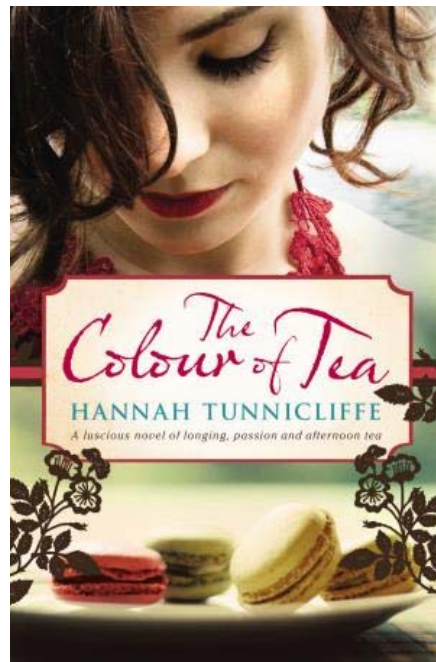


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AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS

Hannah Tunnickliffe



THE COLOUR OF TEA

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'We never thought about getting old. You don't, do you? You just assume you'll always be young because that's how you feel inside, it's how we still feel.' (p 253)

'It was time to find a life for myself. To make something out of nothing. The end of hope and the beginning of it too. But I am getting too far ahead of myself.' (p 2)

This novel explores the experience of an English/Australian couple working in China, whose marriage has been tested by their inability to have children. But it's far more complicated than that. For at its heart it's about questions of belonging and of identifying 'home'. It's about the nature of relationships and of families. And it's also delightfully about the love of food and cooking and how such mutual sensory delights can bring people together.

Grace Miller and her Australian husband Pete have arrived in Macau from London; the latest stop in their marriage which has been lived in various countries as Pete has taken project management jobs in establishing a number of casinos. Grace has had an unusually peripatetic upbringing, trailing after her eccentric mother Lillian (from London to Paris), whose moods swung from passionate enthusiasm to neurotic neediness. And now she feels that she is trailing after her husband instead. Her inability to have children is finally becoming indisputable after years of medical visits and treatments. Having arrived in this foreign country, she sinks into despair until one day she sees a shop for sale (p 29) and makes a rash decision fuelled by her love of cooking, to open a cafe. 'It happens in under a second and then I know that my mind is made up. It is so bold it is probably stupid. It's more like Mama than me. A little bit of Mama's shamelessness and courage. The kind that was always getting us into trouble.' (p 58) In the same period of time, she becomes slightly infatuated by a married French chef named Leon, and she and Pete continue on a path towards an increasing distance from each other. But the staff and friends who congregate around Lillian's (named for Grace's mother) prove to be Grace and Pete's saviours.

The state of Pete and Grace's marriage lies at the heart of this novel, which particularly deals with the effects of Grace's infertility on their relationship. For their inability to have a child has had several effects. First, it has placed stress on their love: 'It has been so long since I have really looked at him and I realise, through the fog of sadness, just how much we have drifted apart. He looks foreign to me somehow. The last few years of trying for a baby have had us walking more and more separate paths.' (p 14) Second, it has led to Grace becoming depressive and reclusive: 'Mama, I don't know what to do or say or think or feel. All I can think about is other things. Like that bird. If I think about the real thing it is as if I am drowning. It is as if I can't breathe.' (p 17) It has made Pete very wary of speaking his mind for fear of upsetting his wife. And it has caused her to feel guilty: 'He will never be a father and it is my fault.' (p 18) But most of all, the underlying problem is that Grace feels a desperate need to reconcile her own fraught love of her mother by experiencing motherhood herself.

'The phone rings while I am gazing out at that lonely piece of land and doing what I do best. Waiting.' (p 12) Grace has become a woman in waiting. She has no sense of agency in her own life partly because her mother wouldn't allow her any space to do what she might have done, such as go to university, and also because she has for a long time felt that she can't play any useful role in Pete's life either. Being the wife of a global executive doesn't offer her any joy and her grief has driven a wedge between them as well. But when she finds that she might have a purpose in opening a cafe, she discovers that she has a lot of talent and a lot of love to give.

