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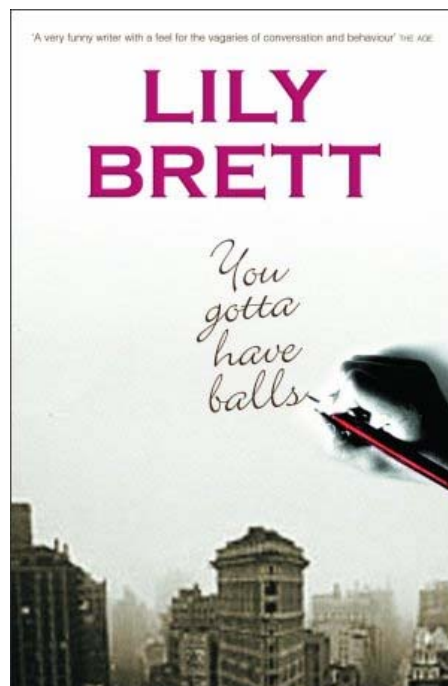
AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Lily Brett

YOU GOTTA HAVE BALLS



Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

CONTENTS:

- ∞ Thematic & Plot Summary
- ∞ Writing Style
- ∞ The Author
- ∞ Questions for Discussion

THEMATIC & PLOT SUMMARY

'Ruth was suspicious of people who had no complaints. She didn't understand how they couldn't see what was wrong. There was always something wrong. And something wrong with people who couldn't spot what that was.' (p 212)

The title of this book is a gloriously post modern elision of two ideas - that we all need energy, resilience and hope to be 'survivors', and an ironic commentary on gender relations suggesting that being a woman is not about being beautiful, thin, or 'kicking ass' but about having moral, emotional and intellectual strength and confidence. Words are part of this confidence for Ruth Rothwax's trouble is that, although she is a wordsmith, this creates issues for her in her daily recognition of the tricky nature of communication and the slippery nature of words. But, of course (or 'of coss, Ruthie', as Edek would say) the title refers to the plot as well. For this is about how Ruth's 87 year old father Edek, a widowed Holocaust survivor whom she has brought from Melbourne to New York to live out his last years, surprises her by surviving in a spectacularly successful manner—if hooking up with a 69 year old Polish blonde bombshell named Zofia and setting up a trendy meatball eatery is anything to go by. While Ruth survives a separation from her artist husband Garth, who's in Australia for six months, she has to contemplate the extraordinary confidence of Edek, Zofia, and Wallentya, Zofia's friend. Why has she inherited all the 'survival guilt', while he has simply developed a will to survive and an immensely optimistic love for life?

Ruth Rothwax runs Rothwax Correspondence, a letter writing business which is about to launch into producing its own 'words only' greeting card line. While Garth's away Ruth has to deal with Edek's manic determination to become the custodian of the 'Stockings Department' in her business. Mayhem ensues as Edek purchases far too much stationery and Ruthie racks her brain to think of hobbies or pursuits which might get him out of her hair. But Edek suddenly becomes secretive and Ruthie can't work out what he's doing with his time. He starts to frequent the Lower East Side, which is where the more 'authentic' Jewish culture resides and where things are a lot cheaper than in SoHo. Her children Zelda, Zachary and Kate tell her not to worry, but when the two Polish women she and Edek had met in Europe arrive and move in with Edek, things begin to get seriously weird. For the women enlist Edek's support in establishing a Polish meatball restaurant and this requires Ruth's capital. Ruth could never have imagined that looking after her father by renting him a NY apartment would result in such a complicated arrangement. Nor that nearly everyone she knows would consider it such a fabulous idea.

This is a book about survival. The horrendous stories of Ruth's parents' endurance of the Holocaust, lurk in the background of this comic novel. 'Ruth thought that children of Holocaust survivors, particularly death camp survivors, probably found it almost impossible not to compare any distress they experienced with the distress their parents had experienced.' (p 29) She admits that 'She hadn't escaped the grief and the disbelief. They, too, had become part of her present' (p 32). Edek's energy and spirit which should have been crushed by what he's been through in the death camps, instead has given him a love for life and love, which Ruth can't bear to quash. So she supports him (against her better judgment) by loaning him the \$30,000 he needs to start the restaurant. 'And to be excited about possibilities at eighty-seven was not bad.' (p 179) Edek is a ball of energy. 'Everything had to be done at high speed ... Edek between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-eight and with good reason thought that he had no time left. That he would be killed or drop dead any minute. Since then he had been on the run.' (p 222) He is also

amazingly forgiving. When Ruth makes acerbic comments about Polish anti-Semitism (pp 210-1) he is quick to defend those, who like Zofia, were not involved.

