

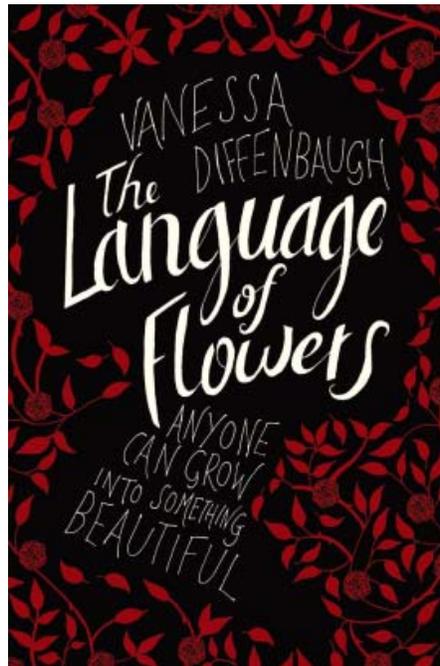
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AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Vanessa Diffenbaugh



THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'I had been loyal to nothing except the language of flowers. If I started lying about it, there would be nothing left in my life that was beautiful or true.' (p 113)

This is an exquisitely resonant novel about the mysterious language of flowers. It's also about the emotional damage which can be wrought on children by the fostering system. Told in alternating chapters about the present day adult and the child she had been at a crucial point in her life ten years earlier, Victoria's story is a moving, joyous celebration of the possibility for redemption, and of the healing power of love.

Victoria Jones had been fostered unsuccessfully several times, so that by the time she'd turned nine she had begun to prefer institutions: 'I liked it there. Meals were served at regular hours, I slept under two blankets, and no one pretended to love me.' (p 10) However, her social worker Meredith, had decided to send her to one last carer - a woman named Elizabeth who owned a vineyard - but warned her: ' "This is your last chance. Your very last chance, Victoria - did you hear me?" I didn't acknowledge her question. "When you turn ten, the county will label you unadoptable, and even I won't keep trying to convince families to take you. It'll be group home after group home until you emancipate if this doesn't work out—just promise me you'll think about that." ' (p 9) Her year with Elizabeth had been the happiest of her life; a time when she felt loved, and when she learned the language of flowers. Elizabeth had been the first adult who had shown a genuine desire to have Victoria join her family: "These flowers are starwort," she said. "Starwort means *welcome*. By giving you a bouquet of starwort, I'm welcoming you to my home, to my life." ' (p 28) Despite her rebellious acts in the early weeks with Elizabeth, she continued to show Victoria patience and understanding: ' "I believe you can prove everyone wrong, too, Victoria. Your behavior is a choice; it isn't who you are." ' (p 41) But sadly, old insecurities had surfaced and a terrible event caused them to be separated, and Victoria to be returned to institutions for her teenage years.

The novel opens on her eighteenth birthday when she is to leave the home and be delivered to a 'The Gathering House' a transitional home where she is expected to begin her adult future. 'I'd been on the waiting list since I was ten.' (p 6) Even Meredith who has stayed with her 'case' all these years, offers little hope for Victoria's future: 'no high school diploma, no motivation, no support network, a complete lack of social skills. She was asking for my plan, demanding I think about my own self-sufficiency.' (p 13) At first, Victoria finds little to offer her hope save for the garden she builds secretly in a nearby park. Forced by her desire to escape Meredith's supervision she begins to live on the streets. But, desperate for money and food, she finds a job at Bloom, a florist owned by a woman named Renata, and life takes a new turn. 'But suddenly I knew I wanted to be a florist. I wanted to spend my life choosing flowers for perfect strangers, my days steadily alternating between the chill of the walk-in and the snap of the register.' (p 52) The language of flowers offers her a new beginning ... and a way to change other people's lives as well.

Being fostered can have both a healing and a destructive effect on some children. 'I had lived in thirty-two homes that I could remember, and the one thing they all had in common was noise:' (p 39) The only adult who has been constant in Victoria's life has been Meredith, and her dispassionate influence has also caused damage: 'For a buoyant, bewildered moment I thought her reaction had come from a place of hidden fondness for me, but when I turned my gaze I saw her pale skin pink in embarrassment. She had been my social worker since birth; if I was to be declared a failure, I was, by extension, her failure.' (p 14) Hence, when she encounters love she can never really believe in it. "I don't trust myself," I said. "Whatever you imagine our life would be like together, it won't happen. I'd ruin it." (p 138) Then she meets Grant, a flower farmer, and Elizabeth's estranged nephew, whom she'd known briefly as a child. They fall in love, but still she harbours fear born of her childhood experiences and actions. 'If he knew the truth, he would hate me. I was surer of this than I had ever been of anything in my life. My affection for him only made it worse.' (p 174)

