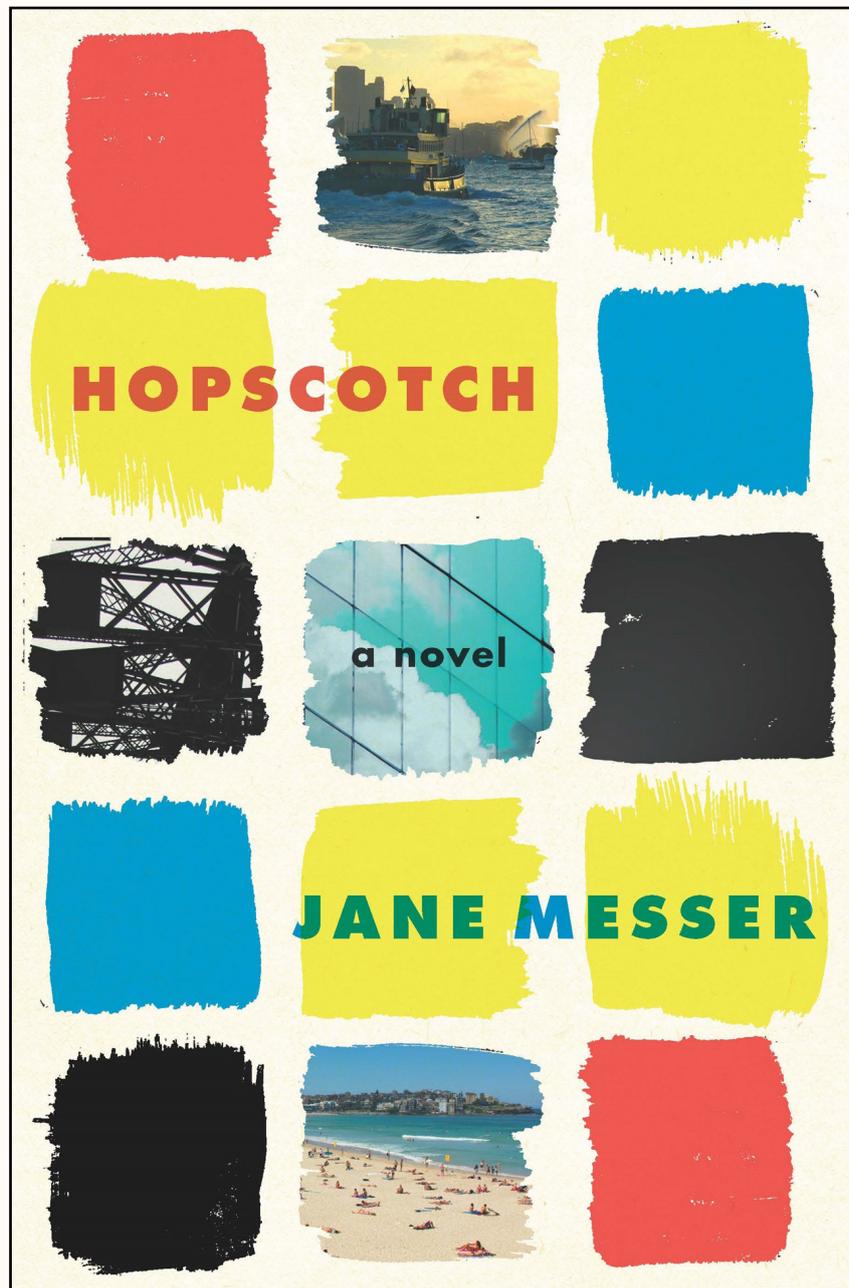


SPOTLIGHT TITLE  
APRIL

# HOPSCOTCH

by Jane Messer



PICADOR

# HOPSCOTCH

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## Praise for Jane Messer

'I can't begin to tell you how excited I am about this novel, which peels back the super-tanned, toned, glammed-up skin of Sydney to reveal its dysfunctional innards. It manages to be both a love letter to and an obituary for modern metropolitan life. I felt like I was reading my life as I dived into the stories of the deeply flawed but ultimately loveable members of the Rosen family. I can barely get through a few pages without either having a little cry, guffawing with laughter or wanting to punch a wall: such is the power of Jane's prose and the disarming insight of this novel. The female characters in this novel resonated with me in particular – they catapulted off the page and straight into my heart. Jane is an amazing writer, at the height of her powers, who doesn't just have her finger on the pulse of modern life, but has the heart of modern city existence gripped in her fist. A brave, challenging and exhilarating novel, one to be devoured and debated!'

Emma Rafferty, Editorial Manager

'... madness is not a subject like cricket or coffee. Either you go down deep or you don't do it at all. And that's where Messer has gone. The movement here is vertical, not horizontal. We're not travelling but tunnelling.'

*The Australian*

'The stories and essays are almost without exception tight and beautifully crafted. They are strikingly different in style and voice. Jane Messer has not rounded up the usual suspects ...'

*Australian Book Review*

'The greater the barriers, the more romantic the love. It's a rule of literature (think Abelard and Heloise, Romeo and Juliet) ... Provenance proves it yet again.'

*The Sydney Morning Herald*

'Jane Messer has created a rich hinterland for both characters that adds depth and heft to the narrative'

*The Age*

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## About *Hopscotch*

Sydney. 2008. Pre-GFC. *Hopscotch* charts a year in the lives of the Rosen family as they crash up against debt, deceit, disease and violence.

Forced into an early retirement due to illness, Sam Rosen has lost any semblance of control over his life. His frustration flares into rudeness and obstinacy frequently and bizarrely. His wife Rhonda, confined to the carer role, is feeling her identity ebb slowly away as her former life retreats further and further into the past.

Their eldest son Mark is over-invested, over-reaching and overwrought. As he lurches towards financial disaster, he can't bring himself to tell his wife Ingrid that they're losing money fast, and that her dream of starting a family might be the collateral damage.

