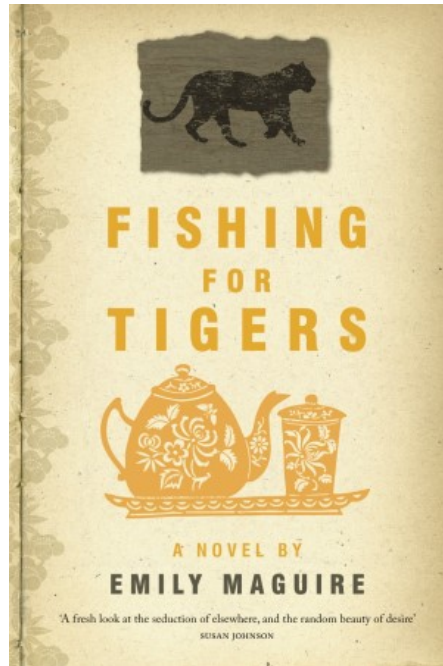


# AUSTRALIA

## NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Emily Maguire



## FISHING FOR TIGERS

## Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

### CONTENTS:

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

## THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

*Innocence is like a dumb leper who lost his bell,  
wandering the world, meaning no harm.*

‘You can catch the tiger, but not the tiger’s power. And without the power, the tiger is no good to itself and no good to the people. But people don’t like to learn. They keep doing this thing, fishing for tigers, feeling proud, then burying tiger skin and bones.’ ‘Imagine that,’ said the English man. ‘Catching a great big tiger with a little tiny hook.’ (p 252)

*Fishing for Tigers* is about making moral and ethical choices; it’s also about adopting a new country as a form of escape - it’s about love, power, identity, diaspora, emotional loss, abuse, morality, innocence and experience. Some people (like many Vietnamese) are forced to leave their homes. Others, when things go wrong, retreat to another place in the hope of re-inventing themselves. Mischa struggles with the morality of living in war-scarred, impoverished Vietnam, and with having an affair with a teenage boy, but eventually finds fulfilment in herself, and in a country which has become truly hers.

Thirty-something expat Australian Mischa Reese has lived and worked as a magazine editor for VietVoice in Hanoi, Vietnam, for six years. Her decision to escape the wreck of her marriage to Glen in California, was no surprise to her two sisters Mel and Margi, given the years of abuse she’d nearly not survived. But her decision to live in Vietnam was a surprise to them all. Matthew was the first friend she had made in Hanoi and they have become members of a group of expats including Henry, Amanda and Kerry. They’re detached, cynical and somewhat amoral in their attitudes, although Mischa prides herself on being less corrupt than her friends are. When Matthew’s beautiful Vietnamese-Australian teenage son Cal arrives he is clearly delighted to introduce him. But Mischa soon realises that Cal has set his sights on her for some unknown reason and that she is going to find it difficult to resist him. Cal is like a flower in the desert of all their cynical games. ‘I suppose they guessed that we would do what our kind always do when we see beautiful things that don’t belong to us. Except he did belong to us, in a way. Anyway, he would be the first to say that he was one of us. He would insist on it.’ (p 10) What is it about Cal which draws Mischa in, and what it is about Hanoi which she can’t escape?

‘I was content in his company, and I was innocent.’ (p 44) Cal’s idealistic innocence might be compared to Mischa’s at seventeen when she met Glen. Both had troubled parental histories; her parents died in an accident when she was eleven after which she lived with her sisters and then married Glen as a teenager; Cal’s were separated, and his father chose to live in Vietnam while his Vietnamese mother chose to stay in Australia. Cal initially has no love for Vietnam and resents his father’s allegiance to it. Mischa’s view of Cal as such an innocent (p 167) is belied by his deliberate seduction of her, despite the fact that she’s nearly twenty years older. ‘So of course I wondered - then and many times since - why Cal was interested in me. When he looked at me, I didn’t feel admired so much as recognised. It was like he saw me as his partner in some enterprise so secret that even he didn’t know about it yet.’ (p 129) Who is innocent here and who is culpable? Is it ‘...the boy stretched on the bed, as cool and toxic as the rushing Red River’ (p 2) or the older woman who is sleeping with her best friend’s son? Mischa can’t accept what she’s done without viewing it through the prism of general opinion of it. ‘... but although I was no moral hero, my conscience was clear. I paid my way in the world, tried to help people who seemed to want it, and leave alone those who didn’t. I had no need to steal or cheat and nothing about which I needed to lie. It sounds as though I’m bragging; I’m not. I lived like that while it was easy to do so. As soon as I had an incentive to behave badly, I did.’ (pp 57-8) She is powerless in the face of her desire, but also ashamed and fearful that his father will find out. Her convenient escape to Vietnam has become uncomfortably ruffled by this emotional challenge, forcing her to examine who she is and where she really wants to be.

