Praise for *Don't Make Me Laugh*

'A great book, an important book that will start a discussion that needs to be had… my heart was in my mouth'
Marian Keyes

'Gripping, brilliantly plotted and so depressingly relatable. I loved it'
Lucy Porter

'So tense and gripping [it] flourishes into a proper thriller. It's wonderful. It's furious. It's true. And all gorgeously written with bright clever flashes and insights, it should be seen and heard'
Russell T Davies

'An assured debut. Funny, razor sharp and so satisfying'
Nina Stibbe

'Exhilarating, viscerally thrilling and SO timely – an ambitious dark comedy that really delivers. Hugely smart, with so much emotional depth and resonance'
Daisy Buchanan, author of *Careering*

'More relevant with every day that passes, *Don't Make Me Laugh* is written with a comedy insider's knowledge and a woman's rage. Sharp, dark and outrageously funny, it's the #MeToo book we've all been waiting for'
Marianne Levy, author of *Don't Forget to Scream*

'This is an honest, funny, devastating and timely book'
Jenny Colgan, author of *Meet Me at the Cupcake Café*

935JJJ_tx.indd 1 19/12/2024 11:38

'It's going to shake things up and also be so helpful to so many people'
Kate Weston

'Written with rage, wit, heart and soul. This novel is f*cking ace'
Sarah Phelps

'*Don't Make Me Laugh* is a brilliant, important book. Very, very occasionally a "brilliant, important" book is also gripping, relatable and FUNNY. DMML is all of those. And more. Smart, visceral, compelling, poignant – all the very best things. I loved it'
Liz Lewin

'A gloriously unnerving and compelling read with so many sharp and witty moments'
Justin Myers

'This will undoubtedly be THE debut of 2025. So great to read a novel that does London well, does Edinburgh well and exposes the murky underside of British comedy in such an elegant, continually surprising and compelling way'
Matt Thorne

'Certain men should feel nervous Julia has articulated the unspeakable in this recognisable and remarkable read'
Siobhan McSweeney

'Julia's compelling novel peels back the sparkling skin of the comedy industry, exposing a cesspit of sinister clowns. It stirs up a crucial conversation about abuse, power and fame, lingering in the uncomfortable grey areas, and capturing a heady atmosphere of confusion and control. Yet Ali's story is darkly funny, with moments of real catharsis and hope. You'll be left questioning what lies behind the public persona of every famous funny man'
Rachael Healy

935JJJ_tx.indd 2 19/12/2024 11:38

‘Funny but pitch-black, fierce but sad, tender but brutal, *Don’t Make Me Laugh* WILL make you laugh, but it will also make you want to punch something. A timely and assured literary heckle’
Beth Morrey

‘This book. So, so good. A compelling read but also a painful one. Every word rings true. Julia Raeside captures so perfectly the mental gymnastics one puts oneself through in a relationship with a narcissist. While it’s set in the world of stand-up comedy (and will definitely make you look at some ‘comics’ differently), *Don’t Make Me Laugh* has a much wider resonance. Should be required reading in school. Put this on your reading list and order a copy for that friend who deserves much better in her love life’
Chrissie Manby

‘It’s so very good. Grimly funny, gripping and filled with affection for comedy and comedians while confronting the darker side some of us would prefer to ignore’
Tara Flynn

‘Such an entertaining, funny and remarkably accurate read. I was GLUED to it, skipped off to bed early to read and now I’m so sad I’ve finished it’
Wendy Wason

‘This is a brilliant debut by a brilliant woman. It is clever, funny, insightful and angry and it has captured both the complexities of MeToo in comedy and how much still needs to change perfectly’
Rosamund Urwin

‘One of the most accurate depictions I have ever read of the true monsters in stand up; it’s not the swaggery lads you need to keep an eye on; it’s the “good guys”’
Gráinne Maguire

935JJJ_tx.indd 3 19/12/2024 11:38

'It's a timely, shocking, and important exploration of abuse in the standup comedy world. A very absorbing and propulsive read, I steamed through it'
Nussaibah Younis

