students and that annoyed the crap out of me because I know it probably happens in the real world. I usually also like (view spoiler) but I just didn't care. I kind of have a thing for people successfully sabotaging other people so I enjoyed the boarding school drama at least. This was also a British boarding school so a lot of the terminology like "exeat" was lost on me but hey.

So not for everyone, but a quickish read that was still enjoyable, and a solid debut for Rebecca Thornton.

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## **Cleo Bannister says**

I don't know about you but ever since reading Enid Blyton's stories of boarding school I've been a teeny weeny bit jealous of anyone who got to go to one, so when Midas PR asked me if I wanted a copy of The Exclusives to read, whose very setting is an exclusive girl's boarding school, I couldn't resist. Better still, the summary indicates that are secrets in the past that are impacting on the present for at least one of the pupils.

I was quickly absorbed, we first meet Josephine Grey in 2014, daughter of the Prime Minister's advisor when she receives an email from Freya Seymor, her former best friend at Wendell's. Back in 1996 the two girls were studying their A levels, hoping to go to Oxford but it is clear from Josephine's reaction to Freya's email that something went badly wrong.

This is an engaging story although sadly devoid of midnight feasts and jolly japes the atmosphere is far more competitive and with rivalries bubbling beneath the surface the japes are anything but and the consequences far-reaching. The whole story is told from Josephine's point of view, a girl who has a mentally ill mother and a father who is being busy and important. Freya is really her only friend and so when the friendship suddenly breaks down she has scant support to help her through.

In the present Josephine is an archaeologist but she doesn't want to go digging around in her own past and she doesn't want Freya raking it all up either. As her personal life, such as it is, begins to fall apart, Freya's dogged determination to meet up with Josephine to discuss the past causes panic. It is obvious from the beginning that she feels guilty about something but what could possibly have such a long-lasting reaction?

The storytelling is engaging and I had some sympathy for both girls, although there did come a point when I wondered how much longer the author could expect me to wait for the secret to be revealed as my patience reached its limits. It is always nice to read a book where the characters appear to be authentic, funnily enough I was more convinced by the pupil's behaviour than some, but by no means all, of the adults. As much as I hate to admit it, lots of girls together can be a force to be reckoned with and I could easily imagine that in the enclosed environment of boarding school the element of claiming the prize whatever the cost can soon spiral out of control. Interestingly it appeared that the Head teacher shared this personality trait with her pupils, but for her it was to ensure Wendell's kept the top slot in the Times list!

I enjoyed this story about friendship, how bonds are made, how they can be broken and what happens afterwards,

enormously. I'm full of admiration for the publisher's twenty7 choice of debut novels, the two I have read feel fresh and innovative, I can't recommend this book if you like xxx as t haven't read a book quite like this one. The setting combined with the secrets, yes there is more than one, cause a powder-keg of tension and I could only wonder what the result would be when the whole thing went up – I wasn't disappointed.

The Exclusives is published today in eBook format, the paperback will follow in April 2016.

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### **Suze Lavender says**

Josephine wants to forget about her past and when Freya, her former best friend, contacts her and wants to meet she panics. In 1996 they were both promising students at a boarding school. They were excellent students with a lot of potential and Oxford was where they wanted to go next. One night changed everything. Suddenly Freya and Josephine were no longer best friends and things went very wrong between them with devastating consequences. The past still influences the present and will never go away again...

The Exclusives is a gripping story about two girls who seem to have it all. Things aren't always as they seem though. Josephine and Freya are both young and they make mistakes. I read some of the scenes with tears in my eyes. There are plenty of secrets and misunderstandings and there's a snowball effect that can't be stopped. This story kept me on the edge of my seat and I read it in one sitting. I couldn't wait to find out what would happen next. The ending is amazing, fitting and surprising at the same time. Of course I had my suspicions, but there were some very interesting twists and turns.