But really, the central theme here is Ruthie's survival in the modern world, not Edek's. For this is a comedy of manners in the tradition of other classics—an incisive satire of modern consumerism and social pretension in which aspirational opportunism is never far from the surface. Ruthie's food fetishes, New York trendsetters and style-brokers, the PR industry's trickery, and the hypocrisy of the legal world represented by Ruth's friend Sonia Kaufman create a miasmatic force hovering over every social interaction. Ruth's business is in itself a comic metaphor for the difficulty people have in being honest with each other and in expressing their feelings. This tips over into Evelyn Waugh-like satire when Ruth finds herself penning a letter of condolence for James King 'on behalf of himself and his dog Gus, a labrador, about the death of Gus's friend, also a labrador. The letter was to the deceased dog's owner.' (p 51)

'Closure' is a faddish modern word which suggests that changes in life can be dealt with, or adjusted to neatly, whereas of course that is not the case. 'In America there was a lot of talk about grief and loss as though they were neat, trim, fixed entities.' (p 31) Healing, getting over things, or getting through them is never as cut and dried as Oprah Winfrey might suggest. 'There was something very satisfying for Ruth about putting words together. Part of her satisfaction was the control it was possible to have over words. If you put words in the right order they stayed in the right order. They didn't make moves that took you by surprise. They didn't suddenly turn into strangers or take up tango lessons.' (pp 1-2) Sonia is constantly amazed by Ruth's extreme need for routine (p 62) and Ruth is amazed by Zofia's ability to negotiate New York within days of arriving there. 'Zofia seemed to know more about New York than most New Yorkers.' (p 190) She seems to have survived a life full of traumas and yet accepted major changes with enormous optimism. 'Everything, it seemed, in Zofia's universe was very good.' (p 128) In contrast, order, for Ruth, is her only (inadequate) protection against the things she cannot control.

Food is an obsession for Ruth, as it is for many modern women. Why do women count calories while men are out counting the dollars they've earned, the scores they've achieved in whatever game takes their fancy, and the amount their properties have gone up in the last year? Ruth's description of her size and weight (pp 36-7) is typical of the cultural impetus to 'watch our weight', as if it will get away from us if we take our eyes off it for a nanosecond. Deliberately, this novel is full of food, since nearly every meeting between these characters involves eating a special delight (and it even concludes with a number of recipes!). This is literally because the novel is about opening a restaurant, but metaphorically it relates to the fact that inmates were starved in the concentration camps, so that Ruth's obsession might be seen to have resulted from that, and to contemporary society's obsession with diets, which might relate to a general lack of ability to be satisfied, or to be replete.

Work (writing letters and cards) is also the focus of Ruth's similarly obsessive attention, and the idea of 'conducting a creative business' is central to this story. (p 193) Edek's 'rags to riches' story is based on faith or on an idealistic belief in not only the 'product' but more importantly on the creator's passion for the product. The hectic pace with which these dreamers gather their ideas, rent premises, and enlist the support of student architects, builders, suppliers and patrons to achieve their dream is a delight. Ruth is shell-shocked by their achievement. But this too is a thinly-disguised metaphor for how Ruth has also created a business from words, just as all writers conduct businesses from creating ideas. She knows in her heart that what they've done is not an aberration, but an achievement which stems from their creative instincts. They simply know it is right.

Male and female power relations is a key issue too. 'Men are so clear-headed. They know what they want. And they know how to get it. Their brains aren't fogged and clouded and clogged with purposeless pursuits. They're not filled with self-delusions of sweetness or notions of their own niceness or twelve different diet plans.' (pp 3-4) 'Men have straightforward friendships. They don't hang up phones in a huff with each other. They don't feud and not speak for months over insignificant issues. Men don't weep at something another man says. Or hate them for years because of it.' (p 6) Female relationships with each other are questioned too when Ruth tries to start a Women's Group and is subjected

to a series of excuses from women who never actually join. 'If we don't understand that the notion of women as being all-embracing, nurturing and compassionate is a myth, then we're doomed. Women are furiously jealous of each other... We use gossip to get rid of a rival.' (p 63) The ambitions of women to achieve in the workforce are called into question too: 'women who make it to the top,... buy into the notion that they are special, that they are extraordinary. They want to stand out. They don't want crowds of successful women around them.' (p 131) Brett is not afraid to challenge feminist notions of solidarity by suggesting that when the chips are down, women are there to 'help' each other, but not when all is going well. (p 135)

Sexuality and age is another issue. Ruth is menopausal and is horrified to find that her 87 year old father Edek is having sex with 69 year old Zofia. Sex is mentioned constantly, and the title (like many passages in the book) is a sexual double entendre denoting the need for men to be sexually potent as well as a literal reference to the name which Edek and Zofia choose for their meatball eatery. 'Ruthie, when you can see what Zofia can do with a boll, you will feel much better.' (p 158) Ruth is puzzled by Sonia's need to have affairs, but Sonia says it's because she feels 'trapped by the endless familiarity.' (p 66) Ruth is shocked when Zofia tells her about their love-making (p 213). Sex, our most basic of intimacies, often becomes a subject from which we prefer to remove ourselves, and instead of being the natural function which Zofia describes, becomes the source of an endless variety of the neurotic behaviours which are reflected in popular cultural texts such as the television show 'Seinfeld'.