The language of flowers plays a very significant part in the novel, for it's a common bond between Victoria and Elizabeth, and later between Victoria and Grant. Victoria

has gained a sense of control over the world in her dedicated study of flowers and their meanings. She had learned from Elizabeth that flowers could contain secret messages. So when she meets Grant again and discovers that he shares her knowledge, she is instantly drawn to him. Later, though, he observes: ‘ “Here you are, obsessed with a romantic language—a language invented for expression between lovers—and you use it to spread animosity.” ’ (p 104) As her new relationship grows, her choice of flowers becomes less ‘prickly’, and the language seems to offer a parallel sense of security and an insight into the beauty in the world. It offers Victoria a job and the ability to change people’s lives for the better. But her faith in the language is shaken briefly when she finds in comparing several dictionaries, that ‘The definitions were not only different, they were often contradictory.’(p 82) Typically, she instantly relates that discovery to her relationship with Elizabeth: ‘It wasn’t long before I knew. Elizabeth had been as wrong about the language of flowers as she had been about me.’(p 74)

This psychological drama demonstrates the painful legacy wrought by one generation on the next; and the scars left by abandonment, abuse, and mental illness. Victoria’s pact with herself is one which many deprived children make. If they have been damaged, then they must damage others. ‘There was only one possibility, and that was to turn Elizabeth against her sister. She had to see Catherine for what she was: a selfish, hateful woman unworthy of her care.’ (p 228) Renata befriends her when she recognises just how hurt she is: ‘I knew right then that you felt unworthy, that you believed yourself to be unforgivably flawed.” (p 278) Guilt plagues those who have suffered, or those who feel they have failed their traumatised loved ones. ‘I’d come to the conclusion that her sudden ambivalence was because of my growing clinginess, or else my tears.’ (p 196) Swinging from guilt to a manic demand to be loved more than anyone else, Victoria’s reactions are typical of someone who has been denied love for most of her childhood. Her affection for Elizabeth was always tainted by her propensity to see rejection in a slight; her jealousy of Catherine an expression of her fear that she would be once again rejected.

The pain and the joy of the bond between mother and child is another central theme. Victoria is clearly searching for a mother, although she has hidden this desire behind her anger and resentment. ‘I spent the early mornings thinking about which child I would have been most like, had I had a mother to walk me to school every morning. I imagined myself obedient instead of defiant, quick to smile instead of sullen. I wondered if I would still love flowers, if I would still crave solitude. ’(pp 21-2) But with the responsibility of mothering comes the inevitable legacy of pain. For once love is allowed to enter one’s heart, the pain inflicted by those we love is one of our greatest burdens. Victoria observes the effect she has had on Elizabeth: ‘Mothering me had changed her. A year after I’d moved in to her home, she was a different woman, softened in a way that allowed suffering. With me in her life, she would only continue to suffer. She didn’t deserve it. She didn’t deserve any of it.’ (p 261) And when Victoria has a baby she fears that she too will inflict suffering on her daughter: ‘I had failed my daughter. Less than three weeks after giving birth and making promises to us both, I had failed, and failed again. The cycle would continue. Promises and failures, mothers and daughters, indefinitely.’(p 250) Her decision to take the baby to Grant is driven by her love: ‘*No, it isn’t in me*, I thought bitterly. I wanted to tell her that I had never loved anyone, and ask her to explain how a woman incapable of giving love could ever be expected to be a mother, a good one. But even as I thought the words, I knew they were not the truth. I had loved, more than once. I just hadn’t recognized the emotion for what it was until I had done everything within my power to destroy it.’ (p 240) She fears hurting the things she loves because of how much she believes she hurt Elizabeth.

This book is a paean to the evocative language of flowers, and to the timeless art of their nurturing and arrangement. It’s about the power of love which can be damaged and distorted, but which can also be repaired if tended carefully. For, despite all, when Victoria gives birth to Hazel, the love she has suppressed for so many years comes to the surface. ‘I wanted, more than anything, to be with her.’ (p 215) Her love for her baby is strong, and her love for her ‘lost mother’ Elizabeth, and for her new lover Grant, is as well. Even though she still fears herself, and her capacity for self-destruction, she eventually realises that love requires a leap of faith:

‘If it was true that moss did not have roots, and maternal love could grow spontaneously, as if from nothing, perhaps I had been wrong to believe myself unfit to raise my daughter.

Perhaps the unattached, the unwanted, the unloved, could grow to give love as lushly as anyone else.' (p 308)

WRITING STYLE

1. This work is structured in four parts: *Part One / Common Thistle 1 Part Two / A Heart Unacquainted 89 Part Three / Moss 191 Part Four / New Beginnings 267*. Within these parts, there are **two narrations which shift in time** between Victoria's life now, and her life when she was nine. Discuss the effectiveness of this narrative technique. How do some of these sections in the novel parallel each other?
2. This book uses the **symbolism of flowers** as a motif and thematic framework. Discuss any passage or description of flowers which was particularly resonant.
3. **Description** in this novel is suggestive and evocative. For example: 'The darkness was becoming thick, heavy. The vineyard seemed to stretch in all directions, an inescapable sea, and all at once I was terrified.' (p 38) or 'bouquets of sunshine rolling down the freeway to brighten someone's near-winter wedding,' (p 58) or '*The sky felt bigger at Elizabeth's. It curved from one low horizon line to the other, the blue seeping into the dry hills and dulling the yellow of summer.*' (p 62) Choose one or two passages, and discuss how the construction of language in them has made them so memorable.
4. **Setting** in this novel is vividly organic: Elizabeth's vineyard home; the flower market; Renata's florist shop; the apartment which she shares with Natalya where she sleeps in a fur-lined 'cave'; Grant's home in the watertower, amidst his greenhouses. Which setting was most enticing, and why?
5. The **main characters** in the novel are each distinctively drawn. Which person was most interesting as a character - Victoria, Elizabeth, Grant, Catherine, Renata, or Mother Ruby?

