

**PICADOR**  
**AUSTRALIA**

**NOTES FOR READING GROUPS**



Emily Maguire

**SMOKE IN THE ROOM**



## Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

### CONTENTS:

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

### THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

#### Thematic & Plot Summary

'It was so *unfair*. When you take a stand, when you make a conscious, committed, passionate *choice*, then you should have to live with it. You should be allowed to live with it. Forever.

Forever was the point wasn't it?' (p 107)

This novel is about three disparate but troubled characters thrown into contact in a share house, but it is in another way the story of a society rent by despair and poverty, a malaise occasioned by a lack of care, compassion and hope. Each are suffering some form of mental or emotional illness - Katie from mental illness, Adam from grief, and Graeme from a depression hidden by his total immersion in the suffering of refugees and those abandoned by societies. Each are casualties of a common human malaise: a romantic desire for life to offer joy and happiness when often it serves up only despair.

'An undamaged person would not be so easily dragged down.' (p 55) The novel grapples with the whole question of why people end up in hopeless situations and how they might find a way of escaping them. Themes include mental illness, suicide, depression, grief, leading a meaningful life, connection or communication, a declining social system, global poverty and consumerism.

Katie deals with **mental illness** by 'Cultivating this wacky but fragile persona just to avoid facing up to reality.' (p 77) Her only protection has been that offered by her young grandmother who has provided a haven for her in a flat she lives in rent-free. But she is constantly in danger and in need of the drugs which assist her in maintaining equilibrium. Adam deals with the **grief** (p 71) occasioned by the death of his beloved wife Eugenie, by refusing to go home to the US in order to face his ordinary life: 'I don't think it's safe to be as sad as he is.' (p 132) Both he and Katie deal with unemployment by drinking and fornicating. 'To what possible end all that screwing and shouting?' (p 63) Graeme's abandonment as a child has contributed to the choices he has made in his life. A human rights crusader who worked for years as an aid worker, he now manages a case centre for refugees, and has donated all his money to the cause. Clearly the loneliness of his

childhood has never left him: 'an axe you thought was safely stowed has fallen and split your mind clear in two.'(p 83) His commitment to causes masks a deep seated depression. Each of these three characters therefore have a form of emotional illness, and each are at risk.

**'Maybe that's all depression is: life without a filter'**(p 237) The narrative then cleverly traces the weeks they share, with the focus being Katie's disintegration once she's stopped taking her meds. She becomes the target of her housemates' concern, and in so doing masks from the reader, the real danger in their household, although Katie has her suspicions. The almost documentary-like detailing of their domestic routine is interrupted towards the end by a lyrical segment (Chapter 33) in which the climax of the novel unfolds in a surprising but inevitable denouement.

**Leading a meaningful life is a major theme here:** 'The stuff of life was all distraction, and distraction allowed her to get on with the stuff of life. But nobody stays distracted.' (p 160) What the housemates are each grappling with is the desire to face each day with hope. Each have lost that capacity and the novel traces their efforts to re-gain it.

**Another major theme is that of connection.** For example, those who are protective of Katie (like her grandma) wish she wouldn't become so immersed in the troubles of others. But Katie's empathy is fundamental to who she is; she's naturally drawn to the down and out and the troubled. When she tries to not worry about others, she feels alienated and afraid. On the other hand Graeme is used to dealing with suffering by taking concrete, practical action, however, when he has to deal with the ordinary, mundane griefs and stresses of life he finds himself unable to cope and is lost. He doesn't understand that friendship or kindness can be life-savers; he doesn't know how to connect. And for Adam, re-connecting with others - missing his friends back home, attempting a date with the girl at work, treating Katie as more than a distraction - is a sign that he is coming through the worst of his grief; that he is imagining a future without Eugenie.

**This story is also about a declining Australian social system.** Adam as an outsider is more aware than others of the failures in this society and reflects at one point on 'a belief in the power of Australia to heal its own: a deadly romanticism.'(p 86) Maguire presents an Australia which some readers may find foreign. For example, every day on his way to work, Graeme encounters people begging, and regards this as normal in the area in which he works and lives. He is very aware of the many social problems in our society and constantly plagued by both a desire to help and a frustration with the system which often obfuscates real need and real solutions. He expresses this frustration when he raises questions such as: 'Addicts should be helped to reform, not paid to continue their addiction.'(pp 58-9) His friend Jenny shares his concerns and frequently offers her medical services to people like Katie for no cost, if she recognizes that the system has failed them.