‘Is it possible to view your own past with clarity? And if it isn’t, then how can you learn from it? How can you hope to get better at life if every mistake is mis-remembered, every decision coloured by its outcome?’ (p 137) The mystery of how things begin and the ‘cause and effect’ of human interaction is one of the main topics in this novel. Why did Mischa choose Glen? Why did she choose when she left him, to live in Vietnam? Why did she

never have an affair with Matthew? Why did the affair with Cal begin? Her sexual addiction to him is only one part of the answer. Another might be that he seduced her with his beguiling teenage flattery, or that '... when he insisted on his love he reminded me of myself at his age. That sounds condescending, and a little bit creepy. That's okay, I am both those things. This is the woman he said he truly loved.' (p 159) Which of us can truly look back and say with any clarity what made us choose to send our lives in a particular direction? Or when that moment was?

Mischa's expat friends and their relatively affluent lifestyle in this largely impoverished post-colonial country come in for some criticism in this novel. For example, men like Matthew have maids (p 28), whereas many people share basic facilities and eat in the streets. Mischa reflects on first meeting these friends: 'Everybody I spoke to that night had a convincing explanation for what they were doing there and I left thinking that I had stumbled upon a community of laid-back, self-deprecating saints. Genuine doers-of-good who still enjoyed a drink and a laugh. I assumed they were all so welcoming to the frazzled, explanation-less stranger out of pity and kindness. To be fair, there was a bit of that. But mostly they were so warm because they recognised me as one of them: a damaged fuck-up unable to thrive in her own land.' (p 20) She tries to convince herself that she has genuine reasons for living in Hanoi: 'The cities I've lived in before,' I said, 'in Australia and then the States, they're so new. I don't mean the buildings and roads and such, I mean the . . . the . . . the spirit. There's a sense that everything that is wrong can be permanently fixed and the only thing in the way of perfect order and harmony is lack of will. Vietnam isn't like that. Hanoi, especially, knows that permanent solutions, the promise of order and harmony and happiness - they're children's dreams. Terror, chaos, war and grief will always be there. There's no false hope, no pretending.' (p 271) But Cal bursts the bubble of her pretences by reminding her of how little connection she has made with local people and is appalled that she hasn't even tried to learn the language. The novel also introduces the paradoxes of Vietnamese life and culture to the reader - the beauty alongside the poverty; the lack of material wealth but the abundance of spiritual belief - which offer a challenge to the often morally vacuous conversations engaged in by the expats. The book offers real insights into cultural aspects of life such as food, clothes, and religion: 'The way I understand it,' I said, 'Vietnamese belief systems are like Vietnamese architecture and food. They take the bits that work for them and leave the rest.' (p 42)

The idea of culpability versus innocence is also implied in reference to those who participated in the Vietnam War and the damage it did to the country. Cal's outrage when he and Mischa visit war museums, might be compared to the wilful blindness of those who wasted the country and whose legacy is still felt today. 'He had never seemed such a child, standing there impressed against his will, believing that the men who started wars had never seen photos of deformed babies, didn't know what their weapons did.' (p 224) When Cal first arrives, he presumes that he can interfere in a dispute in the street between a man and a woman, but Mischa explains to Cal why he shouldn't intervene because of cultural protocols (pp 72-3).