Middle child Liza has always been independent and political, content to scrape through on her child-care worker's wage in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Then her biological clock goes off. She begins to plan a nursery at her elusive boyfriend's inner city apartment, but instead uncovers a seedy secret. Before she knows it, she's back at square one: single, underpaid, undervalued. And angry.

Baby of the family Jemma thinks that being mild-mannered will let her pass through life unharmed. Then, after dropping into a party at her neighbour's place one night, she wakes up bruised, naked and with no memory of what's happened. Her careful, uncurious life as a celibate finance lawyer falls away.

Frenetically paced and with comedic Franzescan prose, *Hopscotch* captures contemporary urban life, interrogating our endless capacity for self-destruction, longing and love, and asking why we think we could ever find peace in a city that's roaring with dysfunction.

## About Jane Messer

Born in Melbourne, and raised in London, San Francisco and Copenhagen, Jane Messer lives in Sydney where she teaches creative writing at Macquarie University. Her books include *Provenance*, *Night by Night* and *Bedlam - an Anthology of Sleepless Nights*. She is a regular contributor to *The Conversation*, has been a Director of the Australian Society of Authors and a judge of the Australian Vogel Literary Award. Recently she spent four months in Berlin with her son on a German Academic Exchange fellowship.

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**The release of *Hopsctoch* will be supported by**

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- Pitching for feature interview coverage in book pages nationally
- Review coverage across the literary press
- Review coverage in high profile women's and general interest magazines
- Online coverage on fiction and literary blogs

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## A conversation with Jane Messer

**Q: Your novel *Hopscotch* centres around the Rosen family: Sam and Rhonda and their grown-up children Mark, Liza and Jemma: why did you choose this character structure to explore *Hopscotch*'s themes?**

There's always a bucket list of ideas that I want to work with for a novel, and the only way to approach this novel's themes was to have multiple characters, and so working with a family, of people connected to each other yet also individual and distinct, made sense to me. I love the baroque patterning that you can work towards with the family, people who're held in the dance because they are linked by history, habit, blood and, if they're lucky, genuine love and affection.

