

Backpackers – synopsis – for blogpost on www.astrotomato.com

Backpackers is a series of interlinked stories, driven by rock star Jack Wolf trying to find a backpacker called Cath Pearson.

It starts in 2013 as Jack Wolf quits music on stage, then tries to overdose. Rescued by his manager, he tries to find Cath, the only girl he's ever loved. Following a tip off, Jack meets different backpackers who travelled with Cath after they separated 10 years previously in Indonesia. Their stories bring to life Cath's journey and eventual breakdown, which forms the backbone of the book – a female-centred road journey.

We flip to 2003 and learn how Jack met Cath, and Jack's early disillusion with his celebrity lifestyle, and Cath's night terrors. Then we hear Krishna's story, a backpacker who met Cath after Cath and Jack parted ways. Krishna is desperate to score some ecstasy in Bali, while his friend Tom has taken a fancy to Cath, who is an elusive & barely present character in their tale. After Tom steals a bag of pills from a dealer, he & Krishna are soon on the run. They seek safety in a nightclub, but the dealer follows. Cath appears and punches the dealer to the floor, enraged that she hasn't got her own E. Appalled by her own behaviour, Cath flees the Bali drugs scene for Sumatra.

On a jungle trek Cath befriends Michelle, who brings Cath into focus both in the story and in Cath's own life. Near the end of the trek, they are climbing a steep cliff. Drenched in an intense rainstorm, Cath ends up pulling Michelle up the cliff. But a random lightning strike makes her lose grip, and Michelle falls off the cliff. Believing Michelle to be dead, Cath runs again,

We're in Malaysia. Jane, a teacher coming to terms with a miscarriage which happened while teaching in her classroom, meets Cath. After Cath suffers a breakdown she reveals what she's running from: she believes she's to blame for her father's recent death. Jane experiences her upward turn in her grief and takes Cath under her wing.

They travel to Thailand. By chance Cath meets Jack for a second time. But Cath doesn't remember him: the drink, drugs and shock about her father have destroyed her memory. The Jack of 2003 is a self-centred 20-something. Unaware of what's happening with Cath, he tries to re-ignite the week-long romance from a couple of months previous. Confused and frustrated by Cath's apparent rejection, they argue and Cath and Jane move to another hotel. Jack leaves, bitter and broken hearted, but inspired to write his greatest works.

Jane leaves for home, and Cath sinks into depression. She travels alone, eventually taking a boat ride up the Mekong with several other backpackers. Wandering around a Laotian village after

midnight, high on opium, Cath is attacked by one of the other backpackers. She successfully fights back against her attacker and humiliates him, and falls under the protection of Robert and Sandra, two backpackers who we meet earlier in her travels. Badly shaken, and scared to return home to mum after missing her dad's funeral, Cath moves on to Thailand. She has a final night out with a collection of backpackers she's met along her travels. Drunk and with emotions riding high, her fellow backpackers' lives all change that evening: Matt wants to propose to his girlfriend Sandra, who dumps him instead. Matt is heartbroken, but goes on to found an internet music firm which brings him in contact with Jack Wolf in 2013, where he helps Jack begin his quest to find Cath. Sandra is confused about her sexuality, and hooks up with Lars, who we first meet in Krishna & Tom's story. Sandra falls pregnant, and Lars ends up sacrificing his travels for her, and to face up to his responsibilities. The next day everyone leaves and Cath is alone. However, tipped off by Jane, Cath's mum has flown to Thailand and has tracked her down. Cath throws herself into a river in an attempted suicide, overwrought with grief and shame.

We're back in 2013. Jack is distraught at learning his 6 month quest to find Cath has been ultimately fruitless: he believes her to be dead. But he's talked to many people and listened to their stories, and for the first time in his life hasn't been the centre of attention. He's been clean of drugs for 6 months, and has regained his humanity. In the final scene Jack becomes highly strung on hearing about Cath's suicide attempt. Matt reveals that he saved Cath from the river, and Cath went home to Australia with her mum. But Matt has a surprise, and on the last page Jack is finally reunited with Cath.

Themes: Backpackers deals with the universal themes of losing a parent and growing up in a complex world, relationship break-ups and falling in love. It also looks at how first-world young adults treat people in the developing world. The glamour of Jack's music industry world contrasts with the poverty of the backpackers. In turn, the backpackers' relative wealth contrasts with the poverty of the countries in which the story is set.