

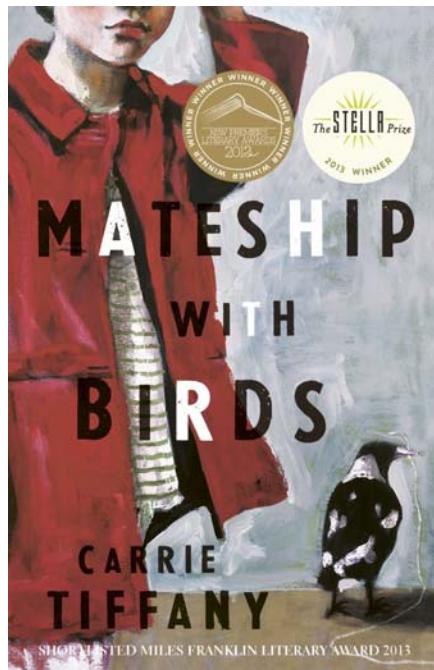
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AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Carrie Tiffany



MATESHIP WITH BIRDS

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'Kookaburras, magpies, butcherbirds, wagtails; the farm birds own the pasture and the bushes and the tree-top sky, but the parrots are supreme.'(p 1)

'Instinct, from where I stand, from on the ground, looks like love.' (p 179)

The natural order of things; how people and families interact with each other and how they interact with the landscape; instinct and environment; sex and desire; the birds and the bees - these are topics which resonate throughout this evocative paean to nature and love. A story of two lonely mature-aged people thrust into close proximity - their observations of the family dynamics between the flocks of birds which circle around their plots of land, and of the herds of animals such as the dairy cows which are tended by Harry, and of the rich visual feast represented by the change of seasons - this is a story about their growing desire for each other, told in an artfully suggestive style. But at its heart, this novel is about the need to really 'see' what is around you; to take in the detail whether it be of the birds, or the landscape, or the people who share this place with you.

Set in the early 1950s near Cohuna, a small place north of Melbourne on the Murray Valley Highway, this novel tells a love story of sorts, as Harry and Betty forge a tentative partnership. Dairy farmer Harry lives next door to single mother Betty Reynolds who is in her mid-forties, and her children Little Hazel and Michael. Harry had been a late-starter in love, having married at 33, but acquired a healthy appetite for female company with his former wife Edna Orchard who ultimately rejected the boredom of their daily lives, to marry Alex Gedge, a fellow bird watcher. Betty, too, has enjoyed desire, but has escaped from the city to rear her children, and has no outlet for her ardent nature, except in the caring work she does in a nursing home, where she is witness to old men's declining needs. Both feel an attraction to each other, and this novel traces the delicate dance of their mateship, over a year during which Harry watches a flock of kookaburras through his binoculars, and Betty often has her binoculars trained on him. It's told through the prism of the rituals observed by those things in nature which they witness every day around them. And it's also told with reference to their pasts which have left indelible marks on them as well.

Harry is always ready to assist Betty's family, so that when young Michael evinces a confused need to learn about sex (pp 54-5), he takes it upon himself to give him the sex instruction he himself lacked as a child. Havelock Ellis's research into sex forms the 'guidebook' to Harry's efforts to educate Michael: 'In Studies on the Psychology of Sex, Harry reads about hermaphroditic slugs, the courtship rituals of spiders and a peculiar balloon-making fly. But it is the intimate case histories at the end of the volume that interest him most. Ordinary folk from around the world, both men and women, have submitted to Dr Ellis a summary of their sexual history from their first childhood stirrings. Harry makes a few notes and stores them carefully inside his wallet. This is where he decides to start with his advice to Michael.'(p 81) Harry continues his sex instruction classes by detailing his seduction by Edna (pp 120-1), aspects of the female anatomy (pp 153-6), and his deductions about what gives a woman pleasure (pp 166-9).

Unfortunately when Betty stumbles across these letters, she is horrified by their frankness, particularly since her discovery comes directly after news of a neighbouring farmer's bestiality. (This man, Mues, has some rather deviant sexual desires, a sub-plot which indicates that sexual desire can lead to stunted rather than healthy growth.) Harry is bewildered by her reaction: 'If she'd asked him why he did it, he would have said because ignorance is cruel, and perhaps because it is what a father should do.'(p 194)

What is 'natural'? What sort of sexual behavior is acceptable? Is it 'normal' for a middle aged man to reflect on such intimacies? How should a mature love affair be conducted? Can the birds and the animals in the paddocks offer any advice or 'model' for how Harry should court Betty? How should Michael go about learning about love and sex? Is he too young to be contemplating sexual experimentation with Dora? How much about sex should be revealed to children, and at what age? What sort of family are Betty and her children? And could Harry become part of that family?

This novel is also about how we see (or don't see) the landscape around us. Like Tiffany's first novel, it's about the impact we have on the land sometimes without even knowing. 'Always the worry over the bottom paddock. How to control the prickly pear? How to tackle winter bogs and the summer scalds? Harry aims to keep his head up when he walks through the paddock to Betty's, but it rarely works. He finds himself stopping and noticing how the prickly pear has extended its range, how hard and pale the soil is, how without give. Soil, he knows, is not a substance in and of itself; it is a layer, a transitional space. The farmer needs to keep his soil soft and friable, in a constant state of openness. Harry makes plans for the bottom paddock.' (pp 174-5) Throughout this narrative Harry's observations of nature infuse his understanding of himself and of others. Betty in contrast has to learn to really look at the world around her, or at least to try and see it through Harry's eyes.