Despite the damage done to this country by successive waves of invasion, this novel makes it clear that Vietnam is a country of survivors. 'The only way this city's survived for a thousand years is by taking what the occupiers and invaders and colonisers have left behind. Only a weak, insecure people would feel the need to trash everything and start again each time it defeated an enemy. Everything you come across here - the buildings and food and ideas - all of it might have started out as Chinese or French or American or Russian, but they've ended up Vietnamese, and that's the point.' (p 37) As Cal's grandfather says: 'Vietnam should be gone. Should be nothing. Should be historical footnote. Why is it not? What is the number one value of Vietnam?' I said courage and he scoffed so I said strength and he almost spat! 'Self-preservation. That is it. That is first. Communist, capitalist, protectionist, socialist, democratic, nationalist - doesn't matter if it keeps Vietnam alive.' (p 313)

The pros and cons of tourism in Vietnam is another key topic. The difference between being a traveller interested in culture and in engaging with local people, and a tourist in a voyeuristic sense is argued about at one point: 'Now that's not true. Tourism means prosperity for this country. I respect that. But there was a time when visitors came because

they were interested in the country and its people. They came with basic knowledge and a desire to immerse themselves in the culture, to learn more. But now. Now it's become so cheap to travel here - especially - no offence intended, for Australians - that every idiot who manages to save a couple of hundred dollars from their weekend job at the supermarket turns up and starts haggling over thirty-cent cyclo rides.' (p 8)

The question of ethics in journalism is another topic raised by the fact that Mischa's magazine publishes thinly disguised Vietnamese propaganda. Mischa maintains that it's 'Feel-good stuff, we'd call it back home, but when your history is as desperately sad as Vietnam's, feel-good stuff is essential. People here believe in destiny and stories like the ones we published helped them to believe that theirs is not one of uninterrupted suffering.' (pp 63-4) But Cal is not so sanguine about this, and others would agree that some journalists exploit their subjects and 'Take their most intimate stories and painful moments and turn them into breakfast-cereal placemats.'(p 13) Cal also comments on the lack of world news about Vietnam (p 13) to which Mischa replies: 'Oh, no one has any idea what's going on here. It's one of the attractions of the place.'(p 14) In contrast to this lack of knowledge about Vietnam, the novel also suggests that surveillance in Vietnam is all pervasive. 'In my Hanoi bedroom, with the ever-present background hum of three million people and the knowledge that my landlady, all of my neighbours, the local Communist Party rep and probably the police were keeping track of my every move, I felt truly alone. Free and safe from judgement.' (p 26) When a maid discovers she and Cal in her room at a Saigon Hotel she is summarily asked to leave. 'There is no privacy in Vietnam. I knew, but had forgotten.' (p 266)

The exploitation of young Vietnamese women by wealthy foreigners is another theme which is referred to throughout the novel. Henry is a serial monogamist and Matthew too, finally reveals that he has a secret love life. In the six years she's known him, Matthew has told Mischa nothing about his affairs or sexual encounters. But when she is called to help him when he's injured she writes: 'If I'd known Saigon better, then the address Matthew gave me would have rung alarm bells.' (p 211) Later she also writes: 'I'd been sure Matthew went to Australia twice a year, was certain he'd never mentioned Bangkok' (p 218) And then he is forced to confide that he had not been at a conference but had come to Saigon in order to have some time with some local women. Thuan, a beautiful Vietnamese translator, tells Mischa: 'All Vietnamese girls know about foreign men. Some girls forget for a while, because it is, um, romantic to have a lover who is different and exciting. There is a story all Hanoi schoolgirls love: Trong Mai. You know this? Okay, on vacation in Sam Son, a beautiful young woman falls in love with a fisherman.' (pp 96-7)

