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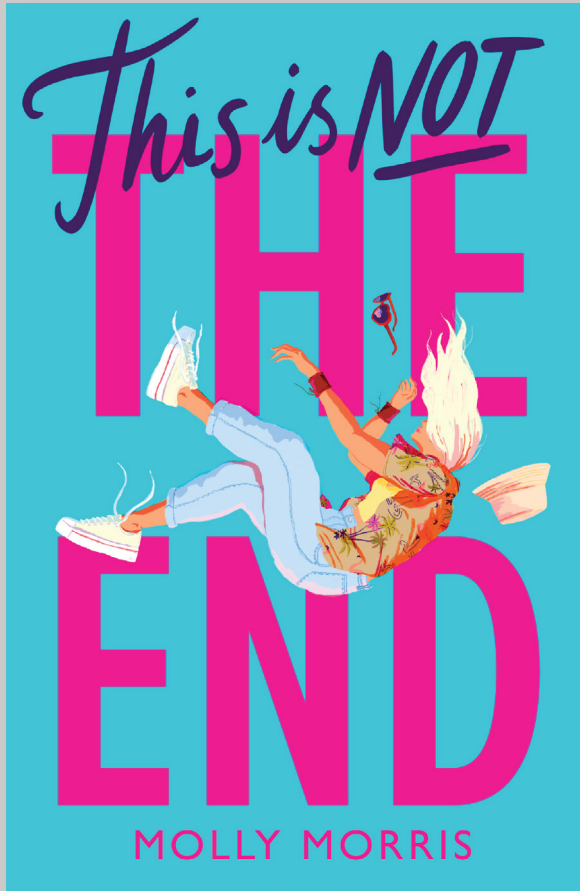
THIS IS NOT THE END

Molly Morris


READING GUIDE



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THIS IS NOT THE END BY MOLLY MORRIS

SYNOPSIS

When seventeen-year-old Hugh Copper witnesses his former classmate Olivia Moon fall off a roof, his predictable summer of driving his sister's serial killer-themed ice cream truck around Washington, DC, hanging out with his fellow loner-in-crime Razz and secretly hooking up with his neighbour Becky is thrown a little off course. And not just because of, well, the obvious – it's because Olivia's tomato-pulp head stitches itself back together.

After his parents died in a car accident, Hugh developed a serious preoccupation with endings specifically bad ones – and the fact that Olivia can't have one brings up more than a few questions. So when she asks him to help retrieve a crate of stolen things her ex-boyfriend took with him to New York City, Hugh agrees. Ordinarily he wouldn't dream of stealing his sister's truck and leaving DC's pseudo-suburban walls – too many possible bad endings – but with his sister considering ditching the truck to sell her ice cream in grocery stores and dating some dopey frat dude, plus Razz and Becky leaving for college, it's either make a move or get left behind.

Fast forward to the road, where Hugh and Olivia – both parent-less, after Olivia's mom died even though she could bone-stitch too and Olivia's dad is somewhere spending her college fund in Atlantic City – start to realize they're not so different. Sure, Olivia's body can heal itself and Hugh spends his time dissecting endings on his website Spoiler Alert, but neither of them are going to college and they're both more or less on their own, which is exactly



how they like it – or so they say. Pretty soon, Hugh is opening up to Olivia about things he normally tries desperately to avoid, like his parents' deaths. Turns out, his dad may have had a drinking problem, a revelation that slapped a big fat question mark on all of his memories of him.

An emergency forces Hugh and Olivia to make a pit stop at the Jersey Shore, where a trip to a tacky casino amid New Jersey's drunk and disorderly only draws them closer despite Olivia's sarcastic, hard candy shell. It's also where Becky, in an attempt to thwart Hugh's trip, lets slip that Olivia's mom died after she cut her wrists. Just when Hugh thinks he's finally nailed down everyone around him, Olivia then reveals it was Becky who demanded everyone ignore Razz in the tenth grade, leaving him completely alone while he transitioned. Suddenly that picture Hugh had built up of the most important people in his world starts to look foggier by the second.