'Julia Raeside's debut novel was a thrilling unputdownable read. Vividly drawn characters in a world that feels so real you can smell it. And a story that could have come straight off the front papers. Julia has her finger on the pulse with a book that is not only a dynamic and satisfying read but a manifesto for tackling toxic masculinity within the comedy scene. Five stars from me'
Sally Abbott

'Burns with righteous anger. Hails the power of female friendship. And you'll enjoy guessing the real-life inspirations for the toxic male characters'
Michael Hogan

'Julia writes with a wry, sardonic wit and a tremendous gift for seeing through people and their excuses for themselves, but most importantly she writes with a searing anger about an aspect of the comedy world some would rather festered away unseen. This book is by turns gut-wrenching and heart breaking, but at its heart it's a timely, furious call for change. I loved it'
Will Maclean, author of *The Apparition Phase*

'Darkly funny, brutally real and beautifully written, this is a masterclass in nuance but still packs a satisfying punch for women everywhere'
Lauren Bravo

'The tightest, wittiest storytelling – an addictive compelling story – brilliant actually, and cleverly real'
Helen Lederer

'Funny, furious, impossible to put down – and with an ending that had me punching the air'
Erin Kelly

935JJJ_tx.indd 4 19/12/2024 11:38

DON'T MAKE ME LAUGH

935JJJ_tx.indd 5 19/12/2024 11:38

DON'T MAKE ME LAUGH

JULIA RAESIDE



935JJJ_tx.indd 7 19/12/2024 11:38

First published in the UK in 2025 by Bedford Square Publishers Ltd,
London, UK

bedfordsquarepublishers.co.uk
@bedfordsq.publishers
info@bedfordsquarepublishers.co.uk

© Julia Raeside, 2025

The right of Julia Raeside to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of the publishers.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN
978-1-83501-185-0 (Hardback)
978-1-83501-186-7 (Trade Paperback)
978-1-83501-187-4 (eBook)

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

For Colin and Jim Raeside

935JJJ_tx.indd 9 19/12/2024 11:38

Comedy is very controlling – you are making people laugh. It is there in the phrase 'making people laugh'.

It's Always Something
GILDA RADNER

935JJJ_tx.indd 10 19/12/2024 11:38

One

His hair was wild, like he'd slept in a field. On TV he was clean-shaven, styled with gunk. But on the small stage in front of Ali, Ed Catchpole looked feral, unpredictable.

She couldn't look at him now from her seat on the front row. Too risky. But she could feel him looking at her. She froze, like a field mouse as a hawk flies overhead.

'What's your name?' Ed drew level with her, holding his mic out towards her mouth. Shit, she thought.

Her face muscles locked into a grimace and she heard, 'Alison' come out of her mouth, her voice squeaking. Why did she say that? Only her mother called her Alison.

Ed broke into song. 'Aaaaaaa-lison,' he crooned. Then the line about knowing the world was killing her. It was her dad's favourite Elvis Costello song, the one he'd named her after.

Ali wanted to shrink and fall through a gap in the floorboards. She often felt like she took up too much space, but she couldn't deny that the sound of her name in his mouth set a small furnace going in her stomach.

Ed was leaning over her, rocking forward and back as though to the music in his head. 'And is this your boyfriend, Alison?'

Her eyes screwed shut and her whole face felt like it was made

935JJJ_tx.indd 1 19/12/2024 11:38

of teeth. She couldn't bring herself to look up at him or at the stranger next to her, but she could feel the stranger shaking his head, probably embarrassed to be paired with her by the man from the TV.

She'd never felt more alone, but she couldn't go home. It was either this or spend the rest of the worst day of her life getting drunker on the sofa and ignoring the unopened envelope on the coffee table.

She sensed Ed's bulk moving away as he ducked under the lights to peer at a new target on the other side of her neighbour. 'So are you his lover?' He pronounced the last word as though French, lowering his mic and glancing back for a second, catching Ali's eye. He winked and returned to his work.

Ali pushed her back against the hard plastic of her chair, looking at her hands in her lap, willing her pulse to slow down.

