

# The oh comely book club

words terri-jane dow  
photos terri-jane dow, freya at thoughtfully cafe and amber carnegie

For our latest book club, we discussed Nina Allan's new novel, *The Dollmaker*, at meet-ups in London, Liverpool, and Sheffield. *The Dollmaker* follows Andrew on his quest to rescue his institutionalised penpal, Bramber. Between his journey and Bramber's letters are the fairy tales of a dollmaker, which uncannily mirror Andrew's own life... →

## "INFORMATION WANTED ON THE LIFE AND WORK OF DOLLMAKER EWA CHAPLIN AND/OR FRIENDSHIP, CORRESPONDENCE. PLEASE REPLY TO: BRAMBER WINTERS."

Andrew Garvie sees the advert and decides that he will reply to Bramber – after all, not many people are familiar with Ewa Chaplin's work, as her dolls are rare and not well-liked. As he and Bramber forge a friendship through their letters, he finds out that she lives in an institution on Bodmin Moor, and she shares the events that have led her there. Andrew decides that he will rescue her, and takes off, reading Ewa Chaplin's collection of fairy tales as he goes along. The stories begin to reflect events in Andrew's own life, and weave themselves around his and Bramber's story. *The Dollmaker* is a love story, a Gothic fairy tale, and a tale about difference, all at once.

### What we thought

Our book club meetings discussed the delicate balance of the real and the fantastical as well as the obsession of detail in the characters, their passions and, of course, Nina's writing.

*I would read a collection of the Ewa Chaplin stories on their own.*

I found myself googling all of the doll references, artists and famous dolls – it felt so real!

I felt sad for Andrew and how isolated he was. The ending of the book was perfect.

*I was so surprised at how Andrew acted in the museum; he was suddenly much bolder than I thought he was.*

I loved that Andrew used a real, paper map for his trip – it felt so old-fashioned.

*It was hard to work out in which time period the novel was set. It felt like it was set in the past, until Andrew pulls out a mobile phone. I guess it's quite timeless.*

The characters in the book stayed with me long after I had finished reading it.





## Meet the author

Terri-Jane Dow talks to **Nina Allan**

Nina held a breakfast celebration at the Museum of Childhood in London when her book was announced. For this chat, Nina spoke to me from her home in Scotland. We talked about the perks and pitfalls of working from home as well as the world of *The Dollmaker*.

**T: *The Dollmaker* is quite experimental...**

**N:** I love experimenting with the form, because now that we have so many ways of accessing stories – via film, games or TV – there are so many ways that have influenced the form a novel can take, but also it stresses the interest in creating something that only a novel can do. I like to read stories that don't just go from A to Z, and aren't just in one world. I like to question the reality of what's going on, and that reveals different aspects of both the characters and of what the book is doing. *The Dollmaker* began in a very straightforward manner, with the character of Andrew. He came into my head almost fully formed. The first pages of the novel, and Andrew's parts in general, are the least altered from when I first conceived of the book, almost 10 years ago. I had a rough draft of *The Dollmaker* before I had even started my other novels, and Andrew was the centre of it.

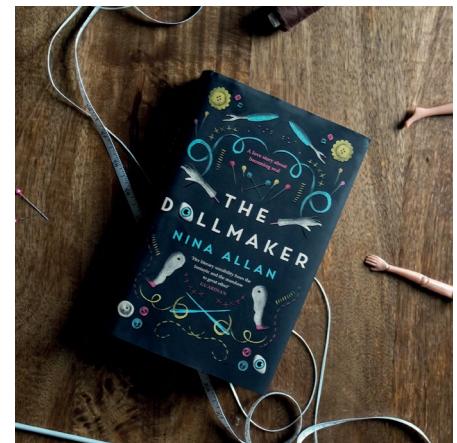
**T: You've carried him around a long time!**

**N:** I have! There was a gap of probably five years when I didn't look at the manuscript, but I never doubted that I would return to it, because Andrew was so important to me. I loved his voice and his story and knew it

had to be told. It also carries within it a lot of my memories of the West Country. I lived in Exeter for nearly 18 years, and I know the area really well. It was almost a kind of bizarrely warped personal record, so it was definitely a story I wanted to finish. The Ewa Chaplin stories had been there from the start, but only as fragments. When I understood that they were major components of the text, and I could make them almost a mirror image of what Andrew was doing, I realised how much fun that could be. That was when the book finally started racing together. Writing the Ewa Chaplin stories was fun, and it's not often as a writer that I feel I can say that, because it's such an intense process. The Aunt Lola story was just great fun. I couldn't stop talking about it saying, "Oh, I'm going to kill her! I'm so excited!"

