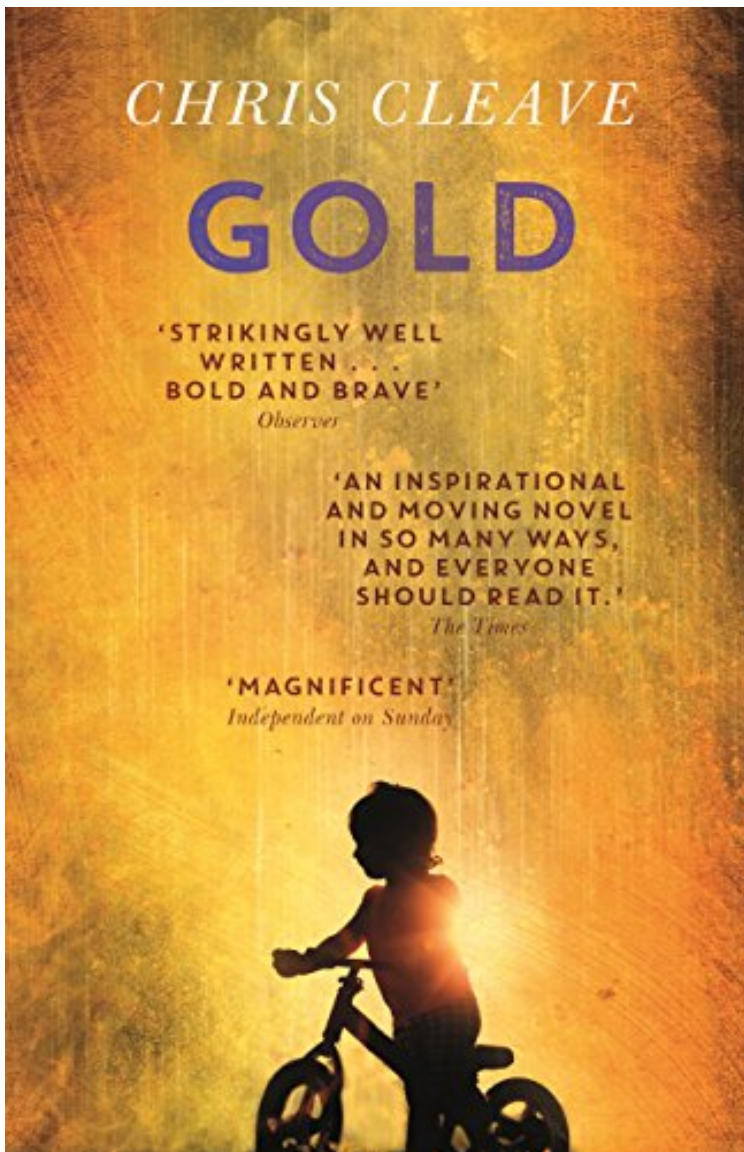


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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurUsually, this is where we'd tell you what this book is about. But with Chris Cleave, it's a bit different. Because if you've read *THE OTHER HAND* or *INCENDIARY*, you'll know that what his books are about is only part of the story - what really matters is how they make you feel. *GOLD* is about the limits of human endurance, both physical and emotional. It will make you cry. *GOLD* is about what drives us to succeed - and what we choose to sacrifice for success. It will make you feel glad to be alive. *GOLD* is about the struggles we all face every day; the conflict between winning on others' terms, and triumphing on your own. It will make you count your blessings. *GOLD* is a story told as only Chris Cleave could tell it. And once you begin, it will be a heart-pounding race to the finish.Extrait203 Barrington Street, Clayton, East

Manchester On a tiny TV in the cluttered living room of a two-bedroom terraced house, Kate Meadows watched her best friend emerge from the tunnel into the central arena of the velodrome. The crowd noise doubled, maxing out the TV's speakers. Her heart surged. The baby's bottle was balanced on the TV, and the howl of the crowd raised concentric waves in the milk. When Zoe lifted her arms to acknowledge the crowd's support, the answering roar sent the bottle traveling across the top of the TV. It teetered on the edge, fell to the floor, and lay on its side, surrendering white formula from its translucent teat to the thirsty brown hessian of the carpet. Kate ignored it. She was transfixed by the image of Zoe. Kate was twenty-four years old, and since the age of six, her dream had been to win gold in an Olympics. Her eighteen years of preparation had been perfect. She had reached the highest level in the sport. She had shared a coach with Zoe and trained with her and beaten her in the Nationals and the Worlds. And then, in the final year of preparation for Athens, baby Sophie had arrived. This was an old TV and the picture quality was terrible, but it was quite clear to Kate that Zoe was now sitting on a twelve-thousand-dollar American prototype race bike with a matte black monocoque frame made from high-modulus unidirectional carbon fiber, while she herself was sitting on a Klippan sofa from Ikea, with pigmented epoxy/polyester powder-coated steel legs and a removable, machine-washable cover in Alms red. Kate was well aware that there were victories to which such a seat could be ridden, but they were small and domesticated triumphs, measured in infants weaned and potty-training campaigns prosecuted to dryness. She ground her knuckles into her temples, making herself remember how in love she was with Sophie and with Jack, who was in Athens preparing for his own race the next day. She tried to exorcise all jealous thoughts from her headkneading her temples till they hurt but God forgive her, her heart still ached to win gold. Under the coffee table Sophie picked over the fallen mess of breakfast and lunch, cooing happily as she brought cornflakes and nonspecific mush to her mouth. The doctor had said she was too poorly to travel to Athens, but now the child seemed effervescent with health.