And some of my favourite novels have also taken an ensemble approach, cycling through the interconnected lives of a group of people. Titles like Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, Ali Smith's *The Accidental*, or the family-located social novels of Christina Stead and Malcolm Knox.

**Q: Sydney is a city that comes across as tough and superficial as well as one of great beauty and excitement in *Hopscotch*: what's your relationship with Sydney like?**

I'm a passionate lover of Sydney because it is so textured and contradictory, and so dramatic physically with the harbour and river, our huge and horrible road system, the vast stretches of suburbs, with national parks valiantly rebuffing the suburb creep, and so on. And so many kinds of people live here, in terms of ethnicity and culture. There's all those layers of Indigenous, convict, immigrant, and refugee history. It's a truly multicultural place. Each time I've lived away from it in other cities, I return more appreciative of its best and worst aspects.

I haven't always felt that way. When I was a teenager growing up on the north side, I was deeply unhappy with the place, but didn't know why. The Lane Cove/lower north shore area that some of the novel is set in I used to know well, and as a teenager I felt out of place there. In those days I was classified as a 'wog', long before it was a good thing. I'd lived in London and San Francisco and just found I wasn't comfortably fitting back in to what was then a fairly conservative, suburban milieu. I was too young to appreciate its benefits, like the bushland and the many strong local communities. Like Liza, I couldn't wait to escape across the Bridge.

**Q: The GFC features heavily in Mark's story in *Hopscotch*: do you think the GFC changed ordinary Australians' lives in a lasting way? Are there any positives to take from the GFC?**

In Australia we were protected from the worst of the GFC's impacts because the Australian economy was in good shape and the government took some actions which turned out to be very effective. Living in Berlin last year, for instance, what the Germans call the Financial Crisis has had a more lasting impact on the local economy. It's something ordinary Berliners talk about as still having negative impacts. And of course countless ordinary Americans have been deeply affected.

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So, I'm not convinced that many of us here in Australia were changed in a lasting way, which is a pity, as there are some important 'lessons' about financial morality and greed that should be learned. That said, particularly for the middle-aged, mid-career men who lost their jobs in swathes, yes, I think there were massive changes to their lives. There was a long tail of unemployment for them. And for younger men and women in the innovation sectors and financial sectors, many of them lost jobs or their savings, or lost all that and were left with huge new debts. It took some of them years to recover financially and emotionally, and for many, relationships were affected. I know people who have never recovered financially, and are still struggling. That's sobering.

The positives? There was a bit of a brake put on the banks and financial sector's greedy and disingenuous behaviours and the allure of the stock market was tarnished a bit. Culturally, I think ordinary people, and I count myself among them, probably felt that our suspicions and wariness about the big end of town had been justified.

**Q: Disease features pretty heavily in *Hopscotch* in Sam's story: what is it about euthanasia that interests you?**

Euthanasia goes to the core of so many of the big questions about life and death. For Sam though, his problem is more that he's not living life as well as he could be while he has it, and euthanasia for him isn't an urgent and pressing question, because he isn't in deep physical suffering. Thinking about euthanasia is more a way for Sam to avoid dealing with the now. He doesn't really grapple with the implications; he has the capacity to, but he backs away from thinking deeply. So that is one aspect of euthanasia that interests me: how it shines a light on what your life is now.

Another issue is the one Rhonda raises: what about the rest of us, your family? Because the end of anyone's life affects others in a family, and so to choose to die is at least as complicated for them, if not more so, than accidental death or death from age or disease.

I find myself uncomfortable with some aspects of euthanasia, mainly around the need for protections for vulnerable people, but do believe that we should be able to choose not to endure suffering and to manage our own deaths in a dignified way, if possible.