After feeling closer to Olivia than ever, now Hugh's not sure where they stand when they reach New York City. But when he sees Olivia mid-kiss with her ex-boyfriend, he's got a pretty good idea. Hurt and confused, Hugh grabs Olivia's crate and flees to his aunt's apartment where they were both due to stay the night, but Olivia beats him there. Hugh's been catastrophizing all along and now he's convinced Olivia is about to follow in her mother's footsteps ... but it's all a misunderstanding. A struggle ends in Hugh accidentally nicking his wrist with scissors and passing out.

When he comes to, they have a heart-to-heart. Hugh finally sees through Olivia's tough-girl exterior, through all the ideals he's been projecting on everyone around him. His parents made stupid mistakes that didn't define them, while the true picture of Razz, Becky and even his sister was right in front of him all along. As for ending-proof Olivia, she's alive, but not as indestructible as he thought. It's just that while focusing on endings, Hugh missed a few things along the way. As he heads back to DC and makes a long overdue trip to his parents' graves alongside his sister, he realizes that while his summer might not have ended perfectly, the new beginning he has with Olivia makes up for it.

WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

'Stories with rubbish endings are deeply frustrating ... but what if your frustration over bad endings grew into an obsession and spilt out into every area of your life? Meet Hugh, our extremely anxious hero, who does



everything he can to avoid the bad endings he hates. For Hugh, safe is good. Familiar is good. But somehow he finds himself driving near-stranger Olivia Moon to New York City in this romance-drama-road trip mash-up, a super cool pop-culture feast of the possible and impossible. I love this amazing debut novel, bursting with comedy, friendship and the biggest of questions. Want to know the answers? Read on ...' **BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Molly Morris is a California native with a penchant for the bizarre. After living in the Washington, DC area for university, she moved to the UK to study on the Creative Writing MA at UEA. It's here where she honed her love for all things magical realism and Young Adult fiction, her writing and reading true love. These days she lives in Norfolk with her husband, daughter and their cat, Lemon.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'This novel was formed around its characters, and began with Olivia Moon. I had her in my head for many years before putting pen to paper.

From the very start, I knew Olivia couldn't die and could picture her standing on a roof, but had no idea what the story would look like other than the fact that I knew she wasn't my protagonist. She was the supporting character, even though so much of the story would revolve around her. My next thought was, who would challenge her most? Who could push her to her limits and force her to confront the things most troubling her, thus making the story as exciting as possible? This is how Hugh was born. Because who better to confront the ultimate risk-taker than someone petrified of taking risks?

Because Olivia wasn't the protagonist, I knew that in some sense the arc of the story must revolve around Hugh, which is why they go on a road trip (the ultimate boundary-pushing activity for him at this point in his life). Olivia just needed to provide the motivation. Now that the framework was in place, I was then able to fill in the blanks with more details.



Though this seems like a really technical approach and not at all very personal to me as an author, it became more personal as I dug deeper. I was a very unhappy teenager who spent most of my teenage years wishing for them to be over. I felt powerless and awkward, and wanted nothing more than to be an adult who could make my own decisions and live far away from the insular suburb in which I grew up. I harnessed this discomfort into writing Hugh's story.

But now looking back, I can see that those teenage years were some of the best and most vibrant of my life. They helped shape me and some of my dearest friendships, and while I cherish those years now, I do wish I had valued them more at the time and taken advantage of them while I could. It's this that helped motivate so much of the themes of endings in this novel; I wanted to encourage people to enjoy these years (and those beyond them) as much as they can, to push themselves to try new things and make the most of these experiences even though they might end badly. Because to paraphrase Olivia, the only way to guarantee a truly unsatisfying ending is by living a truly unsatisfying life.'