Human cruelty also looms over the action in this seemingly flippant novel. "You'll never know what people are capable of,' her mother Rooshka Rothwax used to say to her over and over again.' (p 11) 'Ruth thought about what her father had experienced. ...the barbaric and base nature of human beings. The murderousness of ordinary people.' (p 266) The powerful meaning of words to translate the real intentions of people is central here to the writer's investigation of human nature. 'Ruthie thought that it was unlikely that the woman had intended the question to be a compliment. It was surprising how often people let you know exactly what their intentions were. When someone said, I don't mean to hurt you,...you could almost count on the fact that they very shortly would.' (p 30) 'Ruth tried not to let herself be distracted by how close the word Ruth was to ruthless. Words would always distract her.' (p 135) The novel suggests that society is a thin veneer which camouflages the culpability of every human being; the ability to harm each other.

'Survival' here is equated with contentment which is amazingly difficult to achieve. Edek appears to have found contentment despite the fact that he has been to hell and back. However, his daughter Ruth is always trying to escape herself. 'As soon as I start to feel a deep happiness, I start trawling as though I'm like some slug at the bottom of the ocean with two giant antennae and three hundred and sixty degree vision eyes at the ends of my antennae...They're on a mission, a search, an almost desperate search for trouble.' (p 67) While he loves the vitality of the city, she has a house she retreats to on a deserted backwater ironically called Shelter Island and at the end of the novel is purchasing burial plots there because it's so peaceful, and 'nicer' than 'being buried in a noisy, overcrowded, carbon monoxide-filled cemetery.' (p 287) Her angst might be put down to the external forces created by the society we live in, or to her inherited survival guilt, or to her childhood obesity, but in the end, it is up to each of us to learn to be comfortable in our own skins. This novel is about learning to love what each day brings, to accept the unexpected with joy, and the good and bad as they come. It's about the courage necessary to learn to love ourselves, so that we can begin to love those who are dearest in our lives. It's about finding our true home, our shelter from the world—inside.

WRITING STYLE

1. **Jewish humour** is at the core of this book which see-saws constantly from humour to tragedy. 'Jews always knew that things were never all right.' (p 237) Several jokes are darkly somber, for example, when the would-be restaurateurs are discussing smoked kielbasa, Edek says: 'I do not like anything what is smoked.' To which Ruth replies tartly: 'You probably had more than enough smoke in Auschwitz.' (p 190) Such humour confronts tragedy via the ability to laugh at oneself. What did you find most amusing? Were there jokes you found too tragic to be funny?

2. **Word play** is the delight of this book which shows how elusive words can be. 'One slip and friend could become fiend' (p 79). This novel interrogates the usage of words in many ways. eg The opening and closing of a letter (p 85); Edek's difficulties in expressing himself make for some gorgeously awkward sentences: 'That is the same thing what Max did say.' (p 101); Sexual jokes abound eg 'Edek had plainly been tasting a lot of bolls. Ruth corrected herself. Balls. He had been tasting a lot of balls. Maybe bolls was better. Tasting a lot of balls sounded quite unsavoury.' (p 186). The obscurely worded cards Ruthie writes are also very enticing. Discuss some of the messages Ruth creates for her cards, and the general use of words in this novel.

3. This is written in **third person**, despite the fact that it has such a confessional tone. How does this work? Would it have worked in first person? Why? Why not?

4. There are various **metaphors** in this work which relate to the themes. Obviously **food** is central to it, and relates variously to satisfaction, survival and to sexual gratification. Often, for example, the food in the novel is described suggestively. **Letter writing or words** play an important part too. What other metaphors did you notice?

5. **Setting** is central to this work in which two areas of New York are contrasted. Ruth lives in Soho, but Edek prefers the Lower East Side. Each is characterized by a suite of references to food, lifestyle and culture. New York (as it often does in literature), assumes the role of a character with a particular personality; compare the 'characters' of these two contrasting areas of New York.

THE AUTHOR

Lily Brett was born in Germany in 1946 and came to Melbourne with her parents in 1948. Her first book *The Auschwitz Poems* won the 1987 Victorian Premier's Award for poetry, and both her fiction and poetry have won other major prizes, including the 1995 NSW Premier's Award for Fiction for *Just Like That*. Her books of essays, *In Full View, New York* and *Between Mexico and Poland*, were critical successes, and her more recent novel, *Too Many Men*, was a bestseller in Australia, Germany and in the US. She is married to the Australian painter David Rankin, and lives in New York.