Grace's relationship with her mother was always ambivalent, and thematically it is also at the heart of this novel. She constantly contrasts her own timidity with her mother's adventurous nature (Ch 1, p 3). But she also reveals how chaotic their lives together were and how many secrets her mother had, including the identity of Grace's father. Lillian suffered from selective memory and mood swings so that she was capable of making

judgments about other people's children while never realising the toll paid by Grace in being her daughter. 'My god!' she would have said. 'It's well past his bedtime!' Forgetting that I had been awake at that time often - baking cakes, making volcanoes out of flour, building Lego, drawing pictures of whales.' (p 61) Her mother's bipolar state is revealed late in the novel, which explains why Lillian was in a constant state of movement: 'Swimming and swimming, just to keep from drowning?' (p 270) And Grace's guilt about having left her mother when she escaped her and went to Australia is also revealed as being at least partly to blame for her own depression and sense of isolation and aloneness.

The question of 'home' is another complicated theme tackled in this novel; most of us spend at least part of our lives living in other places, and most have felt a yearning for home. 'Homesickness really is like that - a kind of sickness; an irritating cough or rash you have to ignore until you forget about it, get used to it, or both.' (p 133) The novel suggests that we sometimes yearn for something imagined without recognising the home we've made with those closest to us. We even sometimes endanger the relationships we have by harking back to those we've lost or moved on from.

Food is the subject and framework in the novel too; it offers restorative power physically and emotionally. Grace loves the process of choosing ingredients and crafting something out of them. It seems to restore her spirit and enjoyment of life and it also reminds her of the exotic dreams of her mother. Her macarons are more than sweets; they act as a tonic, and they are made up of ingredients which have particularly resonant associations. The titles of the chapters contain both the French names Grace gives to her macarons and also the ingredients, for example, 'Remède de Délivrance - Rescue Remedy' (Violet with cream and bitter blackcurrant filling) or 'Coeur Curatif - Healing Heart' (Vanilla with raspberry markings and raspberry gel insertion). Such tempting confections are meant to be shared, so that Lillian's becomes a 'home' for several women.

The experience of expats is another central theme in this novel, which reveals that the post-colonial world of Macau is still very influenced by foreigners, even if Portugal no longer has control over it as a colony. Pete and Grace feel the pull towards engagement with local people whilst others like Linda, the wife of Pete's work colleague Paul, seem to engage with the foreign community only in a negative way, and yet continually move to overseas postings for the financial return, without being truly interested in the places they live in. One senses that Linda's return to 'home' would be a disappointment to her; for she is happily engaged in feeling superior to the locals, and would find it impossible to make any real connection to her 'home' either, since she has lost any sense of empathy for the people she meets in Macau, and for people generally. In contrast, Grace and Pete become enmeshed in the lives of a number of local people; this is despite the fact that they recognise that they will always be regarded as foreigners, and can accept that. 'I don't know. Living in Macau. We're never going to be locals, never going to be Chinese.' (p 177) They are also able to make the break and return to Australia without losing those connections. Leon and his wife are different again, as they appear to have decided that Macau is 'home', and his transition from chef to culinary tour guide is an example of the way in which people can re-invent themselves in post-colonial countries. He is a French man who has made his home in Macau and doesn't want to leave.

The novel comments too on the financial greed which has appropriated much of the culture of places such as Macau, and on the scourge of gambling there: 'Gobbled up, like almost everything in Macau by Progress. Progress and gambling.' (p 1) Pete works for casinos, and Gigi is typical of local Chinese people who often leave their family businesses in order to make the quick bucks offered by the casinos: 'Ma doesn't like Pau Pau playing mah-jong. Reckons it's as bad as gambling. Doesn't want her to get involved with it. You should have seen her face when I first said I was going to be a dealer. Well, she couldn't stop me, but she wasn't happy about it. Didn't complain about the salary, though.' (p 123) The fact that Gigi eventually rejects that temptation for the more satisfying pleasures of working at Lillian's, whilst Pete returns to Australia, is another development of the theme.

Chinese superstitions or customs are also referred to in the novel, which suggests that there is a necessity to trust our dreams as well as to act with common sense. The action begins at the end of the Year of the Golden Pig (2008) and the subsequent Year of the Rat,

and there is a sense that the old lady Yok Lan really can see the future. When Grace meets her early in the novel her prediction is ambivalent, but eventually is proven correct. Grace's actions in burying her mother's things beside the cafe are driven by a spiritual or supernatural sense of this being the 'right' place for her mother to rest.