You had to remind yourself that babies didn't do these things deliberately. They didn't use the kitchen calendar to trace out the precise schedule of your dreams with their chubby little fingers and then plan their asthma and their allergies to clash with it. It was sweltering in the living room. The open window admitted no cooling breeze, only the oppressive August heat reflecting off the pale concrete of their yard. Kate felt sweat running down the small of her back. From next door, through the shared wall, she heard the neighbor vacuuming. The Hoover groaned and thumped its bald plastic head against the skirting board, again and again, a lifer despairing of parole. Crackling bands of electrical interference scrolled down the TV picture, masking Zoe's face as she lined up to start the race. The two riders were under starters' orders now. A neutral voice counted down from ten. Up at the start line, behind the barrier, Kate caught a glimpse of Tom Voss in the group of IOC officials and VIPs. At the sight of her coach, her pulse quickened to prepare her system for the intense activity that his arrival always signaled. Adrenaline flooded her. When the countdown in the velodrome reached five, she watched Zoe's hands tense on the handlebars. Her own hands tensed too, involuntarily, grabbing phantom bars in the stifling air of the living room. Her leg muscles twitched and her awareness sharpened, dilating every second. Kate hated the way her body still readied itself to race like this, hopelessly, the way a widow's exhausted heart must still leap at a photo of her dead lover. There was a commotion by her feet, and an excited squeal. She reached down to lift a small electric fan from the floor to the coffee table, out of the way of Sophie's exploring fingers. Its breeze was a relief. On the TV, the starters' countdown reached three. Kate watched Zoe lick her lips nervously. Two, said the starter. One. Sweat was beading on Kate's forehead. She reached out and turned up the speed on the fan. The picture contracted to a bright white dot in the center of the TV screen, then sparked out entirely. From next door the whine of the neighbor's Hoover descended in pitch and faded through a long, diminishing sigh into silence. Through the wall she heard the neighbor say, Shit. Kate watched the blades of the fan relinquish their invisibility as they slowed to a stop. She looked at the fan dumbly, feeling the breeze on her face fade into stillness, wondering why a breeze would do such a thing at the exact same second the TV went on the blink. After a moment she understood that something had blown in the fuse box. As usual, it had taken half the street's electricity down with it. She felt a rare pulse of self-pity. Only these little things set her off. Missing the Olympics was too big and blunt to wound in anything but a dull and heavy sense. It was like being etherized and then smothered. But Jack's plane tickets when they arrived had been sharp enough to cut. The packing of his send-ahead bag had left an ache, and a specific emptiness in the wardrobe that they shared. Now the electricity burning out had left her burned out too. A second later she laughed at herself. After all, everything could be fixed. She looked in the kitchen drawer until she found fuse wire, then took a torch into the understairs toilet, where the fuse box was. Sophie screamed when she left the room, so she picked her up and held her under one arm

while she juggled the torch and the fuse wire in her other hand, standing on the toilet seat to reach the fuse box. Sophie wriggled and squawked and kept trying to grab the wires. After a minute of trying, Kate decided she cared about not electrocuting her daughter more than she cared about watching Zoe race. She put Sophie back down on the living room floor. Immediately the baby brightened up and resumed her endless quest for dangerous objects to put in her mouth. Fifteen hundred miles away the first of the best-of-three sprint rounds was over by now, and Zoe had either won or lost. It felt weird not to know. Kate clicked the TV on and off, as if some restorative element in the wiring of the house's electronic white blood cell might have healed the damage. No picture came. Instead she watched herself, ten pounds heavier than her racing weight, still in her nightie at three in the afternoon, leaning out of the reflection in the blank black TV screen. She sighed. She could fix the problems with her reflection. Some hard miles of training would put the leanness back into her face, and her blond hair wouldn't always be scraped back into a tight bunch to keep it clear of Sophie's sticky grip, and her blue eyes were only hidden behind her ugly glasses because she just hadn't found the strength to get dressed and go to the shops for the cleaning fluid for her contacts. All this could be sorted. Even so, as she watched herself on TV, she panicked that Jack couldn't possibly still find her attractive. It didn't do to dwell on thoughts like that, so she slumped back down on the sofa and phoned him. Behind his voice when he picked up was the roar of five thousand people. Did you see that? he shouted. She killed it! She won like she wasn't even trying! Zoe did? Yeah! This place is unbelievable. Don't tell me you weren't watching? I couldn't. She heard him hesitate. Come on, Kate, don't be bitter. It'll be you racing next time, in Beijing. No, I mean I actually couldn't watch. The powers went out. Did you check the fuses? Gosh, Ken, my Barbie brain did not entertain that option. Sorry. Kate sighed. No, it's okay. I tried to fix the fuse but Sophie wouldn't let me. Straightaway, she realized how sulky that sounded. Our daughter is pretty strong for her age, said Jack, but I still reckon you should be able to kick her arse in a straight fight. She laughed. Look, I'm sorry. I'm just having a shitty time here. I know. Thank you for looking after her. I miss you. Tears formed in her eyes. Do you? Oh my God, he said, are you kidding? If I had to choose between flying home to you and racing for gold here tomorrow, you know I'd be right back on that plane, don't you? She sniffed, and wiped her eyes. I'm not asking you to choose, idiot. I'm asking you to win. She heard his smile down the phone. If I win, it's only because I'm scared of what you'll do to me if I don't. Come back home to me when you win gold, okay? Promise me you won't stay out there with her. Oh Christ, he said. You know you don't even have to ask me that. I know, she said quietly. I'm sorry. Through the phone connection, the noise of the crowd peaked again. The second race is starting, Jack shouted over the roar. I'll call you back, okay? You think she'll win it? Yeah, absolutely. She made round one look like a Sunday ride. Jack? Yeah? I love you, she said. More than ice cream after training. I love you too, he said. More than winning. She smiled. It was a perfect moment, and then she heard herself ruin it by saying, Call me when the race is over, okay? She cringed at herself for being so needy, for putting this extra demand on him. Love wasn't supposed to require the constant reassurance. But then again, love wasn't supposed to sit watching its own reflection in a dead TV while temptation rode a blazing path to glory. Whatever Jack said back to her, the crowd drowned it out by chanting Zoe's name. She clicked the call off and let the phone fall softly to the washable, hard-wearing cushion covers. It wasn't just that she'd stopped believing she would ever get to the Olympics. Now, if she was really honest with herself, she wasn't even sure if she could win the kind of races you rode on kitchen chairs and sofas. She stared with glazed eyes through the window. In the shimmering heat of their little backyard, a squirrel had found something in the bottom of a crisp packet. She thought, Is this my life now? She held her hands to her temples, more gently now, and timed the pulse in them against the second hand of the living room clock. It had been months since she'd trained hard but even now even with this stress her heart rate was subsixty. The second hand was back where it started, and she'd only counted fifty-two. Sometimes this was the only small victory in her days: this knowledge that she was fitter than time. She looked up and saw that Sophie was mimicking her, trying to press her own tiny hands against the sides of her head. Kate laughed, and for the very first time Sophie laughed back. Kate brimmed with euphoria. Oh my God, darling, you laughed! She dropped to her knees, picked Sophie up, and hugged her. Sophie grinned a gummy, prototype grin that faltered and twitched lopsidedly and then shone again. She gurgled noisily, delighted with herself. Oh, you clever little thing! Wait till I tell Jack, she thought, and the thought was so light and so simple that she suddenly knew everything would be okay. What did it matter if Zoe won gold today or if Jack won gold tomorrow? Kneeling here in the untidy living room, holding her baby close and breathing the warm curdled scent of her, it was impossible to believe that anything mattered more than this. Who even cared that she had until recently been able to bring a bicycle up to forty miles per hour in the velodrome? It

seemed absurd, now that real life had begun for her with its real progression through these lovely milestones of motherhood that anyone even bothered to ride bicycles around endless oval tracks, or that anyone had had the odd idea of giving out gold to the one who could do it quickest. What good did it ever do anyone to ride themselves back to their point of origin? God, she thought. I mean, where does that even get you? After a minute, during which her heart beat forty-nine times, she smiled wearily. Oh, who am I kidding? she said out loud, and Sophie looked up at the sound of her voice and produced an experimental expression, unique to her and perfectly equidistant between a laugh and a lament. Eight years later, Monday, April 2,