The ambiguous role of humanitarian organisations in such places is another topic suggested by Kerry's UN work which is often depressingly non-productive in her eyes. 'Kez, most people have no clue what their purpose is, or even that they're supposed to have one. I sure as hell don't know what mine is. You can't beat yourself up because you haven't single-handedly fixed a nation that's been broken for longer than you've been alive.'(p 100) But Kerry is trapped in a way, as she confesses to Mischa. 'This is it for me. I'm thirty-five years old and I've worked for the same organisation since I graduated. I've uncomplainingly done my time in every shit-hole they've sent me to, three years here, five years there, moving up half a rung on the ladder each time. Hanoi is a dream posting. No militias or terrorists, rapidly developing economy, semi-decent plumbing. If I can't hack it here, that's it for me. Career over.' (p 101)

This novel is also about women's choices. Despite being a successful career woman, Kerry confesses to Mischa, 'And the worst bit is that I never even wanted some big life-dominating career, but since the husband and two kids have failed to materialise the bloody career is all I have,' (p 101) Marcus Scott, a Canadian ex of Mischa's has told Kerry 'I always felt she'd given up on life. That she was finished. It was why things didn't work out between us.' (p 104) Mischa is aware that being single in Vietnam is considered odd: 'Family is everything in Vietnam and my choices seemed a direct challenge to that.'(p 113) One of the worst choices Mischa made in her life was to marry the abusive Glen: 'Be careful what you wish for,' I told her, thinking of hours spent justifying a facial expression Glen had found hurtful, nights wasted listening to him lecture me on how properly to demonstrate my gratitude for his adoration, of red eyes, sore throat, aching bones, constant weariness. 'Obsession can be terribly tedious.' (p 60) That experience has

scarred Mischa and left her fearful of expressing emotion: 'How I hated her, that drippy, beaten, joyless victim. Running scared, mad and thoughtless and self-absorbed, sucking up air until she collapsed and needed rescuing. There was no place for her in this city of orphans and torture survivors ... Goodness may be its own reward, but happiness, pleasure, had to be snatched where and how it could.' (p 111) Mischa has given up on love: 'I might have said, if forced to reflect, that I thought there was too much passion in the world, that it was at best a waste of energy and at worst a destroyer of nations. I would have said I was done with it.' (p 116) So Cal's arrival is a shock to her carefully nurtured emotional isolation. Mischa's relationship to her sisters is another thread in this narrative, for they have contented families: 'My sisters are, in a sense, my world; they are my closest surviving relatives and my oldest, deepest loves. But they are alien to me. Their relationships have been long and happy, their children wanted and adored and adoring. They have planted themselves firmly on this earth.' (p114) When she first receives a letter from Mel (pp 181-2) re Margi's cancer she's immersed in her affair with Cal, but eventually acknowledges her feelings, and is drawn home to help her.

Mischa is editing a book about significant women in Vietnamese history; their stories are parables of life and love which relate to the action and particularly to Mischa's choices: Princess Huye`n Trân (p 65) eventually defied the marriage arranged for her, and was re-united with her commando lover; 'My new favourite was the story of Vo Thi. Sáu. In 1950, at the age of sixteen, she lobbed a grenade into a French battalion, killing an official and injuring twenty soldiers. She was held in a tiger cage in Côn Đa'ô island prison for two years before becoming the first Vietnamese woman to be executed by the French administration (p 132); 'Ah! You live on Á`u Trie.u? So lovely. I wrote my dissertation on Lady Trie.u. I know by heart her words. Ah, let me think in English.' Mai furrowed her brow. ' "I want to straddle big winds, to tread on ferocious waves, to behead the ocean's sharks, to chase away aggressors' (p 178) She was a warrior to whom Mischa compares herself but then 'I felt exposed, suddenly. Trie.u was an orphan who fled from her siblings and the threat of being subsumed by marriage'(p 181); 'The Tale of Kiê`u is like, um, Waltzing Matilda is for Aussies. It's about this girl, Kie`u. She's beautiful and kind and smart. She falls in love with a suitable young man, Kim, but before she can marry him, her father and brother are thrown into gaol and her family plunges into crisis. Kie`u is forced to go into prostitution and eventually becomes a chaste companion to Kim. Mischa concludes that 'Her life was sad, but at least she lived it.' (p 180) But Cal reads the tale of Kie`u and compares it to their faltering relationship (p 188).