She wanted to tell someone that she had been someone's lover, even if it was just for three weeks and one day. But then she'd have to tell them that it didn't count because of what she'd done. An unforgivable thing.

As Ed continued to work the room, she risked looking at him again. From her end of the row, she could see him in profile and tried not to stare at the generous round of his belly hanging over his jeans. She'd seen a picture of him in a cardigan in the *Radio Times* at Christmas and imagined how nice he would feel to fall asleep on. God, he looked comfortable.

Even on a warm July night in East London as Ali's thighs stuck to the vinyl-covered seat, she thought about disappearing into his chest, sinking into his flesh, his arms around her, a hug so tight she could only just breathe. She chided herself because she was supposed to be working. But she saved up the look back and the wink, knowing that she would want to think about them again later when the terrible shame had passed.

She wished she could sit somewhere else, but she'd been jostled to the front row as the lights went down. She was not a front-row

935JJJ_tx.indd 2 19/12/2024 11:38

person, but latecomers didn't get to choose. There was only ice left in the double vodka and tonic she'd drunk too quickly, knowing it wouldn't be enough to numb her. She wished she'd bought two.

With no time to work out what to do with her hands as the lights came up on Ed, she'd wedged one under her thigh and laid the other on top of her leg like she was about to summon a dog. She stayed that way, getting pins and needles, terrified that moving would attract attention.

If the evening had worked out the way it was supposed to, she'd be sat next to Mark, pretending they were a normal couple. What would he have said if Ed had picked on him? 'Is this your girlfriend?' At least she'd been spared that. She imagined the irritated curl of Mark's lip, the moustache stiffening with indignation, his fury at having to define whatever it was they were doing. He'd have lied. 'And do you live together?' God, he'd have been raging.

Ali hadn't met anyone who wore cufflinks since her dad in the nineties. Mark smelled of woody aftershave and dark hairs poked out of his shirt cuffs. She'd never seen him out of a suit, which made her think of teachers; how it's a shock when you see them on a Saturday in jeans. She didn't think Mark owned any jeans, or if he did, he'd wear them with proper shoes.

If she saw Mark out of the corner of her eye, he was hot, capable, nice-smelling.

But if she looked straight at him, he was a furious teacher waiting for a minibus.

When she'd left him at the hotel two hours ago, she didn't look back to see how angry he was.

A whoomph erupted in the room and Ed surfed the laughter deftly into an introduction. 'Ladies and gentlemen, keep it going for our brilliant, amazing next act, she's going to be huge, we're lucky to have her, the absolutely brilliant… Bethan Gill!'

As the applause got louder, a short woman with a brown plait crossed the stage and nodded to Ed as he passed. She began to wriggle the mic stand down.

935JJJ_tx.indd 3 19/12/2024 11:38

This wasn't who Ali had come to see. Paul Bonatti would be the surprise headliner, she had it on good authority. She was pretty sure the rest of the crowd had no idea and took a moment to enjoy her privilege.

Her boss, Otis, the MD of Zone Digital, wanted an 'already made it' to front the weekend breakfast show because he had no imagination and loved to collect famous people like cars. He also collected cars.

Paul Bonatti was perfect, in that he was on television and Otis hoped to appear in Paul's Instagram pictures at one of the comedian's famous poker nights. Most of the comedians Ali followed on Instagram had been in one of the poker-night pictures, bottles of beer aloft, a low light hanging over the green baize table.

Paul's features were instantly recognisable, like a cartoon: thick black glasses framing narrow eyes, a dad's softened middle on top of thin legs and a slight stoop at odds with his huge success. He nodded a lot during his act, as though keen to seek consensus from his audience. Ali remembered him playing the flatmate in a sitcom she used to watch hung over at uni. But here he still was, as popular as ever, selling out the big theatres, keeping up with the new talent on the circuit, always happy to mentor and encourage.

On stage, Bethan Gill was launching into a rant, her large, dark eyes and small frame jarring with the deep gravel of her voice. Ali thought she'd sound great on the radio, but Otis looked blank when Ali had mentioned her name.