The Colour of Tea celebrates the hereditary links between people. Grace's mother has had an indelible influence on her; some of it good and some of it bad, but all to be celebrated and cherished. 'It is then I notice that her eyes and Faith's are exactly the same colour, the colour of oolong: clear, dark amber. The colour of tea.' (p 243) Oolong is a traditional Chinese tea. When Grace notices the similarity between Faith and her great-grandmother Yok Lan's eye colour she is really making an observation about the links in the continuity represented by these two people.

But it also celebrates the bonds forged between people who are not related at all. Grace has always felt alone, perhaps because she is not good at small talk or the shallow sort of socialising favoured by the expat women in Macau. 'I wish I was better at making girlfriends. Or at least understanding other women. Sometimes it feels like they are speaking another language.' (p 53) In contrast, the women who meet at Lillian's and come to mean so much to each other are joined by what they offer to each other in help and love. Grace marvels at Rilla's kindness: 'I have always thought it must be such a burden to be thinking about others all the time. Worrying and caring and considering. But she doesn't seem to have any self-pity. I wonder if she feels part of a fabric, a quilt. The sharing is an easy choice, because of how she views herself from the inside out. Part of something greater. Some, not one.' (p 118)

Grace and Pete are lucky to find their love for each other again, for they have each been in search of a home, and in danger of never recognising it. 'You feel like home,' I think out loud. 'So do you,' he agrees, voice thick with knowing.' (p 253) The fact that they eventually share that home and their love for each other with baby Faith makes their love even more complete.

WRITING STYLE

1. **Imagery in this novel is often cast in culinary terms.** eg 'Every morning the sky was the colour of hot milk, gathered together in skins.'(p 2) 'Outside a crowd is still moving like one beast, the whole greater than the sum of its parts. The sun has split like a yolk through the white sky.' (p 10) 'This is typhoon season. The skies are as blue as cornflowers and the sun the colour of honey falling on the pavements.'(p 175) 'The sun is bright and orange and the air tastes like syrup. (p183) Were there any other descriptions you found particularly evocative?

2. **The novel contains three forms of narrative text:** Grace's story (first person); memories of Grace's mother (third person); letters to her mother (first person). How did these three forms of telling influence your reading of this novel?

3. **Characterisation is often presented obtusely.** Choose two characters who are deliberately cast as opposites in the novel, and discuss not only the contrasts, but also the similarities between them. eg. Grace and Lillian; Leon and Pete; Rilla and Marjory; Gigi and her mother.

4. What part does **setting** play thematically in this novel? Discuss not only the exterior vistas of the city, but also the interiors such as the cafe, the apartments, and the places Grace visits.

5. **Structurally**, this novelist deceptively weaves together events in the near and distant past as well as the present. Did you find this added to the narrative? How did it contribute to the suspense? (For example, having Grace telling only disjointed parts of her memories in her letters to her mother.)

THE AUTHOR

Born in New Zealand, **Hannah Tunnicliffe** is a self-confessed nomad. After finishing a degree in Social Sciences she ventured from her homeland's fair shores to live in Australia, England, Macau and, memorably, in a campervan named Fred. A career in Human Resources and Career Development has been put on the backburner to pursue her dream of becoming a writer. She currently lives in Vancouver, Canada, with her husband, Matthew, and their daughter, Wren. *The Colour of Tea* is her first novel. Visit her website/blog for more information <http://www.hannahtunnicliffe.com/>

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Food, and a love of cooking, is obviously central to this novel as both plot device and theme; it falls into the category relished by contemporary readers and inhabited by books such as *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) by Amy Tan, or *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989) by Laura Esquivel (both made into films), and films such as *'Julie and Julia'*. What does cooking and food represent in these novels and films?