**Q: Mark, Liza and Jemma have interesting sibling relationships: do you have siblings, and how do you think your siblings (or lack thereof) might have influenced the book?**

I do have siblings, two younger brothers, and I am the mother of teenage siblings. Sibling relationships are intensely interesting to me, and figure hugely in how we see ourselves as kids and later as adults. I get on well with my brothers, though it wasn't always the case when we were young. Then, I longed for a sister and was fascinated by girls I knew who had sisters. I truly felt my life would have been better if I'd not been the oldest and had a sister hacking a path forward in front of me. Most of my female friends have sisters, if not all of them when I think about it ...

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Because of my lack of sister-experience, it was challenging writing Jemma and Liza's relationship particularly when I tried to get them fighting. From my observations of others, sister-fights are unique and intensely personal. They can say truly dreadful, knowing things to each other. At one stage in the drafting, Jemma and Liza's relationship was filled with old resentments from the past, but that storyline got in the way and at some point, I found it unconvincing. I liked more the idea that the two sisters are a little closer and aligned than they are with their older brother, Mark. I wanted an uneven triangle in the pattern of relationships.

**Q: Would you describe *Hopscotch* as an optimistic novel? What's your response when I say that *Hopscotch* is Franzenesque?**

Optimistic? I think it must be. I would like it to be without it being too blasé. It's certainly hopeful about people's capacity for endurance and for making change. At the same time, there are larger cultural and economic forces pressing down on the characters. That said, they're all very 'middle class' so are protected for the time being from the worst of what can go wrong.

About being Franzenesque, *The Corrections* was certainly an inspiration for me. It spoke to me very strongly. I was wanting to write a novel clearly located here in Australia that was a roomy social novel about contemporary urban life, remaining firmly connected that to the wider world of work and society, but which digs down into each character's inner self, their sense of identity, and who they are in a visceral way. I would have written the novel at an earlier stage of my writing life, but didn't feel I had the technical skills to do it.

As a medium, the novel offers the perfect form for the kind of complex social story that Franzen does so well. And it's a form I have enjoyed since I was a teenager immersed in the nineteenth century social realist novels (Flaubert, Tolstoy, Dickens).

**Q: Internet porn is featured in *Hopscotch*: how do you think the easy access we have to porn nowadays affects our personal relationships?**

When *Hopscotch* was still in its early stages, the wide world of internet sex and pornography was revealed to me through 'associates' who had, maybe, sex addictions. It wasn't pretty! Some people handle pornography well, and know that like salt, a little improves flavour but too much is bad for your blood pressure. Some people don't get that.

It can be damaging for relationships because the lover or the spouse isn't really present, they're in their heads seeing images; it can be a despoiler of the imagination and of intimacy. The ready access to pornography and to sex with people who you don't need to meet face to face can be hugely corrosive to relationships. It's often a secret life the person is leading, hidden from partners and close friends. At the same time as having these secret or at least superficially private lives, we're increasingly monitored through public cameras, big data mapping, and so on. It's deeply contradictory and fascinating.

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**Q: Do you think of Rhonda as a strong character, or as someone who wields very little control in her life?**

Rhonda is good at enduring. So she's strong in that way, as she makes valid choices to care for her family while recognising that it's wearing her down. As the novel unfolds she is more willing to be what she'd perhaps describe as 'selfish' or at least self-focused. She's in a difficult position, because she very much loves her husband but is infuriated and disappointed in him, and then of course there is the problem of Mark. She finds some surprising solutions. Rhonda is to my mind perhaps the strongest character of all by the novel's end.

**Q: Liza's love story is intensely familiar to me: what's your feeling about the increasing number of single people in Sydney these days? Is this a good thing? A bad thing? Or neither?**

Being single can make for a very fragile and vulnerable experience if you don't have really good friendships and family relationships. But, I don't believe being single, or being a childless or childfree woman or man is either good or bad. I'd like to think there are many ways to love and to feel loved and in a community. The nuclear family is a deeply flawed model.