Ali promised to 'charm' Paul – Otis's word – when a last-minute dinner came up and the boss couldn't be there to schmooze the talent in person. Ali was sure Otis wanted this to come off as some sort of power move, sending a lackey in his place. Otis didn't live in the real world or understand that his radio station was only the centre of his own universe and no one else's.

She tried to make herself concentrate on the new occupant of the stage, but her mind slid back to the hotel room earlier that afternoon, even as she tried to stop it.

935JJJ_tx.indd 4 19/12/2024 11:38

Mark had been in the bathroom showering. Ali had shuffled her dress back down over her thighs and started looking for her knickers in the bed sheets. She wanted to wash before she put them back on, but Mark would be a while yet. She'd picked up her phone and looked for an email: the tickets from Paul's agent. She needed to strike while the iron was hot and Mark was still in a good mood. Just a couple of drinks at a comedy club, then back to the room.

Distracted by her phone, Ali hadn't thought to ignore the knock at the hotel-room door. It wasn't the kind of place that did room service but maybe a part of her thought he'd ordered champagne, something special to mark the day. As she turned the handle, she remembered she hadn't told Mark that today was anything special.

Bethan's fist was raised in salute as the crowd whooped and applauded. 'Fuck the patriarchy,' she said, grinning as she replaced the mic in the stand. 'Bye.'

She passed Ed as he came back holding a small glass of what looked like whisky. 'What did I tell you? Bethan Gill, everybody.'

As the last of the applause died away, he reclaimed command. It was like watching a mesmerist, Ali thought. He seemed calm, reacting to the room, but also several steps ahead of it.

Satisfied he had them where he wanted them, Ed let a smile break slowly across his face as he prepared to introduce the surprise guest, allowing the mystery to continue for a while longer as mutters went around the room.

Ali indulged the idea that people in the bar afterwards might think she was important when she greeted Paul. Then she spent the rest of the show worrying that he'd be angry she wasn't Otis and that she'd overcompensate like she always did.

Ed took a step back and raised his hand towards the wings as loud hoots and cheers greeted Paul's entrance. The humble stoop meant he had to lower the mic stand even though Ali guessed, now she could see him, that he was about the same height as Ed.

'Now. No. Come on.' Paul's hand went to his brow, his eyes occasionally flicking up from the ground to take in the sight before

935JJJ_tx.indd 5 19/12/2024 11:38

him as the noise continued. He shook a couple of hands on the front row as though welcoming high-ranking dignitaries, thanking them for coming. He paused to take in the room again and shook his head, eyes creasing in thanks.

When his stillness brought the room to quiet again, he began, picking up a thought halfway through and immediately taking the room with him.

Ali wondered what Mark was doing. She pictured him in the passenger seat of an SUV, Gemma driving them home in silence as it got dark. She wouldn't leave him, Ali was sure of that. But she would punish him. Maybe that was their thing.

'You've been lovely. I've been Paul Bonatti, good night.' The applause made Ali realise she hadn't been listening, his short set passing while she remembered the hotel room and her sticky skin and how she'd just wanted Mark to get out of the bathroom.

Downstairs in the bar she joined a queue for drinks, glad of the cooler air. She'd get the meeting with Paul out of the way, go to the off-licence near her flat on the way home and pretend it was just another day, another bottle of wine.

She tried to imagine how Mark would've reacted if she'd told him why she was so desperate to go out. She'd thought it was safer to use work as an excuse than to tell him the truth.

She'd shown Mark her phone as they lay on top of the covers in his room, hoping to subtly suggest the gig as something to do 'for a change'. He glanced at it and handed it back. 'A bunch of comics having a cock fight? No thanks.'

'There are ladies too. Look, this one, the Welsh girl.'

He'd glanced over at the picture on her screen and smirked. 'You can say Pakistani. It doesn't make you better, you know, pretending you haven't noticed she's brown. Sorry, "of colour".' He went back to his own screen.

She just needed to get past this and onto him pulling at her underwear. The feeling of him wanting her made her drunk, propelled along on a ride she had no control over. It struck her

935JJJ_tx.indd 6 19/12/2024 11:38

that she didn't care who was doing the pulling and pushed the thought away.