2012 Detention deck 9 of the Imperial battle station colloquially known as the Death Star The Rebel the kid resisted, so they locked her in a dark metal holding cell that smelled of machine oil. It was too much for her and she grinned and wriggled with excitement. She clung to her father. He held the kids skinny neck in the crook of one arm and squeezed with just enough pressure to restrain her or to convey silent affection, the way fathers will apply forces. The child squirmed to escape, giving the hug an aspect of violence: parenting didnt seem to change much, wherever you went in the universe. Two Imperial Stormtroopers stood guard over the pair. They exchanged a look, decided that the detainees were secure for now, and nodded. Leaving the detention block of the Death Star, they slipped discreetly out of a side door and emerged into the bright April light of the car park. They took off their helmets, shook out their hair, and bought two takeaway teas from a catering van. They were both thirty-two. They were athletes in real life. They had sponsorship deals and privacy issues with the press and body fat below four percent. In the world rankings for sprint cycling on the track, they were numbers one and two. The things I do for you, Zoe said. Its far too hot in these. Strands of black hair were stuck to her forehead with sweat. I could do with a wee, said Kate. How are you meant to go in these costumes? They werent designed by a woman. The Death Star wasnt designed by a woman.

There'd be curtains. There'd be a crche. Zoe shook her fists at imaginary higher-ups. Yeah! Cant you brass hats figure out some way of balancing motherhood with suppressing this damned Rebel Alliance? Kate shook her head sadly. With insubordination like that, you'll always be a Stormtrooper. You're wrong, Zoe said. They'll recognize my zeal and my passion. They'll promote me to the command of their battle station. Dont flatter yourself. They'll take one look at your personality profile and make you a droid. Highly specialized but basically single. Oh, get fucked, said Zoe, smiling. I wouldnt swap for your life. A cold squall rippled the yellow-brown puddles of the film-studio car park. On the far side, in a blue SUV splashed with mud, the next group of ticket holders for the Star Wars Experience was already looking for a parking space. Kate checked her watch. The Death Star was theirs for another twenty minutes. Wed better get back in to Sophie, she said. The two women rushed their teas. Zoe looked at Kate over the rim of her cup. Be honest with me, she said. Is Sophie dying? No, Kate said, without hesitation. The chemo going to work. Im one hundred percent sure shes going to get better. Honestly? Weve proved it before. When she first got sick, the chemo worked and she went into remission. This is just a little relapse, and now the chemo will work again. There must have been doubt in Zoes face because Kate began pursing her lips and nodding her head determinedly. Zoe watched the certainty building, going up the dial and into the red. One hundred and five percent. One hundred and ten. Okay, she said. Okay. But do you really think these day trips help? They dont just exhaust her? Kate smiled. Let me worry about that. Let me ask, at least. As your friend. Kates smile stiffened. Would I put her through all this if it wasnt helping? Zoe touched her arm. Of course not. But are you sure you dont organize these trips slightly for your own peace of mind? Just so you can be doing everything in your power as a mother, I mean. What, and youre an expert on motherhood now? Zoe recoiled as though shed been slapped. Slowly, she collected herself and looked down, twisting her hands together. Kate faltered, then stepped forward and took her hand. Shit, Zo, Im sorry. Zoe turned her head aside. No, no, youre right. I was out of order. I know what you go through. Kate moved to put herself back in Zoes eye line, then held her gaze. I know what you go through too. This must make you think about Adam. Its fine, said Zoe. And you know what else? Your hairs all fucked up. Kate laughed. Oh, have I got helmet hair? You think thats bad? Ive got Stormtroopers tits. I swear to God, these costumes are so tight. Under the relief, Zoes heart was still snagged on the wire of the fence her friend had put up between them. She wished she hadnt brought up the subject. She needed to learn when to keep her mouth shut, which was nearly always. She looked down into her Styrofoam cup, where an inch of tea the same yellow-brown as the puddles was reaching the temperature at which the warmth no longer disguised the bitterness. You could get tired of being unattached, of having no partner to undertake patiently the task of winnowing your days from your demons and showing you which was which. You could get to hoping for a companion of your own and yes, even a child despite the overwhelming evidence that children too were bottomless, echoing wells of need into which exhausted