Read interviews with the author:

Freeman, John, 'Pictures of Lily,' *Weekend Australian*, 24 September 2005, Available http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5744,16665190%255E16947,00.html [Accessed 4 October 2005]

Cavenett, Wendy, 'Field of Power'
Available <http://www.thei.aust.com/books97/btlinlily.html> [Accessed 4 October 2005]

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Ruth Rothwax also featured in Lily Brett's *Too Many Men* (1999), in which Ruth traveled back to Poland with her father Edek. Read and compare the two works.
2. The Jewish personality (p 237) has been the subject of countless prose, poetry, film and television texts. For example, it's hard to read this book and not be reminded of Woody Allen films. In another way it is reminiscent of the neurotic mindset depicted in the TV show 'Seinfeld'. Choose a few favourites and discuss in conjunction with this novel.
3. 'Complaints about the city came to a standstill on September 11, 2001. Complaints disappeared. In the days after September 11 people in the streets looked heartbroken... You could see tenderness. You could see vulnerability. You could see love. You could see who people were.' (p 11) But 'Three years after September 11, old prejudices were even more entrenched.' (p 12) Brett suggests here obliquely that human nature fails to learn from suffering and continues to perpetrate the same mistakes. Discuss.
4. Ruth is aggrieved to find that Edek has a relationship with her three children, has spent time with them which she hasn't shared, and that they admire his new enterprise, where she sees it initially as an eccentric and even foolhardy venture. Generational relationships can be a fraught and jealous business, particularly when we realise that our children see our parents through very different eyes. Discuss.
5. Ruth and Garth appear to be quite affluent. But it is a distinctively different form of affluence to what is becoming commonplace in Australia. They rent at \$3000 a month and have a beach shack. They travel, and they eat out, but they don't talk about property values, or conduct lavish parties to impress their neighbours. Discuss.
6. Females in power are few (p 3), and those who have been successful, have been described as 'men in drag'. Margaret Thatcher, for example, went to war in the Falklands, and delivered crushing cutbacks to the workforce and economy of the UK during her term in office. Are women fundamentally unsuited to leadership, do they prefer other levels of work, are they still actively discriminated against, or are they only successful when they mimic the roles of men?
7. 'It seemed to Ruth that intimacy had been usurped by more pressing needs. Career moves, conference calls, parenting, home décor or home acquisition seemed to generate more heat than orgasms.' (p 4) Is sexual attraction being diluted by these forces? This novel also deals with the issue of sexuality and age, particularly in Sonia's need for extra-marital stimulation. You might like to compare it to other recent works on this topic such as Wendy Harmer's *Farewell my Ovaries* and Susan Maushart's *What Women Want Next*.
8. Lily Brett's parents Max and Rosa survived six years in the Lodz ghettos in Poland before being taken to Auschwitz where they were later separated. After the war it took them six months to find each other again. Lily was born in a displaced persons camp. This story draws on aspects of Max's life since Rosa died in 1986. How could such a background not form the substance of the writer's work?
9. 'You could love someone as a substitute for so many things.' (p 5) Is love sometimes used as a protection from confronting ourselves? Discuss.
10. 'Women see other women as the enemy.' (p 63) Ruth's sense of herself as a 'nice woman' is sorely tested when she has to confront Zofia's hold on Edek. Sonia tells her she's a 'prude', and then a bitch in a sulk' (pp 115-6). Do women generally pretend to a niceness which is only skin-deep? Discuss.
11. This work mentions 'The cities that catered to the Holocaust tourist industry.' (p 173) Any traveler must confront the guilt attached to being complicit in the observation of sites which are representative of this tragedy but which can never mean as much to the observer as those who lived through such barbarity. Discuss.

12. Design, art and architecture are obvious interests in this novel. The inventiveness of description of the fittings in the restaurant read like a manual for Lily Brett's 'aesthetic' - an enticing mixture of modern, retro and minimalist influences. The food reflects the same aesthetic. See the description of the spinach balls (pp 209-210). What aspects of design did you find yourself reading with particular pleasure?

13. Perhaps the worst aspect of the Holocaust is that it wasn't simply the maniacal leaders who committed such atrocities but so-called ordinary people 'who were somebody's neighbour' (p 266). 'Normality' is a fraught word, for it is the nature of human nature to be abnormal. Zofia divides customers into 'types' (p 279) but it is hard to countenance the diverse range of people who became party to such destruction. Discuss.

14. Compare this book to *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, another powerful recent Picador title, which deals with similar themes.

15. Survival seems such a heavily loaded word. But it is actually what we each do every day of our lives. This might seem to deny the enormity of Holocaust suffering, but it also describes the human condition. Discuss.

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