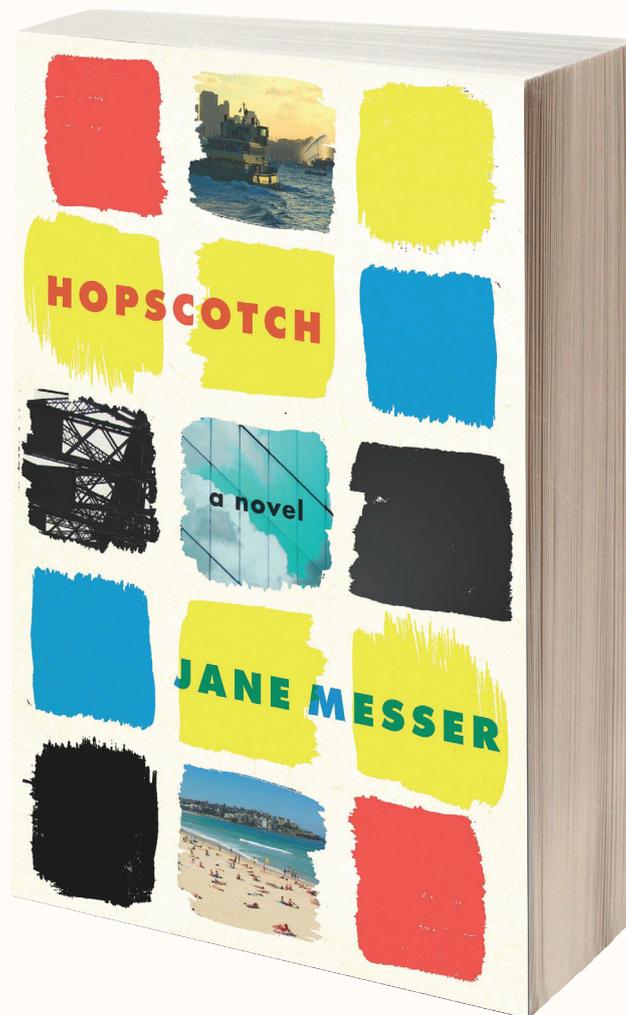
That said, there are many women who would like to be in committed relationships with men and to have children and who just can't get that happening, while their male peers delay commitment, then shack up with much younger women once they're in their forties. Feminism and the invention of the Pill has been effective, perhaps more effective than women want, in freeing women and men from the binds of marriage. The worst of it, from my observation, are the men who live as semi-adolescents well into their late thirties and forties.

**Q: You worked through the edit for *Hopscotch* while living in Berlin: what was it like to write about Sydney from a different city? What took you to Berlin?**

Berlin's culture is so very different to Sydney's or anything in Australia, really. It confirmed to me that in writing about Sydney that I was portraying a very distinct place which is now both super-Aussie and very international. Berliners are very reflective and aware of their nation's history, of its responsibility for the Holocaust and they're comfortable talking about it; but not so comfortable about their country's more recent immigration history, and that again confirmed for me how here in Australia we have so thoroughly embraced multiculturalism. More than we give ourselves credit for sometimes.

My father was born in Berlin and left as a child to escape the Holocaust. I've always identified, if at times ambivalently, as a secular Jew, so it was a very important trip for me to go to the place where my paternal family comes from, and from where many of them lost their lives. By sheer coincidence, I lived in the same street my father was born in, in fact, next door to his first apartment house. And, I met one of my German Jewish cousins for the first time, and that has been very special to me.

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ISBN	9781742611976	Format	C - Format	Height / Width	233	154
\$ARP	\$29.99	Imprint	Picador	Extent	350 pages	
Pub Date	01/03/2015	Binding	TPB			

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