women like this one, her best friend Kate endlessly dropped brave little pebbles of certainty and anxiously listened for a splash that never came. We really should get back to the Death Star, Kate said, pulling Zoe back from miles away. Hmm? Kate pulled her Stormtrooper helmet back on, and her voice was changed to a metallic rasp by the modulator built into the face guard. The Death Star? Big round naughty spaceship? Promising acting debut, got a bit typecast, never appeared in another film after the Star Wars series? Zoe rolled her eyes. Oooh, said Kate. Touchy. Zoe flicked her hair back, suddenly irritated. Listen, Kate said, its that time of the month and Ive got a blaster, so dont start. Zoe looked carefully at her, gauging the extent to which things might now be back to normal between them. It was hard to tell. Kate might be smiling, or she might not. This was the thing with Stormtroopers: they only showed the multipurpose expression molded into the face plates of their helmets a hard-wearing, wipe-clean, semimournful expression equally appropriate for learning that ones souffl, or ones empire, had fallen. Command module of the Death Star The battle station hung in the cold black vacuum of space. Sophie Argall could feel the vast metal mass of it under her feet. It was huge. It had its own gravity, though it didnt seem as strong as Earth gravity. Sophie realized there was extra bounce in her legs. Standing on the bridge of the Death Star was like standing at home would be, if Dr. Hewitt had just told you that your leukemia had gone into remission. Sophie reviewed the data. She was eight. The Death Star was younger. Sophie didnt know by how much. The Death Star was defended by 10,000 turbo laser batteries and 768 tractor beam projectors. A crew of 265,675 kept it running, kept it clean, and did the cooking and laundry for 52,276 gunners, 607,360 troops, 25,984 Stormtroopers, 42,782 ship support staff, and 167,216 pilots and technicians. Despite these precautions, both the Death Stars built before this one had been destroyed. Statistically, the chances of a Death Star surviving combat were zero. The chances of Sophie surviving acute lymphoblastic leukemia were better than ninety percent. When you considered the odds, it was presumptuous of the battle station to be exerting a gravitational pull on her. Sophie knew the stats by heart. She had drawn pictures of the Death Star a thousand times, in felt tip and in crayon, but nothing had prepared her for standing here, on the bridge, looking out through the portholes at the stars. She listened to the low electronic hum of control circuits and the soft cool hiss of the air conditioning. They had taken the Argall family car a silver-gray Renault Scnico to the spaceport at the film studios: Sophie, her parents, and Zoe. The car ride had taken three hours and thirty-six minutes, which Sophie had timed using the stopwatch feature on her iPod. She listened to the original Star Wars soundtrack by John Williams and the London Symphony Orchestra. She made crosshairs with her fingers and aimed them out of the windows on the motorway. The Nissans and the Fords were friendly Rebel craft. The Mercedes and the BMWs were hostile TIE fighters. Theyd used a transporter to get from the film studio car park to the Death Star. It had taken forty-nine seconds. The transporter had looked like an ordinary lift, but it hadnt been. Dad had been captured with her, as soon as they stepped out of the transporter. As far as Sophie knew, Mum and Zoe remained at liberty somewhere within the Death Star. Sophie was still amazed to be here. She had to keep looking down at herself, to check that all the atoms in her arms and legs had made it okay through the transporter beam. Two Stormtroopers patrolled the bridge in their pristine white armor. They checked the settings of every switch on every control panel. They spoke to each other in terse, metallic voices. Their helmets had full visors so you couldnt see their faces, but you could tell they were nervous. There was a rumor that Darth Vader was arriving in his personal shuttle. Sophies mouth was dry and her heart pounded. She held her dads hand and squeezed tightly. She knew none of this was actually real, but that didnt mean it wasnt happening. On the rare days she was well enough to go into school now, school never felt real either. The other girls had moved on. They were into YouTube, and they thought she was weird for still being into kids stuff. She tried to get into the things they were into, but the truth was that she didnt want to learn the dance moves from pop videos. She wanted to be a Jedi knight. Leukemia didnt feel real either. They put tubes into you and pumped you full of chemicals that made your ears ring and your skin go so transparent that you could see right inside yourself. You could touch the tubes with your fingers and look at your tendons with your own eyes. It was possible that you werent dreaming, it just didnt seem very likely. After a while you stopped worrying about what was real. The rare school days lasted six and a half hours, and then they were gone. Life lasted till you were very old with odds of ninety percent or for another few months, with odds of ten percent. Being here on the Death Star would last as long as it lasted. That was how you had to look at it. Her dad knelt and put an arm around her. Youre not scared are you, big girl? Sophie shook her head. No. She made her voice sound as though the question had been stupid, but Vader was coming and the truth was that she was more scared than she had ever been in her life more scared than shed been in January when Dr. Hewitt had told her the leukemia was back. It was important not to worry Dad,

though. It was harder for him. You prisoners, stop talking! said one of the Stormtroopers. Then, in a softer voice: Are you guys alright for drinks and so on? Can I get you a juice or a biscuit? Sophie asked, Is there Ribena? Magic word? said the Stormtrooper. Is there Ribena, please? Of course, said the Stormtrooper, and produced a carton from a blue isotherm bag. Weve got one of those bags at home, said Sophie. Wow, said the second Stormtrooper. Small universe. The first Stormtrooper spun around to look at the second, then quickly turned back to Sophie. Prisoner! said the Stormtrooper. Our master is expected at any moment. When he arrives, you must stand at attention. If you are invited to speak to him, you must address him as Lord Vader. What must you address him as? Lord Vader, said Sophie in a small voice. Whats that? I cant hear you, said the Stormtrooper, cupping a gloved hand to the place on the helmet where an ear would be. Lord Vader! said Sophie, as loud as she could. She was tired from the long car journey. Her voice had a slow puncture and it was letting out air. Thatll do, said the Stormtrooper, and went off to whisper to the other. A hush fell on the bridge. The Stormtroopers stiffened to attention. Sophies legs trembled. The music of The Imperial March sounded from hidden speakers. An involuntary whimper came from Sophies throat. A blast door opened. Clouds of dry ice billowed. Darth Vader emerged from his vapors, stood mightily in silhouette, and stepped onto the bridge. His respirator hissed and clicked. He stared at Sophie and Dad, and nodded slowly. So, he said. The captured Rebel fighters. Sophie felt urine running down her legs, shockingly hot. It splashed on the brushed steel floor. The noise was undeniable. She looked at the pooled urine on the floor and felt tears coming. This was going to really freak Dad out. She looked up at him. Im fine, she said. Im fine. There was a moment of surprised silence on the bridge. Vaders respirator wheezed. Uh are you alright? he said. I think shes let a bit of wee go, Dad whispered. What? said Vader. Oh, where are my manners? I mean I think shes let a bit of wee go, Lord Vader. Vader held up his hands, black gloved palms outwards. Hey, he said. Dont make me the bad guy here. The nice Stormtrooper came over, knelt beside Sophie, and put an arm around her. Its okay, the Stormtrooper whispered. It happens. Sophie looked up at Dads face, which was lined with concern. She couldnt bear that shed done this to him. She began to cry. Darth Vader bent down and patted Sophie on the shoulder. Whats that tube going into you? he asked. Its its a Hi Hi Hickman line, Sophie sobbed. Dad folded her into his arms. Its to get the chemo into her. Ha! Vader said. You call that a line? You should see me when I take this helmet off. I have so many wiggly lines going into me, I look like a plate of spaghetti. Sophie giggled between her sobs. A perfect green bubble of snot swelled from her nose, stretched to molecular thinness, and shrank back again, like the membrane of a calling frog. Youre a very brave young lady, said Vader. After her tears, Sophie had a hammering headache and a rending in her guts and a pain in her side that made her want to curl up. Im fine, she said, looking up at Dad. I actually feel great. He smiled. She smiled back. This was good. Afterwards, when theyd got Sophie cleaned up, Darth Vader lifted her to sit on his shoulders. They watched the huge monitor screens on the bridge, which showed the galaxy lying before them and shimmering. Would you like to choose a world to destroy? Vader said. Why? said Sophie. Vader shrugged. Its just something I offer my guests. Does it have to be a world? Could you blow up my bad blood cells? Air sighed from the grille of Vaders face plate. He waved a gloved hand at the starfield. I can do you anything on that map, he said. Sophie pointed at a bright star in Orion. Lets say those stars are my white blood cells and that ones a bad one. Fine, said Vader. Commence death ray initiation sequence. Sophie held up her hand. Sorry, but its not actually a death ray if its saving my life. Vader pointed at the big red button labeled DEATH RAY. He said, Its the only ray weve got. Oh. Okay. Vader crouched down to let Sophie press the button. A low drone built slowly to a crescendo. The lights flickered. They all watched the monitor screens as the eight green beams of the death ray converged into one, shot out across space, and heated the core of Sophies bad blood cell until it exploded in a shower of bright sparks across the blackness of space. They watched the sparks crackle and fade back into perpetual darkness. Car park, Pinewood Studios, Iver Heath, Buckinghamshire Jack carried Sophie out to the car while Kate and Zoe were still changing out of the Stormtrooper costumes. She was shattered. She clung on around his neck and buried her face in his chest. Jack shifted her weight onto one arm. Her head lolled. He extracted the car key from the back pocket of his jeans, popped open the car door, and eased Sophie into her child safety seat. He handled her like a patient cop with a drunken perp, laying one hand on the crown of her head to prevent her banging it on the door frame. One of the last remaining clumps of her hair came detached. Lifted on the wind, it rose briefly into the ragged sky, then floated down into the mud. Jack followed its progress with his eyes, then turned back to his daughter. He didnt say anything. Sophie sat with her eyes half-closed, uncooperative while Jack worked to install her. She was sluggish, like a reptile waiting for the sun to warm her. On the other side of the car park, mammalian children in red Wellington boots and striped bobble hats giggled and splashed each