After the first time they slept together, they mostly stayed in. He brought prosecco from the M&S by the office, she brought crisps and they'd fuck and watch TV in the room. But tonight, she'd wanted just one night out as a normal couple. She didn't tell him why because she knew it would sound desperate and sad and shrivel his dick and make him recoil from her.

None of this had been her idea. He'd kissed her at the Radio Awards when she was hammered on champagne, wearing the black dress she'd worn to her dad's funeral. She'd thought it would make her invisible, but Mark could see her from across the room, swaying. He'd watched her as he pointedly tipped the last dregs of his wine into his mouth and placed the empty glass on the table next to her.

He'd messaged her when he came back to London for work, asking to meet. He kept pouring the wine that took her away from everything and made her float above herself. She reasoned that all she'd done was say yes to the numbness.

She finally reached the bar and a girl with black nails looked at her like she'd already waited too long for Ali to decide. Ali blanched. 'Vodka and ice. And some lime?'

'Single? Double?' The girl looked actively pissed off now.

Ali almost whispered the word double, ashamed, but the girl was still looking at her like she hadn't heard.

'A double,' she almost shouted, mortified.

There was nowhere to sit down so she went to the far end of the bar to lean.

Leaning felt weird, so she stood upright again and studied the posters on the wall.

The room was comfortably dingy; dark-red walls, old wooden chairs on their second or third life, some with crosses cut into the back and shelves for hymn books. The round plywood tables were branded with a smiley face like the one on the hand stamp. 'Fun Club' repeated around the table's edge in lower-case letters.

935JJJ_tx.indd 7 19/12/2024 11:38

She would flatter Paul, tell him how good he was and tee up a meeting at the radio station. Then she could go. The vodka would get her there.

After a few minutes she realised he might be waiting for her, not wanting to come into the bar where fans would bother him.

Backstage was smaller than she expected as she edged the door open, feeling like a burglar. Paul was sat at a dressing table, smirking at something on a laptop. Maybe he hadn't heard her knock. Over his shoulder was the door to a bathroom, ajar, the toilet inside with its seat up, making her want to look away.

Paul finished whatever he'd been reading and looked up, adjusting his smile to one that said, 'Great to meet you.' He seemed to be waiting for Ali to speak.

'Oh. Ali, hi.' She put her hand out, hoping he'd be a shaker. 'From Zone Digital. I'm so sorry I'm not Otis. He's gutted but something came up.'

Paul stood and mirrored her, extending the same arm and making a handshake impossible. She hated that there wasn't a single standard greeting any more. It felt like a game of rock-paper-scissors to her and she always picked the wrong one.

As Paul leaned in, the bristles around his mouth prickled, his damp lips connecting with her skin. He smelled of something expensive and herbal and she knew she was turning pink without looking in the mirror. Something in the way he was looking at her told her he'd noticed too, but it passed. She couldn't wipe her cheek in front of him, so it stayed wet.

Paul started putting the laptop and some other things into a backpack. 'Well, I hope you enjoyed it.' He emphasised the 'you'. Ali had always liked watching Paul on TV but something about being in this room with him now made her feel hot and unprofessional.

She started as the dressing-room door opened into her shoulder and a 'sorry' came from the other side. She moved towards the bathroom to make space for the new visitor and turned to see Bethan Gill in the doorway. Bethan looked from Ali to Paul and

935JJJ_tx.indd 8 19/12/2024 11:38

back and he smiled broadly at her, pushing his glasses up towards his brow. 'Hey, nice work, nice work. Caught the end of yours.'

Bethan stayed where she was, not really acknowledging the compliment.

Unbothered, Paul turned towards Ali again, holding his backpack in front of him. 'OK, nice to meet you, Elly. Otis has blown it, tell him.' Another big grin and Bethan stood aside to let him pass, waiting till he was out of sight. She creased her brow at Ali. 'Are you OK?'

Ali was puzzled. Did something about her not look OK? She came out of the bathroom and pulled the door to behind her, stealing a paranoid look in the dressing-table mirror. 'Yes, fine. You were great, by the way,' she added hoping it didn't sound like an afterthought.