Global poverty and consumerism are also concerns referred to throughout the work. At one stage, Adam reflects that: 'He'd learnt as a young backpacker that he could get by in any city in the world without a penny as long as there were dumpsters and McDonalds.' (p 108) The waste of modern society is encapsulated in this throwaway line and in other scenes in the novel as well.

Suicide and death are also constant preoccupations in this novel. 'To live or to die' is the question asked by each of the three main characters throughout the action. In Chapter 33, the act of suicide is revealed more fully. And in this final climactic scene, there is a description of death which will leave no one unmoved.

'If you can't imagine the future then there's no harm in anything.' (p 109) In the end, this story is about having some hope for the future. Katie and Adam come to a precarious precipice and then step back to enter life again. Graeme who was the most caring of all, simply stopped believing, stopped hoping: 'When you stopped bothering, you stopped altogether.' (p 259)

## WRITING STYLE

1. Each chapter, although written in third person, is generally told from the point of view of different characters: 1.Katie 2.Adam 3.Graeme 4. Adam 5. Graeme 6. Adam 7. Katie 8. Graeme 9. Adam 10. Katie 11. Adam 12. Graeme 13. Katie 14. Adam 15? 16. Graeme? 17. Katie 18. Graeme 19. Adam 20. Adam? 21. Graeme 22. Katie 23. Adam and Katie 24. Adam 25. Graeme 26. Katie 27. Adam. 28. Katie. 29. Adam and Katie. 30. Graeme 31. Adam 32. Katie 33. Graeme 34. Katie and Adam. Were you conscious of the focus shifting in this way?
2. Characterisation is one aspect of any novel which is integral to how it works. How would you judge the way in which characters are conveyed in this novel?
3. The writing often contains language which is deliberately metaphorical: Katie makes a joke that she's more of a 'plucked chicken' than a 'swan' (p 103)? Did you notice other instances like this one?
4. The style of writing is graphic and gritty. Did this enhance the themes or distract from them, in your opinion?
5. What other aspects of the writing did you particularly notice?

## THE AUTHOR

Emily Maguire is the author of three novels- *Smoke in the Room*, *The Gospel According to Luke* and *Taming the Beast* - and *Princesses & Pornstars*, a work of non-fiction. Her articles and essays on sex, religion, culture and literature have been published widely, including in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and the *Observer*. Visit her website for more information. <http://emilymaguire.typepad.com/>

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Read the quote from Epictetus which opens the novel. How does it relate to this narrative?
2. 'She was old enough now to see the future as a real thing to be protected against.' (p 5) Is this an apt description, or is the future an optimistic concept?
3. Katie 'enjoyed the reading part but hated the way they ended.' (p 7) Is Katie a romantic at heart?
4. 'Blind love was one thing, being seen and loved another.' (p 1) Is this a statement you agree with?
5. 'The government led xenophobia... had inherited.' (p 33) Has Australia's treatment of refugees since the demise of the Howard government improved in any way? This quote suggests that a level of complacency has slipped into our views of the issue, and that perhaps the suffering of refugees is still being ignored. Discuss.
6. 'Everything makes you want to kill yourself.' (p 50) Is this a hopeless and pessimistic statement or is it a realistic assessment of what we see around us in the world?
7. 'Dreadful things that used to be tolerated: human sacrifice...dissenters-' (p 79). Graeme suggests here that such atrocity isn't tolerated any more. And yet the US government tolerated Abu Graib and thousands are dying in countries all over the world. Is Graeme a little idealistic when he says this?
8. Adam as an outsider hates the city of Sydney and Australia in general. 'This is the strangest city. No one here seems to know that.' (p 182) Is he right about Australia, or has his grief clouded his ability to appreciate anything?
9. 'He thought that this was what people meant by love: good conversation with someone you liked to fuck.' (p 107) Is this a fair summary of love?
10. Sexual scenes in this novel are often grim (pp 102-3). How did you respond to reading these scenes?
11. 'She used to think despair was contagious, but she understood now it was magnetic.' (p 233) Discuss.

12. The author of the novel has said that the theme of death in this novel is based on the idea that, as EM Forster said, 'Death destroys a man; the idea of death saves him'. Can an awareness of death be a motivating, positive force in life?

13. If Graeme had been able to make some sort of personal connection with someone, might that have saved him?

14. Is this novel a hopeful one? When we leave Katie at the end of the novel, has she a bright future ahead of her?



**SMOKE IN THE ROOM**

**Emily Maguire**

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