The dilemma of Vietnamese people forced to leave the country and denied their birthright is another key topic. 'We published a piece in the magazine recently about members of the diaspora who've returned to Vietnam. It was fascinating. They came from all kinds of backgrounds, all kinds of situations, but almost all of them spoke about a sense of completeness when they returned home.' (p 123) Vietnamese who are expats in Australia suffer a sense of displacement as well: 'The thing that bothered him the most, he said, was how empty the streets were. He said it was like a movie he'd watched where some bloke woke up and everyone else was gone. Sometimes when he was walking to the train station early in the morning, he had what he calls "dizzy breathing attacks". He said it was like there was only him in the whole world and even nature itself had abandoned him.' (p 176) Cal's mother has never really spoken about the war until he visits the country, and then she confesses her memories to him (p 244). His grandfather has always told him stories and yearns to return, and eventually Cal takes him there. The children of expat Vietnamese have issues as well; Cal is typical in that although his mother is Vietnamese he's never been there and is tired of people presuming that he has some sort of allegiance to the country. He's also tired of being accosted by guilty ex-servicemen who want him to absolve them of any hurt they inflicted there: 'I listened for a bit, but what am I meant to say? "It's okay, you're forgiven?" I mean, I wasn't there. Haven't ever been there.' (p 85)

The mythical power of the tiger becomes a metaphorical thread in a novel which takes its title from a quote about tigers. Cal fastens onto the literal fact of their significance: 'Mish, come on, are you serious? You must know there were tigers during the war - it's common knowledge. There were all these unburied bodies everywhere. All this meat. The tigers got a taste for it and became man-killers. Soldiers on both sides were eaten.' (p 254) But there are cultural meanings, too, attached to these animals: 'Tigers hold the spirits of

the oldest and wisest of our ancestors. Sometimes we use the word for “grandfather” when we speak of them. So the people worried: what will become of us if we continue to abuse the grandfather spirits this way? I think soon the answer came. Yes? The emperors did not last much longer and their people suffered very much without the tiger spirit’s protection.’(p 256) It seems that the novel is asking for respect of the power of such traditions, if one is to survive in this country and culture.

By the end of Mischa’s account of this story, she has found herself to be an expat in her own country of Australia. ‘I willed myself Vietnamese and my family marvelled at how well I had re-adjusted to life in Australia.’ (p 306) She has realised that even if she doesn’t understand why she and Cal were drawn together she does accept that it was a type of love, and does understand where she is meant to be. She’s acknowledged her bonds to her sisters; she’s made her peace with herself; and she wants to go back to Hanoi to the country of her heart, and to the place where she now feels truly at home.

## WRITING STYLE

1. Mischa's story is told in first person but includes both past tense (immediate) and past tense (distanced flashbacks). She recalls her first days in Hanoi, six years earlier, as well as her first meeting with Cal a matter of months ago. How does this alternating perspective affect the telling?
2. Characters are described very well in this novel. Which person did you find most intriguing and why?
3. Myths, folk tales and other literary texts are used throughout the novel as thematic references. For example the Vietnamese song 'Long Me' is compared to the Australian folk song 'Khe Sahn' (p 235). What other literary references had resonance for you in this novel?
4. This novel employs both symbol and metaphor. (For example, the 'tiger' of the title.) What other metaphors or literary devices did you find striking in this text?
5. Dialogue is used to great effect in this novel. The author has the gift of being able to describe characters and scenes using dialogue very effectively. Choose a passage which was particularly enlightening concerning character?