2. Your group may wish to spend some time comparing this novel to other 'food' novels. There are lists online to get you started. eg 'Fifty Fabulous Food novels' Online Education Database <<http://oedb.org/library/features/delicious-reads-fabulous-food-novels>> Has *The Colour of Tea* other things in common with these novels apart from food? You might liven up your book group discussion by having a macaron making (and eating!) party. There are lots of recipes and instructions online and Hannah has given you plenty of tips in the novel too. Here's one from *Gourmet Traveller* for 'Macarons with white chocolate and raspberry ganache' to try: <<http://www.gourmettraveller.com.au/macarons2.htm>> Or you could watch this macaron making 'Tutorial' on Youtube: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bri6xnDBI9I>>

When you have your book discussion group, make sure you have plenty of delicious teas and coffees on hand to savour with these confections!

3. Adam Gopnik says: 'There are four kinds of food in books: food that is served by an author to characters who are not expected to taste it; food that is served by an author to characters in order to show who they are; food that an author cooks for characters in order to eat it with them; and, last (and most recent), food that an author cooks for characters but actually serves to the reader.' In Gopnik, Adam 'Cooked Books' *New Yorker Magazine* http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2007/04/09/070409crbo_books_gopnik

Discuss this statement in relation to this novel.

4. 'Daughters never understand mothers until they become one, that's what a woman at work said to me once.' (p 16) Discuss in terms of your own experience.

5. Memories of childhood are often fragmentary like Grace's and the significance of events becomes blurred. In her case her mother's illness made this time even more confusing. Discuss the nature of childhood memory.

6. 'Trailing behind the breadwinner. Puts me in mind of the guy tagging along behind the elephant at the zoo.' (p 8) Grace's situation is typical of many women who find themselves still waiving their own ambitions in favour of the work which their partners do. What does this novel say about how society has/hasn't addressed women's aspirations?

7. 'His voice is strong and encouraging. His alpha male voice. This is the voice that makes men gravitate towards him like wolves to the leader of the pack. I guess it is why he makes such a good manager.' (p 14) Pete is depicted as a strong, warm and loving man whose brief betrayal of Grace is driven by grief rather than lust. Did she owe him forgiveness? Would you have been so understanding about a partner's actions?

8. 'Sometimes it feels like I've been growing more and more foreign over the years. Like I've been taking steps away from myself. First escaping to Australia, then back to London. Now here. China.' (p 25) Grace is a woman who has never felt at home, but realises that home resides where her love does. Is this how you think of 'home'? Discuss.

9. 'I know that now what I miss is what I thought would be my future, rather than my past. Children, baking cakes, making a family.' (p 134) Grace admits to herself that nostalgia is fuelled by what hasn't happened, rather than what has. Is this typical of everyone's yearning for the past, for one's childhood home, or for another place? Is homesickness an incurable illness, or is it something we can conquer?

10. There is a curious lack of information about Pete's background and family in this novel, perhaps because this is about Grace's desperate need to reconcile her own past with her love for him. What do you imagine was his pedigree? Has he secrets too? His attack on Leon would seem to suggest that he has pent-up insecurities, just as Grace has?

11. Gambling is at the heart of Macau culture, and the 'GFC' lingers in the background to this novel. Pete is sent back to Australia at the end of it, because the casino project hasn't gone well, and things in China are not happy for the immigrant workers either. What does the novel reveal about the economics of such communities?

12. Linda's attitudes seem to belong to the colonialist powers of much earlier decades. What does the novel suggest are the attitudes of expats in Asian cities like Macau today?

13. 'Sisterhood' is a concept suggested by the bonds forged here between the women who gather at Lillian's. The issues they've experienced (eg Rilla and Jocelyn's mistreatment as immigrant workers) have made them all very vulnerable but also resilient. Discuss their relationship in terms of your experience of female friendships. Does the writer present a realistic view in your opinion?

14. The novel carries the hopeful message that sometimes when we find ourselves cast adrift (having left a job, a home, or having experienced an estrangement from a partner) good things can arise. Grace's time spent dwelling on her past, and writing letters to her dead mother helps her to reconcile herself with those memories and leads to the idea of opening a restaurant. Have you ever found that having 'time out' has given you a new lease of life like this? Discuss.

15. What was the key thing which healed Grace's emotional illness?

THE COLOUR OF TEA
Hannah Tunnicliffe
Macmillan Australia
Trade paperback - ISBN: 9781742610047

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Sydney NSW 2000

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