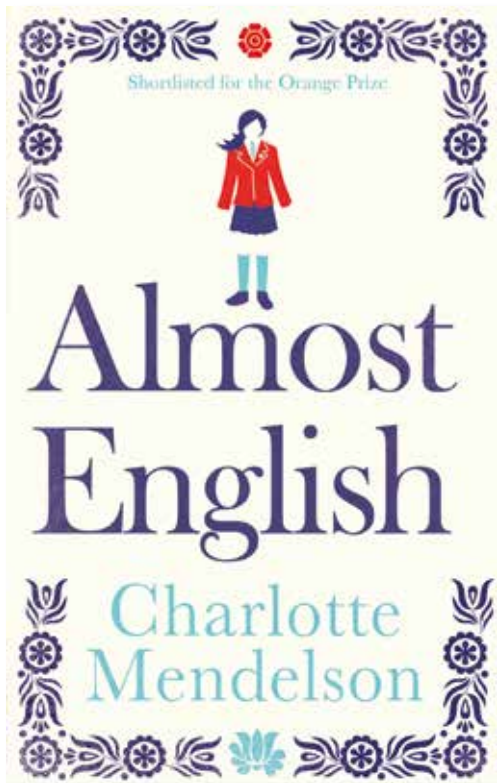


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## Reader's Guide



Other novels by Charlotte Mendelson

*When We Were Bad* (2007)

*Daughters of Jerusalem* (2003)

*Love in Idleness* (2001)

# Almost English Charlotte Mendelson

Mantle

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## About the author

Charlotte Mendelson was born in London in 1972 and grew up in Oxford. She has written and reviewed for *the Guardian*, *the TLS*, *the Independent on Sunday*, *the Observer* and elsewhere. She currently lives in London.

She is the author of four novels: *Love in Idleness* (2001); *Daughters of Jerusalem* (2003), which won both the Somerset Maugham Award and the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and was shortlisted for the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award; *When We Were Bad* (2007), shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction; and *Almost English* (2013), longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2013.

## *Almost English*

The air stinks of tuberose, caraway and garlic: the universal scent of central European hospitality. But Marina is not hospitable. After only an hour her skin is tender with cheek pinchings; she has been matchmade, prodded and instructed beyond endurance, and the night is young. Soon they will come to find her, to admire the shape of her fingernails, the thickness of her lashes, their eyes peeling back her clothes, weighing her like fruit. This is not new. She has been brought up to accept the questions and kisses as if nothing could please her more, however much lava is boiling inside. The problem is that Marina has changed. She can bear their scrutiny no longer because her life is a disaster, and it is her fault. She betrayed them and escaped them, and now she wants to come back.

In a tiny flat in West London, sixteen-year-old Marina lives with her emotionally-delicate mother, Laura, and three ancient Hungarian relatives. Imprisoned by her family's crushing expectations and their fierce unEnglish pride, by their strange traditions and stranger foods, she knows she must escape. But the place she runs to makes her feel even more of an outsider.

At Combe Abbey, a traditional English public school for which her family have sacrificed everything, Marina realises she has made a terrible mistake. She is the awkward half-foreign girl who doesn't know how to fit in, flirt or even be. And as a semi-Hungarian Londoner, who is she? In the meantime, her mother, Laura - an alien in this strange universe -, has her own painful secrets to deal with, especially the return of the last man she'd expect back in her life. She isn't noticing that, at Combe Abbey, things are starting to go terribly wrong.

## Discussion points

The two central characters of *Almost English*, Marina and her mother Laura, seem locked in their inability to express their true feelings to one another; how does Charlotte Mendelson explore the mother-daughter dynamic in the novel?

If Marina can be seen as *Almost English*, is Laura perhaps Too English?

Marina is particularly afflicted by teenage awkwardness and the ability to be embarrassed by so many things; how does Mendelson make this intensely personal experience of her protagonist feel universal?

Many of the characters in *Almost English* are withholding secrets and misunderstandings pile up; what do you think Mendelson is exploring here about the human condition?

Close observation is a hallmark of Mendelson's work; how is telling detail used in *Almost English* to both richly comic and moving effect?

## Useful links

### Author's website

<http://charlottemendelson.com>

### Publisher's website

<http://www.panmacmillan.com/book/charlottemendelson/almostenglish>