It traces the relationships between birds and animals and people; how we live alone in the face of nature's threats, but also as part of a community whether it be with family or neighbours. It's about the sometimes silent communications we have with each other; Harry and Betty speak little of their feelings. Kookaburras appear in the first image in the book and Harry observes them through his binoculars and in his written notes. There are touching analogies between how these birds and Harry's dairy cows behave and how he and the people around him do as well.

Happily, the rift between these two mature lovers is mended in the final scene in this spare and delicately inscribed novel which is a eulogy to landscape and nature, to innocence and experience, to the mysterious powers of love and desire, to how a family might construct itself, and most of all to the lonely nature of our shared existence whether we be man, woman or beast.

WRITING STYLE

1. This novel is a lyrical evocation of the land in poetic prose, largely written in the third person; however it also includes a number of different styles of writing such as the poems which Harry writes in his milk ledger as he observes the kookaburras, in first and third person (pp 29-34; pp 61-7; pp 91-7; pp 130-6; pp 176-182; pp 201-4); Hazel's Nature Diary in first person (pp 107-11 and pp 148- 151); Betty's lists of the injuries her children have suffered (pp 35-9); Harry's sex education letters in first person (p 81, and following); or the marriage notice in *The Emu* (pp 53-4) which are interpolated into the framing narrative. How does the use of these different styles and persons add to or inform the story in your opinion?
2. Characters in this novel are described in relationship to the natural world. For example: 'She's a running tap, Harry thinks, a swig of water. Not like Betty. His Betty is heavier, more complicated. Betty meanders within herself; she's full of quiet pockets. The girl Dora might be water, but his Betty is oil. You can't take oil lightly. It seeps into your skin. It marks you.'(pp 113-4) Discuss one of the characters in this novel, and how effectively natural metaphors and similes are used to describe his or her nature.
3. The setting is important in this and Carrie Tiffany's earlier novel; in fact rural Victorian landscape is integral to both in terms of theme as well. Discuss.
4. Structure is dependent on an over-arching framework holding the various parts of a novel together. The year and its seasons is one framework employed here to anchor the various voices and styles in which this tale is told. Discuss.
5. How does Carrie Tiffany's characteristic wit and humour add to this novel?

THE AUTHOR

Carrie Tiffany was born in West Yorkshire and grew up in Western Australia. She spent her early twenties working as a park ranger in central Australia and now lives in Melbourne, where she works as an agricultural journalist. The manuscript on which her first novel, *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living*, was based on the Victorian Premier's Award for an unpublished manuscript in 2003. She later won the WA Premier's Literary Award for Fiction in 2005, and the Dobbie Encouragement Award in 2007. The novel was also shortlisted for numerous major awards including the Orange Prize, the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the Guardian First Book Award and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize. *Mateship with Birds* is her second novel.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'The miracle of water into milk via grass must be performed at the start of each new day.' (p 1) This novel is a tribute to the powerful natural processes which we all tend to forget when we are confronted with food which is processed and with goods which are manufactured. Discuss.
2. 'What is the fixative that causes one memory to congeal and set, while others dissolve?' (p 123) Discuss.
3. What does the novel say about human influences on the land?
4. What did you think of Harry's very idiosyncratic sex education style? Is such personal reminiscence likely to inform or offer guidance to a young boy like Michael?
5. Seeing Mues expose himself is not so much a shock to Little Hazel, but rather a moment when she is confronted by stark and disappointing reality. 'Little Hazel understands that she will never, ever, get a Shetland pony. Her life will be no different to everybody else's - made up of cobbling things together that are misshapen, ill-suited, imperfect. That wanting something badly is not enough to get it. And adults are part of this pretence - they hold one thing in their hand and call it another. Hazel picks up her school tin and leaves. She isn't even late for the bus.' (p 11) Children often deal with the concept of sex far more sanguinely than their parents give them credit for. Discuss.
6. Betty's charges in the nursing home are suffering the sad decline of old age. Their desires are still as strong, but their impaired faculties make them frustrated, querulous and often pathetic. Discuss the treatment of the elderly in relation to Betty's warm-hearted care for these old men.
7. How important is the time period in which this novel is set? For example, would Harry and Betty have had this sort of tentative courtship today? Would Michael have needed Harry's instruction?
8. 'This is why Betty left the city. To get away from the insinuators; to give the children some air around them, to put some distance between the woman she is now and the ardent girl of her past.' (p 99) Betty's experience as an unmarried mother is seemingly typical of the 1950s; but have attitudes changed that much?
9. Harry's childhood prank while staying with his Aunty Bev at Kangaroo Flat near Bendigo (pp 114-7) seems to have been a seminal moment in his life. Why? The novel also contains passages which allude to the harsh childhood which Harry and others of his era endured with quiet fortitude. For example: 'When Harry was a boy his father locked him and his mother in the laundry when he went out in the evening.' (p 173) From childhood events such as this, though, Harry has drawn patience, rather than having dwelt on his suffering or felt damaged by it. Discuss.
10. Bird watching and recognition (pp 184-5) is an art which is celebrated in this novel, as well. Did the novel awaken your interest in really observing the natural world around you, as the author intended it to?
11. The note about Alec Chisholm's *Mateship with Birds* (1922) at the end of the novel adds another chord to its meaning. What else do you think might have inspired Tiffany to write this novel? (Read about her work, and her earlier novel to inform your response.)
12. Were you surprised by, or did you anticipate the ending? What is the major theme or idea behind this novel?

MATESHIP WITH BIRDS
Carrie Tiffany
Picador Australia
Trade paperback - ISBN: 9781742610764

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Level 25, 1 Market Street,
Sydney NSW 2000

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