THE AUTHOR

Vanessa Diffenbaugh was born in San Francisco and raised in Chico, California. After studying creative writing and education at Stanford, she went on to teach art and writing to youth in low-income communities. She and her husband, PK, have three children: Tre'von, eighteen; Chela, four; and Miles, three. Tre'von, a former foster child, is attending New York University on a Gates Millennium Scholarship. Vanessa and her family currently live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where her husband is studying urban school reform at Harvard. *The Language of Flowers* is her first novel.

Visit: Picador Australia's website for the novel <<http://www.languageofflowers.com.au/>>
View: Vanessa Diffenbaugh, 'The Language of Flowers' [Interviewed by Katherine Pritchard] <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZ6aGDUEw-A>>

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'The only ways out of a group home like this one were to run away, age out, or be institutionalized. Level 14 kids weren't adopted; they rarely, if ever, went home.' (p 4) Foster care can leave some children feeling alienated from people, rather than feeling wanted. Discuss.
2. 'I used the same flowers again and again: a bouquet of marigold, *grief*; a bucket of thistle, *misanthropy*; a pinch of dried basil, *hate*.' (p 50) What do these choices say about Victoria's feelings about herself?
3. 'Meredith Combs, the social worker responsible for selecting the stream of adoptive families that gave me back, wanted to talk to me about blame.' (p 7) Meredith is not painted kindly in this novel; she seems to have buried her feelings in a mountain of red tape, and to have no insight into the emotional needs of her cases, apart from a readiness to recognise failings in the adoptive or foster parents. How difficult would it be to maintain both the necessary emotional distance from a 'case', and also a sense of empathy? Discuss.
4. Victoria carries a legacy of neglect from her years in foster homes, and in her own way, 'gives something back' when she employs Marlana and the other inmates of the Gathering House in her florist business, Message. Her ability to create floral bouquets is a legacy too, to the training she received from Elizabeth. Discuss the role of adult mentors in children's lives.
5. Some of the people who fostered Victoria employed questionable and even cruel methods of control. eg 'For the entire month of June, Ms. Tapley had made me prove my hunger.' (p 26) What do you know about the foster parenting system and how such care is monitored? Some of Victoria's carers evince negligent, inept or destructive practices, and yet the author of this novel is clearly a committed and loving foster parent. Are rigid bureaucratic processes largely to blame for the failings in Victoria's upbringing?
6. ' "I'm talking about the language of flowers," Elizabeth said. "It's from the Victorian era, like your name. If a man gave a young lady a bouquet of flowers, she would race home and try to decode it like a secret message. Red roses mean *love*; yellow roses *infidelity*. So a man would have to choose his flowers carefully." ' (p 29) Choose some of the flowers listed in the dictionary at the end of the novel, and discuss how aptly described they are in this lexicon. Do flowers have innate qualities such as healing, forgiveness, sadness, or regret?
7. Read some poems about flowers (for example, William Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/daffodils/>), or quotations about flowers (for example, 'A profusion of pink roses bending ragged in the rain speaks to me of all gentleness and its enduring.' *The Collected Later Poems of William Carlos Williams*) and discuss their emotional impact and how flowers are used symbolically in them. Discuss the quotation about moss by Henrietta Dumont (which appears at the beginning of the novel), in relation to the ending of this narrative.
8. Grant maintains his faith in Victoria, despite some seemingly insurmountable challenges. His devotion to his ailing mother Catherine seems to have made him an unusually sensitive and patient man. But it might just have easily left him damaged and incapable of trust? Discuss.
9. Read the passages describing Hazel's birth, and her first week of life, including her constant feeding and need for attention. Discuss the challenges Victoria confronts as a mother in this novel.
10. 'But as much as I wanted to be reunited, I would not go to her. My desire for my daughter felt selfish. Leaving her with Grant had been the most loving act I had ever accomplished, and I did not regret it. Without me, my daughter would be safe. Grant would love her like he had loved me, with unearned devotion and tender care. It was everything I wanted for her.' (p 271) Victoria explains giving her baby away in terms which sound selfless. Discuss the conflict between doing the best for a child, and doing what is expected by society.

11. At the end of the novel, Victoria is planning a 'staged entry' into a new family life, and a continuation of her business. Has she a good chance of succeeding?

12. Victoria learns the joy of caring for, and trusting others. During most of her childhood she was denied love, and had learned to avoid the emotion, for fear of being rejected. There are considerable risks attached to opening your heart to others; but the benefits far outweigh the risks. Discuss.

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