other with the tawny water from the puddles. Sophies Hickman line was in exactly the wrong place for the seat belt where it rode across her collarbone, so they always needed to tuck a folded tea towel under the belt. He checked that it protected the Hickman line, and that the seat belt still ran smoothly. He squeezed Sophies knee. How about that Vader? he said. Her eyes came open. He was so cool, she said. You remember how hes actually Luke Skywalkers father? Jack grinned. He is? Sophie nodded. He actually tells him? In Empire Strikes Back? Right at the end? Jack made a face as if he were weighing up the information. You dont want to believe everything a guy in black leather knee boots tells you. The animation left Sophies face and a worried, provisional expression took its place. What? Jacks stomach fell. He was an idiot for breaking the bubble. Sorry, big girl. Forget it. He went to stroke her cheek, but she turned her head away and folded her arms. Now Jack felt terrible for teasing her. This was what she dreamed about what she believed in while the other girls on their street rode their bikes and had Hannah Montana sleepovers. The guy who played Darth Vader had handled the Sophie situation pretty well. Better than Jack would have done, probably. People were actually okay. The man probably made what? ten quid an hour, eighty a day? In that stifling black costume, patiently helping under-tens select worlds to destroy. Jack wondered if he should have tipped Vader. He got into the drivers seat and made sure that the Hickman line emergency kit was still in the glove box of the car beside the sterilizing gel, in case Sophie began hemorrhaging through the line and it needed to be clamped. Can you stop kicking the back of my seat, please? Sorry, Dad. He plugged his phone into the cigarette lighter to charge, in case something happened en route and they needed to call in an emergency. He pulled the road atlas from beneath the passenger seat and memorized the route home to Manchester. Then he checked which hospitals were close to the route and tried to recall which ones had accident and emergency departments. This was in case Sophie began fitting, or lost consciousness, or was stung by a wasp or bee and needed a precautionary injection of adrenaline to stop her small body from going into shock. Can you stop kicking my seat? Sorry. He winked at her in the rearview mirror. He didnt mind, really. If anything he liked it found it reassuring that she wound him up in the ways a normal kid might. A movement in the mirror caught his eye, and Jack turned in his seat to see Kate and Zoe starting out across the car park. Zoes head was down. Kate was walking slowly, making it easy for Zoe to come alongside her if she wanted to, but Zoe walked a few paces behind. He wondered if she regretted having come along. He leaned across to make sure that the small cylinder of emergency oxygen for Sophie was accessible in the side pocket of the passenger door. He checked its air line for kinks or obstructions. He gave the spigot on the head of the cylinder a quarter turn and put the oxygen mask to his ear to check it was delivering. Then he closed the oxygen tap and replaced the cylinder in the door pocket. He looked up again and adjusted the rearview mirror to watch Zoe and Kate approach the car. They paused while something was said, then they briefly hugged. He knew he wasnt the most sensitive observer but the signs were hard to miss this morning: these rushes the two women made to the brink of disintegration, followed by the check, and the careful backing down. Theyd been like this all the way down here in the car. It was always an intricate friendship to navigate, this bittersweet affection of rivals, and yet it seemed more urgent today. Kate got in the back seat next to Sophie, took her cheeks in her hands, and went to kiss her on the forehead. Sophie squirmed and took evasive action, the way any healthy eight-year-old tomboy would. Jack smiled. You collected these signs of normality. You took them to the bank, knowing that if you saved up enough of them, then the compound interest would eventually grow your deposit into a child in remission. Zoe got into the passenger seat next to Jack. He glanced across at her. Everything okay? She tilted her head. Why wouldnt it be? Jack said nothing. What? she said. Lets go, for Gods sake, said Kate from the back. He shrugged, released the hand brake, and reversed five yards. Sophie announced that she needed a wee. Jack smiled. It was all the Ribena: the Stormtroopers had been very free with it. He eased the car five yards forward again, reapplied the hand brake, and sat looking straight ahead. Kate undid Sophies seat belt and helped her to go at the edge of the car park, tucked away behind a van. Jack and Zoe watched the pair of them. Youre more dad than human now, she said. He ignored the jibe. Youre frazzled today. Zoe snorted. You know how to make a girl feel special. Overtraining? Overthinking, maybe. It was good of you to come. It means a lot to Kate. He let himself look across at her. She said, Sometimes it all gets a bit heavy, you know? Jack gripped the wheel a little tighter. Are you okay with it? Zoe thumped her chest lightly above her heart. It just gets me more than it used to. I mean, Sophies so ill But youre fine? Zoe hesitated. Fine she said, seeming to test the feel of the word in her mouth as if it hadnt been used for some time, like housewife, or Rhodesia. Fine, she said. Yeah. I mean fuck, how could I not be? Jack turned to look back through the windscreen, and they sat in silence as Kate pulled Sophies jeans back up and brought her back to the car. What are you two talking about? Kate said as

