

**MARY ZACAROLI** talks to Alison Hoblyn, whose first novel, written in her fifties, was sparked by a teenage visit to a 17th-century garden in Tuscany

# Story of love, death and relationships

**T**here is something deeply satisfying about Alison Hoblyn's novel *The Scent of Water*. On one level, it is a well-plotted story about Ellie, a middle-aged artist and widow, and the relationships she builds during and after a month-long garden course at a palazzo in Tuscany. However, it is also an insightful and richly-textured meditation on love, bereavement and relationships.

The slow pace and style of writing adds a dreamy, contemplative tone and as the action takes place over a couple of years, people have time to build multi-faceted relationships. The romance that develops between two of the main characters is slow and deeply felt; then there's Ellie's simple faith shining throughout the book. She doesn't proselytise. It is just part of her, and adds a surprisingly strong dimension.

When we met at Alison's home in Tubney, I explained that I found this character unusual in a contemporary novel. "I wondered whether it was ever going to get published, because it's not the sort of subject that might necessarily be taken up," she replied. "But I wanted to just have a woman in there who had a faith and wasn't flaky and wasn't some nutty evangelist, just living her life by a code." Is it something that Alison has herself?

"I do have a faith, yes. It directs what I do and it directs how I think. My faith is more following Christ's tenets. I don't tend to evangelise hugely."

She doesn't need to, because by the last page you see how Ellie's struggles to live a simple spiritual life have far-reaching positive consequences on those around her — not that she's a saintly prig, by any means.

Three characters are of particular importance to Ellie: rich, eccentric septuagenarian Nerine, a much-younger man, Max, and the owner of the palazzo, Salvatore, who teaches not only about Italian gardens, but also the early Italian renaissance philosophy of Marsilio Ficino and the Botticelli painting *Primavera*. Alison uses the painting, which depicts the

Three Graces, to underline her theme of consequences. "It's an endless cycle of giving, receiving, handing on. We have consequences from our actions in life," she said. "When you actually live in a way that allows consequences to be right, to be just; it's freedom really."

Bereavement is a strong theme — partly because Ellie is coming to terms with Andrew's death and partly because one of the characters dies. This is reflected

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**Alison Hoblyn**

obliquely in the title, which comes from the Bible, *Job 14*. Alison's parents have both died, her mother while she was writing the book. "When people are bereaved, it seems like the end of everything. With the death they lose part of themselves with that person," she said. "The scent of water is that first trickle of hope that comes when you begin to feel that you're reinvesting in the future. And for Ellie, in particular, it's a metaphor for her beliefs. I suppose she can see that there's something good beyond this life."

Like Ellie, Alison is a trained artist, and she has also worked as an interior designer and illustrator. She took up writing because

she needed another way to express herself creatively, and wrote the book after taking courses at Oxford University's Department for Continuing Education. I asked what it was like to paint in words, as opposed to colours. "It's a different kind of dimension, but you are placing things. I enjoy actually making the sentences as much as anything," she said. "It's a physical feeling like I used to get when a painting was going really well. It's outside of me."

Alison felt it was the kind of book she wanted to read as a woman of 53. It was particularly inspired by a summer sojourn to Florence when she was 18, where she visited the Villa Gamberaia gardens described in the book, as well as the Uffizzi gallery, where she was particularly taken by a portrait of Lorenzo de Medici. A later visit to Tuscany with her husband David reawakened a long-forgotten hunger to delve into the meaning behind all these wonderful creations.

The novel has a surprising twist. "I had no idea that was going to happen, no idea at all. It was a big surprise to me," Alison said. It throws a large and satisfying curved ball and helps bring the book to a perfectly pitched ending.

It seems that Oxford publisher Transita's strategy to publish books for and by older women is paying off — at least if this book is anything to go by. I imagine that a large number of people will enjoy reading such a multi-layered, fascinating novel.

● **The Scent of Water** is published by Transita at £7.99.