**T: Was Bramber there from the start too?**

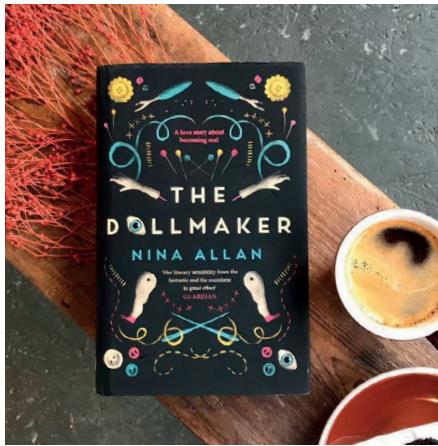
**N:** Bramber's story took longer. She was very clear to me as a character, but it was a long time before she let me know why she was in West Edge House, and what had happened. It's an odd process, because it sounds artificial to make it sound like the characters have a life of their own, because of course they're constructed, but although I know broadly what the story is, I don't always know the details of what's going to happen. That was definitely the case with *The Dollmaker*. It was only the last couple of drafts that I really had a clear idea of why Bramber was in West Edge House, and it was only the final draft that I decided



whether Bramber and Andrew would have their happy ending, or something approaching it. Earlier drafts were much more ambiguous. It wasn't until right at the end that I decided that I wanted more for them, and more for readers. You've carried people that far, the idea of leaving them hanging didn't seem fair. I was really joyful about the ending, and the possibilities for Bramber and Andrew.

**T: I liked the openness of the ending.**

**N:** I think that my endings are usually open-ended, but leaning toward the positive. This was a case of them having met and made huge decisions about their futures, and I needed to give them some space to see how everything would fit together. →



**T: Was Andrew always a dollmaker?**

**N:** He was! Right from the beginning. All of the parts about him learning to make dolls, learning about the fabrics, that's all very personal. I loved going to jumble sales and finding fabrics as a teenager. I had a childhood passion for costume dolls - you used to be able to buy dolls from different places that were dressed in the traditional dress of those places. At one point I had maybe 50 of them! The idea of these individual little people, with their own dream life, was very much a part of my imaginative life as a child. I wrote stories about them,

world. For him, dolls become almost another world he's able to step into, and that's then reflected in the fairy tales, too.

**T: Your previous books are more sci-fi/fantasy. Was *The Dollmaker* a deliberate departure, and did the Ewa Chaplin stories give you an excuse to still be fantastical?**

**N:** I don't think anyone's asked me that before! Yes. In early drafts, Bramber's storyline had a distinct supernatural thread. The ghost train, mentioned briefly in the book, was much stronger in the original incarnation, and was the aspect I was least happy with.

**“I wrote stories where they weren’t just dolls, they were active participants”**

where they weren't just dolls, they were active participants. It seemed that I would write about that at some point. That, and the world of antique dollmaking was fascinating to me. I thought that Andrew, as a somewhat lonely child, would see his imaginative life as very important to him, and he would see the dolls as companions. I could see that very clearly.

**T: Andrew doesn't really grow out of needing the dolls.**

**N:** Most children grow out of dolls, but because Andrew doesn't have many friends, he doesn't really move out into the outside

I knew it wasn't right, but I didn't know how to resolve it. When I began rewriting, my interests were beginning to shift, and I made the decision that the supernatural elements would be relegated, caged off, into the Ewa Chaplin stories. I was pleased with it, it challenged me to bring Andrew and Bramber down to earth, but also allowed me to make the Ewa Chaplin stories as outrageous as I wanted. When I'd got that right, it was so satisfying, and it fitted with the direction I wanted to take my writing in. It felt like a new departure, a new beginning, while keeping faith with my earlier novels. ♦



For our next  
**#ohcobookclub**,  
we'll be discussing

*The Heavens* by Sandra Newman

At a party in Manhattan, Ben meets Kate and they begin to fall in love. Kate soon tells him about her recurring dream as the mistress of a nobleman in Elizabethan England. Switching between a richly detailed past and a frighteningly possible future, *The Heavens* is a powerful reminder of the consequences of our actions, a testament to how the people we love are destined to change, and an exploration of the power of dreams.

**Come join us**

Our London book club is held at Housmans, London's oldest radical bookshop (and bargain basement heaven). Pop in and mention #OhCoBookClub to pick up a copy of *The Heavens* with 20% off. We also have regular meet-ups in Sheffield and Liverpool, and we're going international, with a new meet-up in Berlin! If you'd like to host a meet-up, get in touch with our Book Club Editor, Terri-Jane, at [ohcomely@icebergpress.co.uk](mailto:ohcomely@icebergpress.co.uk)