she swung open the car door. The Tour de France, said Zoe. Oh, I've heard of that, said Kate. She reseat Sophie and reattached her seat belt. Jack watched in the mirror and knew what his wife was thinking: how skinny their child was becoming. In three months of relapse she'd lost half the weight she'd put on in three years of remission. He reached out a hand behind the headrest of his seat, and Kate took it, and they squeezed. The pressure created a fixed point in time, to which so many accelerating events could be anchored. With Sophie safely strapped in, Jack drove away. Sophie? Yeah? Next time you kick the back of my seat, I'm taking you back to the Death Star to be brought up by the Sith. Sorry, Dad. He slowed almost to nothing on the speed bumps of the film studios exit road, and he checked in the rearview mirror to make sure that Sophie wasn't jolted too much. When he pulled out onto the main road, he drove defensively. He'd been on a course to learn how, since it was unlikely that any kind of road traffic accident would improve Sophie's prognosis. Jack planned in which direction it would be safe to swerve in case the green Mercedes waiting at the upcoming junction pulled out early. When it didn't, his eyes moved on to the next car ahead, and then to the mini-roundabout after that. Sophie? Yeah? Kicking. Sorry, Dad. Jack was thirty-two years old, he was an Olympic gold medalist, and he was one of the top five quickest male cyclists in the world. He said, Sophie? If I'm going too fast you just tell me, okay? On the motorway they drove in the slow lane, wedged between lorries. Sophie knew it was to keep her safe. This was the effect she had on people: they drove twenty percent slower, they gripped the handles of boiling saucepans twenty percent harder, they chose their words one fifth more carefully. No one was going to blow a tire and crash her, or spill a pan and scald her, or say the word worry or die. She wanted to tell them that it all just made you twenty percent more scared, but she couldn't do that. They did it to cope with how they felt. She felt bad for making them feel that way. Out the side window, she saw normal families cruising past. They were mostly families who weren't on the good side like the Argalls or on the dark side like the Vaders. They were families who weren't anything except on their way to the zoo or the shops. Quite often you could see them squabbling as they drove past. Their mouths moved crossly behind the glass. It was like a museum of human families, where the display cases moved past you without labels. Sophie wrote the labels in her head: Mum Bought the Wrong Crisps, or Dad Won't Let Me and Chloe Listen to the Chart Show. When Sophie got bored of watching the other families, she watched Star Wars in her head. She'd seen the films so many times now, she didn't need the DVDs. She watched the AT-AT Walkers attacking the Rebel base on the ice planet Hoth, to take her mind off how sick she was feeling. She felt so bad today, it was scaring her. Everything hurt. Her head pounded, her vision was blurry, and her bones ached the way they did when it was freezing and you were out on a long walk and the rain just kept getting harder. Waves of nausea rolled over her and gave her the icy chills. It was incredible how Skywalker flew his fighter ship. It was because he was a Jedi. There were special cells in your blood, called midichlorians, that made you a Jedi. Sophie knew the changes in her blood that Dr. Hewitt thought were leukemia were actually just the start of midichlorians forming. You couldn't expect Earth doctors to diagnose it right: they would be lucky to see a single case in a lifetime of medical practice. Even so, when she felt as sick as she did today, there were times when she thought she would never become a Jedi. Even at sixty miles per hour, she was uncomfortable. The rumble of the road surface was shaking her up and making her insides hurt. How would she ever be able to fly a ship at hundreds of miles per hour between the feet of an attacking Imperial Walker? She swallowed. It's okay if you want to go faster, she said. Dad shook his head. We're good like this. Sophie looked at Dad's wiry forearms on the steering wheel, and then she looked at her own. She squeezed her fists to make her muscles bulge. You okay? said Mum. What are you doing? Nothing. The veins in her arms were dark blue and thin and led nowhere, as if someone had taken a biro and drawn the wiring diagram of a useless droid on her body before stretching human skin over it. Her dad's veins bulged like cables under the skin and made purposeful lines, powering the blood back to his heart. Dad was the strongest man in the world, probably. She didn't understand how Dad could look at her at the fragile, sickly sight of her and not be scared. She had to try to seem strong and brave. It's okay if you swerve a bit, she said. I don't mind. Dad looked at her in the rearview mirror. And why would I do that? There's actually a TIE fighter chasing us. In the front passenger seat, Zoe looked serious. Right. Divert maximum power to the aft deflector shields please, Sophie. Sophie grinned and pressed the button on the side of the child seat that executed Zoe's order. Fire the turbolasers! said Zoe, and Sophie did. Make sure you lock on to their coordinates! Sophie was amazed that Zoe was so good at this. When the TIE fighter was destroyed, and they were all safe again, she relaxed in her seat. Thanks, Han! Zoe turned and there were tears in her eyes, which was something that Sophie didn't get. She hadn't complained and she'd tried really hard not to look ill, and it made her a bit angry and sad if people felt sorry for her. She made sure to keep smiling. It's