'Thanks. I just to need to get…' She indicated the jacket on a hanger behind Ali. 'Sorry. Of course.' Ali looked down at the floor, scraping at a piece of electrical tape stuck to the floor with her foot while Bethan put her jacket on. Ali's compulsion to fill awkward silences took over.

'I'm not a fan. I mean, I am a fan.' She gestured to the chair recently vacated by Paul. 'I'm a radio producer. We were just… touching base. He might be doing a show with us, so.'

She could see she was losing Bethan's interest. 'And now, my life story. Sorry, I'm babbling. Ali.'

She put out her hand and Bethan shook it, her brow softening. 'You might want a back-up plan.'

Ali didn't understand but tried to look like she broadly agreed with whatever was happening here. Bethan came in and closed the door. 'Your friend,' she looked at the chair where he'd been. 'Not a good choice if any women work at your radio station.'

'Right. Oh.' Ali was nodding. Bethan's face told her she wasn't joking. 'You just did a gig with him, though.'

'I didn't know he was going to be here. Ed hadn't heard the stuff I've heard about him. He has now.'

935JJJ_tx.indd 9 19/12/2024 11:38

'What's he actually done?'

Bethan reached for the doorhandle. 'Not my story to tell. Just trust me, it's multiple women, it's not good and I don't think it'll be long before it comes out. Up to you.' She opened the door and held it for Ali to go first.

By the time she got back downstairs to the bar, Ali felt the anger hot on the back of her neck. 'Up to you,' she muttered to herself sarcastically looking around the room at the tables filled with groups and couples, talking and laughing, at ease with one another. Someone knocked a glass onto the floor and a group of lads cheered.

The walls were covered in overlapping show posters lacquered with varnish. Mad faces thrust at her, competing with each other for most emphatic expression. The women looked confused, scared, excited. The men stared down the barrel, disappointed, purposeful, angry. It was oppressive, but sort of comforting. She ordered another drink, not wanting to go home yet.

She looked at her phone, trying to compose a message to Otis, taking sips from her glass, feeling the cold turn to warm inside her, her breath getting shorter the more she thought about Bethan's self-righteous little speech.

The hotel room and Gemma's face rushed up at her like the ground in a dream. 'Fuck,' she said to her phone's screen, the room too noisy to hear her. She stared at the words she'd just typed and deleted them.

The expression on Mark's wife's face had something else mixed with the disgust and anguish. 'Not again.' Of course Mark had done this before. Gemma must have known the signs; how he offered to take the kids to the park or changed his aftershave when he was up to his old tricks.

At the hotel, Gemma had stood at the threshold, car-key fob gripped in one hand, her other holding the strap of her shoulder bag. She took in the sight of Ali with one hand behind her back, squeezing her knees together, saying nothing.

Gemma looked past her into room. The unmade bed brought a

935JJJ_tx.indd 10 19/12/2024 11:38

film of tears to her eyes. She cracked when she saw Mark's brown shoes neatly stowed under the chair by the mirror.

'Do…' Ali had nothing to offer, the shame paralysing her.

'I thought you'd be young,' said Gemma, her jaw clenching.

Ali picked up her things and left. A text message arrived a while later from Mark.

Great, now everyone gets hurt.

Ali tried to turn away from the rest of the bar and its ebullience, but there was just the wall to her left, covered in gurning faces, all indifferent to the onset of panic currently tightening its drawstrings somewhere inside her.

She stared at her phone, hammering out a new apology to her boss, reassuring him she'd persuade Paul's people to circle back, praying for the surge to subside.

She counted the seconds, holding a breath in, letting it out slowly. It'll pass. It'll pass. She said the words in her head, simultaneously terrified people could see the words. You're OK. You're OK. She allowed herself one more out-loud 'Fuck.'

A shadow passed over her screen as someone else arrived at the bar next to her.

There was a pause. Jeans and trainers belonging to a man drew level with her feet and she could feel that their owner was looking at her.

Ali lifted her head and found herself looking into the eyes of Ed Catchpole.

935JJJ_tx.indd 11 19/12/2024 11:38