

No gavels or silly wigs: meet the barrister advising legal TV dramas

Jeanette Ashmole, a lawyer and crime consultant, has worked on ITV's show about Ruth Ellis, the last woman hanged in Britain, but her own story is also gripping



Jeanette Ashmole, orphaned at the age of nine, funded the shortfall in her fees by going on a game show

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hen ITV's drama about the last woman hanged in Britain hits screens next month, there

will be no inappropriate gavels on the judge's bench or comedy wigs on the lawyers.

That is because Jeanette Ashmole, a barrister and television crime consultant, was on set to ensure the legal accuracy and verisimilitude of the show, *A Cruel Love: The Ruth Ellis Story*, in which the veteran actor

Nigel Havers plays his grandfather, the Old Bailey judge, Cecil Havers, who presided over the trial and condemned Ellis to death.

But Ashmole's own story is as compelling as Ellis's and would merit a drama of its own. Orphaned by the age of nine, she left her foster home and school at 16 after gaining 12 GCSEs to move in with her 25-year-old boyfriend.



Ruth Ellis was a victim of abuse by the man she killed
HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

After working in several jobs and volunteering as a special constable, Ashmole developed an interest in the law. Having had a baby, she won a competition offering a scholarship to take a degree and went to the University of Derby to study law and criminology.

She then won a scholarship from Middle Temple to attend Bar school — although it left her £4,000 short of the funds she needed, so Ashmole went on a television game show to win the rest.

Born in Derby in 1984, one of five siblings, the family lived in a council house, where Ashmole would regularly have to call the police when her alcoholic and abusive father beat up her mother and brothers.

Her mother died when she was nine after being diagnosed with breast cancer two years earlier. She recalls being told about her mother's illness one morning just before being sent to catch the school bus as normal. "I remember crying in the playground and everybody wondering what was the matter with me. I didn't really know what cancer was, but I knew it wasn't good," she says.

Two months before her mother died, Ashmole and her sister were bridesmaids at their parents' wedding. She remembers being taken to the hospital to say goodbye to her heavily sedated mother. "It was awful. I remember crying and my auntie telling me to 'pull yourself together'," she says.

The children were split up and sent to live with relatives. Ashmole was fostered by her aunt and uncle, who lived next to a farm in Little Eaton, in Derbyshire. "I literally could not sleep for the silence," she says, recalling her first night there after her mother's death.

Ashmole struggled to make friends at her new school. "The children knew I'd been fostered by my aunt because my mother had died and they treated me like a victim". But one girl, Gina, "treated me exactly like any other kid" and the pair became life-long friends.

Soon after, her father, whom she had not seen regularly after her mother's death, was found dead in his flat. Ashmole was taken to see if she wanted any of his belongings. "One of the walls was covered in all our photographs," she recalls, and the marks on the bed where his body had lain for a week before being found had not been removed.

Feeling "pushed out" and lonely when her aunt and uncle started a family of their own, Ashmole threw herself into extracurricular activities, doing cross country running and playing hockey for Derbyshire. She was in all the school sports teams and the school drama club and joined Derby youth theatre.

"Sometimes I think, if I've had more support, maybe I'd have become an actor," Ashmole says. At 16, she moved in with her 25-year-old boyfriend, working variously in a clothes shop, an old people's home and supermarket to pay her way before joining the police force.

As a child in an abusive home, Ashmole had a positive experience of dealing with the police. "I looked up to police and wanted to do the same for others," she explains.

But she left the force on learning that she was pregnant, and lived in a council flat and on the bread line. Wondering what to do with her life, Ashmole saw a competition advertised in the local newspaper, offering the opportunity to go to university. She applied immediately — not really expecting to hear anything — and got a place at the University of Derby.



The ITV drama *A Cruel Love: The Ruth Ellis Story* follows the last woman to be hanged in Britain after she killed her partner

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Watching a trial at the local crown court in which two of her relatives were convicted of robbery, Ashmole set her heart on becoming a barrister. A scholarship from Middle Temple left her £4,000 short of the money she needed to pay her fees, living expenses and childcare, so she went on the ITV game show *A Minute to Win It*, where she succeeded to bag the rest.

Ashmole initially had no interviews for pupillage places and instead got a job at the Home Office, working as a Border Force officer and then as a criminal investigator. Four years later, she successfully gained a pupillage — the only snag was that it was in Goldsmith Chambers in London, which meant leaving her young children in Derby and moving to the capital. “I felt like the worst mother ever,” she says.

She got tenancy in Birmingham before joining the Crown Prosecution Service. Ashmole, 41, now combines her work as a direct access barrister with television consultancy. Her credits include *Coronation*

Street, the BBC's prison drama *Time*, and *Toxic Town*, which is on Netflix. On set, she says that "one of the things that I say immediately is that judges do not have gavels."

As Ellis was a victim of abuse by the man she killed, Ashmole suggests that there was enough evidence for the jury to have been given the choice of a manslaughter verdict due to provocation. However, she thinks it is unlikely that Ellis's grandson will achieve his goal of getting her posthumously pardoned.

"She was tried with the law that existed at the time and she admitted that she killed [Blakey] and that she intended to kill him," she says.