okay, she told Zoe. I actually feel great! Beetham Tower, 301 Deansgate, Manchester Zoe got out of the car. As it drove off she waved the Argalls away and watched Sophies new-moon face watching her back, through the rear window. The child's eyes fastened unself-consciously on her own, the way her brother Adams used to, and the fact that there was no reproach in them only made her feel worse. She realized she was actually trembling. She had hardly slept, and then the Death Star had upset her, and the car journey back had been worse. Sophie really looked as if she was on her way out, and Kate was in denial, and Jack well, she couldn't decide what Jack thought. A single day with that family had felt like the whole of her life. She didn't know how they could bear it. There was an insane amount of emotion, but nothing sufficiently concentrated to cry about at any particular second. It was impossible. She decided she would go up to her apartment and drink coffee. That seemed a reasonable thing to do. She could easily imagine a woman with more manageable emotions than she had at this moment saying to herself, You know what? I think I'll grab an espresso. This was the best she could hope for today: to do the things that ordinary people did, and to hope that by some kind of sympathetic magic their ordinary sense of well-being would accrue to her. The early April rain was falling. The pavement in front of the Beetham Towers lobby was cordoned off with tall orange cones and red-and-white safety barriers. A yellow crane was hoisting olive trees up into the sky, one by one. Zoe stopped to watch. There were a dozen trees waiting to go up. They were eight feet high, with their trunks swathed in bubble wrap and their roots balled into orange sacks. In the vortices of wind that spun around the foot of the high tower, the undersides of the olive leaves flashed as they turned, all at once, as if at an unseen signal, like shoals of silver fish. Zoe wrinkled her eyes against the rain and watched a tree spinning on its halter, mirrored in the windows of the tower as it rose up into the slate-gray sky. The lift had been going on for two days now. The trees were going up to the penthouse, one floor above her own apartment. Management was making a green space, with birds and plants and a water feature. It would be nice up there a souvenir of Earth. Zoe wanted to watch the trees going up but she couldn't stay too long out on the street before people would begin to recognize her. Over the road from the tower there was a ninety-six-sheet backlit billboard. It showed an image of her own face, twenty feet high, her big green eyes framed with green hair and green lipstick. Her hand, the nails painted green, was holding a bottle of Perrier dripping with condensate. Best served cold, said the text on the advertisement. Across the right-hand third of the billboard, as tall as her face, were the Olympic rings glazed with a frosting of ice. She looked up, to where the looming orange shape of a wrapped tree was disappearing into the cloud base. The smudge of color hung for a moment at the limit of vision, then surrendered to gray. Zoe felt a panic that she couldn't pin down. She slipped away before any passersby spotted her, and entered the lobby of the tower head-down. She hurried across the marble and took the lift to her apartment on the forty-sixth floor. Inside, with the roar of the city five hundred feet below, she dropped her single Yale key into a wide pewter dish that served only that purpose. The chime the key made in striking the dish was the only sound. Beside the dish, a very old dented aluminium water bottle was the only other item on the black high-gloss hall stand. She removed her trainers, balled newspaper into the toes, racked them, and put on the gray felt slippers that were exactly where she had left them. She tried to remember the name of the man she had left sleeping in her bed. He had been sweet. Tall, Italian-looking, a few years younger than her. Carlo, she was pretty sure, or Marco. A something-o with a grin that said this was in no way serious. Still, sometimes you hoped. She called, Hello? No answer. There was no note on the fridge, no message on the kitchen counter. She checked the living area nothing. In her bedroom the bed was trashed she remembered them doing that and his boxer shorts were in the corner where she had thrown them. The rest of his clothes were gone. Her four gold medals weren't on the shelf where she had put them, and for a second her heart stopped. Then she saw them glinting under the edge of a pillow and picked them up. She held the cold metal to her chest, and sighed. He was an asshole for not leaving his number, but he wasn't a thief. She supposed she had been lucky again, if you could call it luck. There was a stillness in the apartment, and maybe the ghost of the smell of him. She made an espresso with the built-in coffee machine and went to sit on an armless, low-backed charcoal-gray sofa in the living area. Clouds obscured the view from the floor-to-ceiling windows. She had only been living here a week. On the two days of clear weather she had been able to see the National Cycling Centre, where she trained and competed, three miles away to the east. It had looked like the domed gray back of a beetle; as if it might crawl away from her through the understory of industrial estates and logistics hubs that fringed the city. Looking to the horizon through the binoculars the estate agent had left, she had also seen the mountains of Snowdonia, the Anglican cathedral in Liverpool, and Blackpool Tower and beach. Her third night she had watched lightning storms and seen the wind boiling over the Cheshire plains. Now there was nothing to see, only gray. It was hard not to

feel like a ghost. Zoe held up her hand in front of her face and was amazed she couldn't see through it. She stood, moved to the kitchen area, and ate a dry slice of multigrain bread. The texture of it was reassuring. She drank a glass of water and went back to sit in the living area. She wondered if this was supposed to be her life now, moving alone between these designated spaces, inhabiting them according to patterns of usage envisioned by the architect. Paolo that had been his name. She flipped open her laptop and found him on Facebook. He was even better-looking than she'd remembered. It had been a nice night. The sex had been good, but it was more than that. There had been a tenderness something that had moved her. She was slightly surprised he hadn't left a note. She closed her eyes and let herself believe that he was on his way up in the lift, right now, with flowers. She smiled. It was silly, but you had to believe these things were possible. Just beyond your sight, life might be moving in ways that were moments away from being revealed to you. It was a mistake to take disappointments at face value. You were only ever a tap at the door and a dozen fresh-cut blooms away from happy. She opened her eyes and clicked on the man's profile. Her smile disappeared. She read what he had written about her and saw the photos he had posted from her apartment, half-naked, with her Olympic medals around his neck. Then she read again what he'd written. She was insane in the sack. She was aggressive. She had to be on top. She phoned her agent. I think I might have a slight issue, she said carefully. Afterwards she put the phone down beside her on the sofa, leaned back, and looked around her at this place she'd bought with a thirty percent deposit that the Perrier sponsorship had afforded her, plus a million-pound mortgage that she had no prospect of continuing to pay unless she won gold in London in four months time and landed another sponsorship deal. The extra pressure helped her push through the pain threshold in training. You had to keep yourself desperate as wild as you'd been when you'd had nothing. You had to double up your stake each time, or watch as someone more frightened than you were rode you off their wheel. It amused her that this place she'd bought to scare herself was trying so hard to be soothing. The walls were painted in Farrow Ball. They had the quality of neither reflecting nor absorbing. The shade was called Archive. The tall plate-glass windows responded to the external light level, sparing one's pupils the stress of it all. On a low ironwood coffee table beside the sofa there was the new copy of Marie Claire with Zoe's face on the cover, smiling. She flipped through it. She was fiercely determined. She was ruthless and unstoppable. She was driven by her demons. This is what they wrote. None of it felt like her. She closed her eyes and tried with her breathing to calm the panic that was spreading from her stomach. There was no traffic noise, no sound of the neighbors' TV, nothing. This high above the world's surface, the thing the estate agent had marketed as privacy felt quite a lot like solitude. This high above the city she'd climbed out of, the silence seemed irrevocable. She didn't know what she'd been thinking. Maybe that she could leave her problems forty-six floors below, on Earth. She tried to focus on her breathing. She wished Tom were here. He would know what to say to help her work through how she was feeling. Since she'd met him, at nineteen, she'd trusted him to get her through the difficult days. The trouble was that the difficult days weren't the race days anymore. Competing in an Olympics didn't scare her now. The thought of stepping up into the full roar of the crowd, in London, seemed simple and natural and good. It was ordinary days now that frightened her—the endless Tuesday mornings and Wednesday afternoons of real life, the days you had to steer through without the benefit of handlebars. Off the bike she was like a smoker without cigarettes, never sure what to do with her hands. As soon as she got off the bike, her heart was expected to perform all these baffling secondary functions like loving someone and feeling something and belonging somewhere when all she'd ever trained it to do was pump blood. She shuddered, and picked up her phone to call Tom. She pulled up his number and paused. She knew he would ask her to formulate the problem for him, and she tried to think what to say this time. Probably she should lead with a question about her diet, or her Pilates regimen, and then let Tom work out what was really wrong. This was often what she did now, when she called him. She was a champion, after all, and it was humiliating just to say out loud, Please, I'm not coping. She hesitated, gazing out into the gray mist that cloaked the city. An Italian olive tree ascended silently past the window, spinning slowly as it rose. *Revue de presse*' Sport is so packed with tension and surprise that when authors or scriptwriters use it as the basis for fictional drama I always end up thinking the real thing is preferable by far. Gold is the exception. Set in the world of elite track cycling Chris Cleave's novel follows the ambitions of three very different cyclists with Olympic dreams. He captures the intensity of the sport with aplomb and if you have doubts about whether romance could flourish with the ferocity it does here then, well, look at Laura Trott and Jason Kenny, Team GB gold medalists, who made the front pages with that kiss' (Times Book Club) A thrilling and quite literally heart-pounding story... You'll never look at an Olympic champion in quite the same way again. (Richard Madeley, Richard And Judy Book Club Spring 2013) Cleave is an