## THE AUTHOR

Emily Maguire's first novel *Taming the Beast* has been translated into nine languages. *The Gospel According to Luke* and *Smoke in the Room* followed. She is a regular feature writer for the Sydney Morning Herald and has also written non-fiction such as *Your Skirt's Too Short* and *Princesses and Pornstars*. She lives in Sydney. Visit her website for more information. <http://emilymaguire.com.au/>

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. A large age-gap in a female/ male relationship is often a barrier both to intimacy and to social acceptance. Mischa's attraction to Cal is difficult for her to analyse, since the stigma both obscures her feelings, and forces her to keep it secret. Is society too judgmental about such relationships? If the man is older it seems to be more acceptable?
2. Questions of innocence and maturity, of innocence and guilt are suggested by the quote at the beginning of the novel. In one sense we are all innocent until experience forces us to confront the harsh reality that sometimes we simply do things we can never understand. Discuss.
3. 'It's stupid not to act on how you feel, just because there's a possibility how you feel will change.' (p 205) Discuss with regards to both this novel and life in general.
4. Vietnam's tortured history is presented as one of stoic survival. Does adversity breed such survival skills? Or is Vietnam unique in its ability to move forward after losses? [You may wish to read more about this history in order to respond to this question.]
5. Emily Maguire has spoken of being influenced by Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, and the experiences of the expat in that book - Thomas Fowler - have some similarities to Mischa's experiences. Read and compare these two novels.
6. 'But the people at Matthew's birthday party, the people who would become my social world, were in Hanoi because it was the only place they'd found where they could get away with being who they were. The only such place with five-star hotel bars, anyway.' (p 21) What did you make of Mischa's friends? Were they genuinely connected to Vietnam (eg read Henry's drunken diatribe on pp 182-6) or just along for the ride? Are they really amoral and unfeeling or just pretending to be so very careless?
7. 'Amongst the expat community in Hanoi, expressing enthusiasm for anything listed in the Lonely Planet is about as acceptable as eating at the KFC or wearing a conical hat, so I'd always kept my love of the temple to myself.' (pp 35-6) This novel comments on tourism in some interesting ways. Do travellers really visit Vietnam wanting an insight into the culture, or are most simply looking for a cheap holiday? Discuss.
8. 'Blaming them for my doomed heart would be like blaming the French education system for the battle of Dien Bien Phu.' (p 115) Mischa knows that losing her parents at such a young age, and then her marriage to Glen, have scarred her. But when Cal accuses her of refusing to reveal her feelings, there is an element of truth which she is uncomfortable with. Is Mischa fooling herself in denying the fact that she has avoided love for six years?
9. Cal's idealism is in stark contrast to the jaded attitudes of Mischa and her friends. Is Cal an admirably mature and self-assured character or a confused and troubled one?
10. 'Mel says you don't hurt someone you love but I think she's wrong. Hurting someone is an act of intimacy; it means they've got to you, got inside you. You lash out because you can't bear the unfathomable need. You bury the hook deep, and even though you despair at the damage, you leave it in there because it means you're in control.' (p 321) Discuss.
11. 'There's always a power imbalance!' Henry said. 'Any two of us at this table paired off right now there'd be a power imbalance. There'll always be one who kisses and one who offers up their cheek. That's love, kids.' (p 282) Discuss power in relationships.
12. 'I doubt, actually, that I have a spiritual level.' (p 165) Is Mischa being too hard on herself when she says this?
13. 'This was how Matthew saw me, wasn't it? Him and all the men like him. They thought women like me were finished and, mistaking their own view for reality, they assumed we thought that way about ourselves.' (p 273) Are Mischa and Kerry, as women in their mid

thirties, overly defensive, or do men genuinely think that women are washed up if they're partnerless at their age?

14. 'I mean that I had become a woman without a self. For years I had spoken in sentences that weren't.' (p 304) Has Mischa changed by the end of the novel? Has she found a self?

## FISHING FOR TIGERS

Emily Maguire

Picador Australia

Trade paperback - ISBN: 9781742610832

These Notes may be printed or viewed for your own private, non-commercial use.  
This material is copyright and may not be repackaged, resold or posted electronically on networks without prior written permission from Pan Macmillan Australia.

Pan Macmillan Australia  
Level 25, 1 Market Street,  
Sydney NSW 2000

[www.picador.com.au](http://www.picador.com.au)

©2012 Pan Macmillan Australia