The Book of Guardians is a gripping psychological thriller about the possibilities of self-knowledge, the possibility and impossibility of interpreting our own and others’ lives and the role of fatherhood as told by narrator Philip Eyre. We inhabit Philip’s POV and he’s something of an unreliable narrator, as he’s in the process of speculating and working out the facts about his own life and that of parents he comes across in his role as ‘Guardian ad litem’.

1. Derek, the book is set in the 1980s. Did you have a particular reason for setting it then? Was it to do with the procedures on adoption or mental health practices at the time? (For instance, I think the guardian ad litem role changed in 1989 and the novel starts in 1987?)
2. The book has a very interesting narrative structure. Many of the chapters open with notes on an adoption case. Did you see examples of this kind of document? One part of the book is also a doctor’s notebook on a patient. Are you inventing this kind of format? Or do such notebooks exist?
3. You very skilfully take us inside the mind of Philip Eyre, and we inhabit his discoveries, questions and uncertainties. In many ways, he’s a very unreliable narrator as he hardly knows what to believe himself. Yet he’s very observant about nature, about food, style and so on and so convinces us. How easy or difficult was it to maintain his interior voice? I imagine you could be swept away/into his character and that might almost be a destabilising process for the writer. Did you find it at all disturbing to write in his POV?
4. Philip is very observant about nature. He can name plants and is acutely aware of the seasons and nature. I really enjoyed all this – and felt that the these unobtrusive but vivid observations somehow anchored him to the world as well as drawing us into it. Were you aware of this in the writing? Did you track seasonal changes and plant life carefully? Or does it just come naturally to you?
5. More importantly, fatherhood is a theme throughout the novel. Philip’s role of searching for fathers who have to be asked whether they will allow their child to be adopted is reflected in his own meditations on his own father who was present but also absent in his life. He himself isn’t a great father – willing to live in another country, quite matter of fact about his children – almost scared of the role. Did writing the book make you reconsider the whole business of being a father?
6. The novel raises questions of whether nature and nurture, genetic inheritance or upbringing, have most influence on children. The novel also raises doubts about how a man can be sure he is a father, about children who may never have been declared. This is a particularly haunting and involved theme in the novel. The novel expresses in Philip a deep anxiety about fatherhood. Was this difficult to write about?
7. You clearly looked into and researched the history of DNA studies and genetic discoveries. The book, while it respects statistical methods, seems also to deny that a life is so simply calculated. Your characters mention to some extent the work of Galton. Did you find that you held passionate opinions about the ways of reading or predicting a life? I was impressed by the interesting way this research underpinned the novel without dominating in a dry way. Did you enter into a lot of debates about genetic research with scientists? Did you read up on many different theories? Could you tell us a little about that particular research journey?
8. Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte is somehow woven into the novel’s subtext, both because of Philip’s name and because Janet, the disturbed antagonist, comes to be obsessed with the book. I liked the way this was done because it wasn’t schematic. Yes, we have a strong first person narrator who is a male Eyre (heir! – homophonic joke on one of the major themes?) – but the links are quite subtle. Maybe the fact that we never know whether Rochester is really Adele’s father? And then Jane Eyre herself is an orphan who is adopted, put in a home and so on. While Philip is someone who makes those decisions on behalf of minors. What was the root for you of the Eyre link? Was it the name heir/Eyre with its inherent questions about inheritance? Is Jane Eyre a touchstone novel for you in your reading history?
9. Janet Burns – I’ve called her the antagonist, but she’s someone we know a lot and very little about. We never see her from the inside. She is a series of interpretations almost and possibilities until the end. (I must be careful of spoilers.) Is that a critique of the mental health service? Or is it rather that the novel explores the way we are unknowable even to ourselves? This seems to demand a yes or no answer, but I wonder whether you could just talk a little about Janet and her creation and how easy/difficult it was to research her and construct her character.
10. The book’s divided into parts. Did this help you in the writing? There’s also an interesting sense of prolepsis at the beginning – K said this or that when we haven’t met K yet. How easy was it to organise the temporal structure of the book? With Philip narrating the story a little in the future of the actual events? You used the case notes to anchor the story in time and also visual seasonal clues. When you wrote the novel, did you map out the whole structure? How did that evolve for you? Do you plan? Or do you write instinctively and then rewrite to find the logical structure?

Questions scripted by Stephanie Norgate, Chichester University.