acutely intelligent wordsmith. Some of the sentences cut so deep you want to scream out in pain and recognition . . . This is an inspirational and moving novel in so many ways, and everyone should read it. (The Times)The wait has been worth it . . . As with all Cleave's work, GOLD probes the limit of what its protagonists will do to identify and protect what they really cherish. And that, in Cleave's confident hands, truly is exhilarating. (Independent)GOLD is a very good novel . . . strikingly well written . . . it has that rare gift of getting past the urban sneer to move and gratify, to stir us because it does, indeed, matter. It is bold and brave and, when you're on your way to the games this summer, and the person opposite you on the train is sobbing hot tears on to their Kindle, you'll have a pretty good idea what they're reading. (Observer)Novels about sport are notoriously hard to pull off . . . GOLD , Chris Cleave's third novel, is a skilful demonstration of the form . . . This is no niche book for aficionados looking for a brief summer distraction. Instead, cycling is the backdrop for a deeper exploration of the struggle between the physical and the psychological... GOLD works as a novel because Mr Cleave manages to make the reader care about what it takes to win - or even to take part . . . The small details speak loudly . . . Cleave knows what makes a good story. Here, his concern is not with macho physicality or crossing a line, but with the endless and enduring human endeavours: love, death and what is left when hopes and dreams are crushed or fulfilled. A book to savour long after the Olympic games are over. (The Economist)'Cleave does a magnificent job of exploring the emotional terrain that top athletes must travel in order to become champions [...] Cleave has undoubtedly put in the hours where research is concerned, as the technicalities and the (actual) rule change that provides one of the novel's bigger twists gleam with authenticity'. (Independent on Sunday)Cleave is excellent on the technical details of the athletic life which, along with its physical and mental demands, requires further personal sacrifices, both of privacy and happy relationships . . . This book overflows with astute perceptions. One of the most moving is the parallel drawn between the athletes' need to live in the present . . . and the more devastating necessity for the parents of a sick child to not consider the horrors the future may bring. (TLS)The race scenes have true visceral intensity, leaving the reader feeling as breathless as a cyclist. From start to finish, this is a truly Olympic-level literary achievement. (Publishers Weekly)If there's one Olympic-themed novel you ought to read this summer it's Chris Cleave's well-imagined and researched look at just what it takes to compete at the highest level. (Daily Mirror)Extremely moving . . . It really has that same thing as *The Other Hand* and *Incendiary*, where you feel a bit lonely and annoyed until someone else you know has read it and you can discuss it with them . . . I really loved it and I do think it's one of those books that you want to talk to people about . . . no one will be able to read it then put it down with a gentle sigh. They will be pressing it on people. (Alex Heminsley, BBC 6 Music)With its tightly plotted twists and turns this is a novel of extremes - of the heights a body can reach in pursuit of Olympic cycling gold, and of what the heart can endure in the face of love, parenthood and an ill child. Cleave's writing is nothing short of poetic and this has to be our (very early) tip for the best book of 2012. (Glamour)The Olympics are almost upon us and if like me you are given to wondering whether it's possible to be a superhuman athlete and a simple human being, GOLD is here to help . . . What counts about this thrilling novel are the characters: the flaws and fears that fuel their need to compete, the drives and dreads that bring them together and threaten to bring them to blows . . . Cleave artfully interleaves moments of high-tensile emotion with no less taut descriptions of action on the track . . . I don't know about Kate and Zoe but Chris Cleave deserves a medal. (Daily Express)Cleave's brilliantly plotted, nail-biting, and emotional tale dramatizes the anguish and triumphs of ambition and sacrifice, fame and heartbreak to celebrate the true gold of love. (Booklist)If you are looking for a book to read to avoid the brouhaha of the Olympics this year but still want to get a taste of what all the fuss is about, this would be a superb choice . . . Cleave's style is highly readable, with plenty of humour and some wry similes and metaphors . . . It would take a cold heart not to be moved at some point in this book. (thebookbag.co.uk)Compelling, dramatic and . . . pure gold. (Scotsman)Compelling and heart-wrenching. (Good Housekeeping)GOLD is immensely enjoyable . . . The writing is energetic and urgent, and, far from being geeky, the descriptions of bike racing are among the most poetic passages. Best of all are the powerful, dark moments where we glimpse the cost of obsession with something as painful as cycling. (Financial Times)A riveting read because at the heart of it is the unseen, private world of our greatest athletes. (Press Association)Underpinning their stories is poignant tragedy, fierce ambition, hope, failure and a glorious twist in the tale that will take your breath away. I tore through the pages with such rabid abandon that, by the time I looked up again, it was dark outside. (Herald)If you've read Chris Cleave's earlier novels you'll know how well he wraps searing social commentary in a gripping and engaging narrative. In GOLD he focuses his insightful gaze on the world of Olympic-level speed cycling . . . It's the perfect counterpoint to

all the Olympic mania - but it's one for sports fans too. (Irish Times)A gloriously fast-paced romp of a sporting novel that's a must-read in this Olympic year. Thrilling and deeply touching, it'll have you sobbing. (FHM)Gold is an emotional rollercoaster ride as it explores what drives people to succeed and what they choose to sacrifice for success. (Choice)This bestseller-bound, tightly told story is unusually compelling . . . Cleave is that rare creature -- an Oxford graduate with an emotional IQ of Mensa proportions. Add some hard research to give his characters credibility and you have a dream team of story-telling ingredients. (Evening Standard)'It is a timely work of fiction, but Cleave is meticulous in his research' (Claire Byrne, Irish Times Books of the Year)