Rebecca Thornton is great at creating tension. Part of the story is set in 2014 and part in 1996. I couldn't read through the chapters fast enough to find out how each part of the story would continue. This has been done this in such a brilliant way that I even forgot to breathe from time to time. I loved Josephine's voice. She has her flaws, but I also liked her a lot. She's a main character that will stay with me for a very long time. I love Rebecca Thornton's vivid writing style. She has a great way of describing settings and situations which made me feel the huge variety of emotions in the story very well. It was easy to sympathize with the main characters and the situation. I absolutely loved this fantastic book and highly recommend it.

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### **daisychainbooks says**

Best friends Josephine and Freya rule the roost at their exclusive boarding school where excelling academically means everything. They are the girls with whom everybody wants to be friends, but they keep their distance, a clique of two that can't be penetrated by outside forces. Jo and Freya share everything – until one night- after which things are never the same between them again. Eighteen years on, after years of

no contact, Freya gets in touch. She wants to talk to Josephine. Josephine, however, is determined to avoid her old friend by whatever means possible. The last thing she wants to do is revisit the past – no matter how insistent Freya might be on her doing just that.

The Exclusives is an absorbing debut from Rebecca Thornton with a slowly unfolding mystery that will keep you guessing throughout. Thornton explores the theme of mental illness via Josephine and her mother, and to that effect I was hoping for a bigger twist than this tale turns out to be. However, the story of Jo and Freya and how their lives spiral out of control after one fateful night is as dark as it is compelling, and I remained invested in the story throughout.

If you love books about boarding schools and toxic friendships, then check out The Exclusives – it may just be the book you've been waiting for.

<http://daisychainbookreviews.blogspot...>

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Initial thoughts:

There was less going on with this story than I originally thought, but it's an absorbing read nonetheless. Read it if you like books about boarding schools and toxic friendships!

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## **Liz Barnsley says**

I have a bit of a thing for stories set in schools that hold a hint of mystery and a past/present vibe so when I read the blurb for "The Exclusives" the terrific cover having caught my eye I thought AHA. Looks like one for me.

And it was – I loved this – for many reasons, not least of which is the brilliant characterisation, with the girls being portrayed evoking many emotional responses, from deep sympathy to intense dislike. Sign of a good read, that.

Freya is trying to contact Jo – way back when they were the closest of friends – until they were ripped apart by actions and consequences. What those actions were remains obscure for much of the novel, but it is clear that something went very wrong between these two girls which has reverberated down the years.

Rebecca Thornton constructs her plot carefully and compellingly – starting with a night out gone wrong and following on from there, we see snapshots of events unfolding back at their exclusive school and now see Jo in the present willing to go to extreme lengths to avoid coming face to face with Freya again. Atmospherically speaking it is haunting and often very sad, themes of parental and peer pressure run through the narrative, not only that but the pressure we often put on ourselves at a vulnerable age.

The writing style is terrifically engaging and as I mentioned earlier, the author has a great eye for building a character you can love or hate – I went from one extreme to another on both our main protagonists Freya and Jo, also frankly on the external cast, all of whom are perfectly drawn.

It is not actually difficult to work out what happened initially on that first night when the cracks in their friendship started, probably on purpose so you could feel the full horror of what happened next. It is thought provoking, intense at times as you watch how each girl reacts both to the situation and to each other. In the

present day it is obvious that Jo is damaged, but one of the things I loved most about this one is the subtle shades of grey that Ms Thornton weaves into the overall storyline, a real feeling for human nature and the things we will do to keep that which we feel we need.

An impressive debut for sure and one that certainly comes highly recommended from me, especially if you like this type of past/present focus and have a thing for enduring characters. This one will stay with you.

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### **Irene says**

Two timescales, 1996 and up to date. Beginning at an expensive boarding school with best friends Freya and Josephine, until something happens one evening. Freya wanted to discuss it but Josephine didn't - end of friendship. The trouble is that sometimes the longer you have to wait for the reveal, the less of an impact it is, which is what happens with this story. It was all a bit tiresome and I thought that some of the events at school were implausible. Neither of the girls were particularly likeable. I liked the cover and the blurb was interesting as was the insight into an all girl boarding school - the petty jealousies and minutiae of life in a closed off environment. I liked the idea for this book and know that lots of people will love it. I was given this ARC by the publisher and Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

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