MOLLY MORRIS

THEMES

- Friendship and relationships
- Endings and death
- Change and transformation
- Roadtrips and journeys
- Love and trust
- Acceptance and grief
- Fun and humour

WRITING STYLE

The novel is written in first person, past tense, from the main character Hugh's perspective. Hugh's voice is humorous, colloquial and idiosyncratic. Notably, there are detours from the main story into versions of what



Hugh thinks might happen next and how his story might end. There are also extracts from his blog on the subject of endings in pop culture. **336 pages, 27 chapters, ages 14+**

PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1. *Analysing Endings*

'The site was divided into five sections: books, movies, TV, people and misc., for things like bands and wars, and in each of those sections were individual threads for specific subjects with bad endings. Good endings and all their fake neatness didn't interest me.' **Hugh, *This is Not the End***

Hugh, the hero of *This is Not the End*, is obsessed with endings – particularly bad ones, whether it's the death of Marvin Gaye or the disappointing conclusions of great movies. He even has a blog to justify and explore his selection. But what makes a good or bad ending? Discuss as a class – noting down on the class display the main characteristics of good and bad endings – before separating into groups, with each group assigned a category inspired by Hugh's blog: books, movies, TV, people, misc (e.g. bands and wars, or broader historical events). The task of every group is to identify the best and worst ending in their category and create a presentation to justify the selection using clips or extracts, reviews, commentary, their own analysis and any other evidence they have gathered. At the end, vote as a class: Whose presentation was the most persuasive?

2. *Character Journeys*

'Who better to confront the ultimate risk-taker than someone petrified of taking risks?' **Molly Morris, author motivation**

Molly has written what we might term a 'character-led' novel, in which the characters came to her first, and story was drawn first and foremost from her exploration of their main traits and challenges. This exercise is all about coming up with character-led story ideas.

As a class, discuss what Hugh is like at the beginning of the novel – and how he is at the end. You may even



create a group character profile showing Hugh's main character traits, hopes and dreams, and the obstacles in his life. What in the novel has he had to grapple with – and how has his relationship with Olivia (and the roadtrip itself) changed him? Are there any seminal moments in the book (e.g. the fake funeral) which represent his character journey? Repeat the exercise with Olivia for contrast and comparison.

Now, it's time for you to create your own character journey. First, you have to come up with a character! You may base the character on yourself, as Molly did in creating Hugh, or a character from *This is Not the End* – or someone entirely from your imagination. Create a character profile – perhaps including a headshot-style image – with the character's main personality traits and the challenges they might face at the beginning of the story. Next, you have to decide how you might challenge them in a story to grow as a person. Note down three key story aspects – e.g. scenes, other characters or obstacles – your character might have to overcome. Finally, write a short paragraph as if from their perspective at the end of your story describing how their experiences have helped them grow.

3. Vintage Aesthetic

'All our windows were down as Marvin Gaye's "Baby Don't You Do It" blasted from the truck's tape player.' **Hugh, *This is Not the End***

Hugh and Olivia's roadtrip is accomplished in a 1980s ice cream van with a selection of cassette tapes – and the soundtrack of the novel is pure Motown, music from the 1960s and 70s. What's more, Olivia doesn't own a smartphone and Hugh's is destroyed towards the beginning of the novel. Why do you think the author chose to set her story in the present day, while also including 'vintage' vibes and stripping away modern conveniences? What do you think that achieves?

Now, separate the class into groups and assign each a decade of the later twentieth century (starting from the 1950s and ending in the 1990s). Each group should assign its members to research one aspect of the culture of the decade: music, fashion, interior design, architecture, cars, food. Together, they should create a



large physical 'mood board' on their decade's aesthetic and present their findings to the class, perhaps even utilizing a soundtrack. Create a class display of all the decades, arranged in a timeline.

WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the main message of *This is Not the End*? What feeling or sentiment were you left with when you turned the final page?
2. Did you like and relate to Hugh as a main character? Why or why not?
3. What did you think of Hugh's relationship with Becky? Why do you think he ultimately breaks up with her?
4. Why do you think the author decided to send Hugh and Olivia on a roadtrip? What does this achieve that another type of story couldn't?
5. Hugh's imagined endings are a huge feature of this novel – particularly the one that opens the story. What did you think of this technique? Did it work for you? Why or why not?
6. What do you think happened next for Hugh and Olivia? Do you think there should be a sequel to this story?

