

Rachael's Gift Reading Group Notes

Blurb

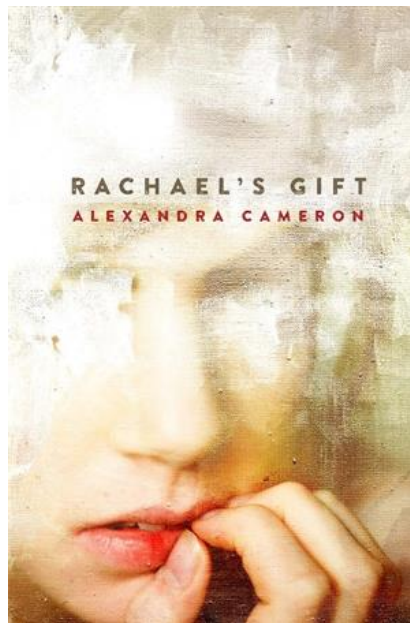
Rachael is a child prodigy, a talented artist whose maturity and eloquence is far beyond her fourteen years. She's also energetic, charming and beautiful, beguiling everyone around her. To her mother, Camille, she is perfect. But perfection requires work, as Camille knows all too well.

For Rachael has another extraordinary gift: a murky one that rears its head from time to time, threatening to unbalance all the family has been working towards. When Rachael accuses her art teacher of sexual misconduct, Camille and Rachael's father, Wolfe, are drawn into a complex web of secrets and lies that pits husband against wife, and has the power to destroy all of their lives.

Set in the contrasting worlds of Australia and Paris, ***Rachael's Gift*** is a mystery story of the heart, about a mother's uncompromising love for her daughter, and a father's quest for the truth.

The Author

Alexandra Cameron is an Australian living in London with her husband and son. She has a BA in Film and French, and a background in film and television production and development. She studied novel-writing at City University in London and was mentored by author Jill Dawson.



Plot Summary

Camille Larkin is an art researcher who investigates the provenance of artworks for various clients. She is married to Wolfe, with whom she has a fourteen-year-old daughter, Rachael, a child prodigy and talented artist. They live in a seaside suburb in Sydney where Rachael attends an expensive girls school. Camille and Wolfe are called to Rachael's school after a classmate's painting disappears, and Rachael has also made some alarming accusations about her art teacher. An official investigation is mounted, while Wolfe has certain suspicions and undertakes his own line of enquiry, starting to unravel a trail of lies that threatens to tear their family apart.

When Camille suspects that Wolfe no longer loves his daughter and is betraying her trust, she whisks Rachael away to Paris to reconnect with her maternal relatives, and to enrol Rachael in the *École des Beaux-Arts* – something to which Camille had aspired in vain as a young woman.

As the blossoming young protégé to Camille's former lover, Rachael sets out to achieve her dreams in a way that increasingly alarms Camille. Meanwhile the investigation at home spins out of control, threatening to destroy a teacher's reputation as well as Rachael's. Wolfe departs for France in order to discover the truth: about Rachael, about Camille, and about himself.

The novel reaches its climax in France after Wolfe resolves to return home with his family, and all is finally revealed.

1. "You're going to ruin her. Don't you realise? I can't let you do that." (p. 79) In the wake of Rachael's accusations about her teacher, the school's revelations that they suspect she's lying, and Wolfe's potential betrayal of Rachael, Camille takes Rachael to Paris. Do you think her actions are understandable? What would you do?
2. 'There would be a logical answer. She'd never do this to me. Not Camille. Not my wife.' (p. 88) Discuss Wolfe's response to the unfolding situation and to Camille and Rachael's departure. Are his thoughts and actions justified?

Themes

Betrayal

At the core of *Rachael's Gift* is the issue of betrayal, in particular lying.

1. Camille would do almost anything for Rachael, yet this has its limits.

"I'll tell him all about you. All the lies."

A rumbling began in my diaphragm. Oh, this was rich. Too bloody rich. "You think anyone is going to believe you?" I walked over to the door. "You're the girl who cried wolf." (p. 329)

In this novel, who is betraying who?

2. Wolfe struggles to come to terms with Rachael's gift. 'And there was the time she'd "borrowed" a super-flash new board I'd been working on for one of the pro surfers. One day it was there, the next it had "disappeared". When I asked her if she knew where it was she'd looked up at me with innocent eyes and said, "Maybe Wayne came by and picked it up already?" But the next day it was sitting back in its cradle...But wasn't this normal teenage stuff?' (p. 47) How would you respond if you found out your child was a liar?

Appearance vs reality

1. 'I watched her suffering. Saw her pain. Perhaps it was real? A child is splayed on the bathroom tiles, her skin red and twisted, vomiting up bile. Another time, in the supermarket aisle, sitting in a burst pile of popcorn, coughing so hard through the sobs she throws up down her front.' (p. 321)

How does Rachael's appearance deceive those around her?

2. The author uses art as a metaphor throughout the novel, often in relation to the way people perceive themselves and the world around them.

"See how the paint has built layers? Layer upon layer of depth and life and story." He lowered the brush. "What do you see, Camille? Rachael?" He turned to face me. "Or, perhaps, yourself?" He put the brush on the palette, "You see what you want to see, Camille." (p. 327)

How do you think Camille views herself and what is the reality?

Ambition

Camille: 'As Wolfe would say: Why did we all have to "be" someone? I couldn't help it. Something burnt in me. I wanted more. Worse to die without having known it at all; without having blown the balloon to its full capacity... It was a fine balance before it burst and exploded into tiny bits. The crushing moment when that young girl recognises the unremarkable stain of mediocrity.' (p. 333)

In Camille's striving to achieve, does the end justify the means? In what ways are Camille and Rachael similar, especially in the pursuit of their goals?

Parenthood

1. 'There were many things about parenting we'd disagreed on over the years; he with his hands-off "Let them be their own person" attitude and me with my preference for guidance, which he referred to as "overinvolved". But I'd always made sure that he felt like some things were his decision.' (p. 34)

What does this quote reveal about Camille's attitude to parenting? What can we read into it?

2. 'Poor Rach. This was what happened when you had a gifted child. They were singled out – marginalised, taken advantage of by people in positions of power trying to put them down. I just had to hold it all together. There was her emotional state to consider and her reputation and schooling.' (p. 35) How does Camille's role as mother cloud her judgement?
3. How is the theme of parenthood explored in the novel?

Characters

Camille

'Camille was engrossed in her BlackBerry, her fingers madly clicking; she was classy in her tailored suit and black sunnies, her blonde hair brushing her shoulders, her legs extra-long in those heels. I was afraid to touch her in case she crinkled or stained.' (p. 16)

How does the author position the reader to view Camille? Is she meant to be a sympathetic character? Discuss.

Wolfe

Camille's description of Wolfe: 'Wolfe liked things to be simple. Surfing, food, sleep and sex. And love, of course. Always love, like some leftover hippy standing on the side of the road with his broken guitar and unwashed hair, thumbing rides up and down the coast, preaching love as the answer.' (p. 12)

Is this an apt description? Is it fair? Explain.

Rachael

'There was something too adult about them, at odds with Rachael's own cheeks, peachy and round. Underneath those were several others, half-naked self-portraits, taken in the mirror. It made me feel uneasy and yet I didn't want to stifle her creativity by insisting she stick to Disney subject matter. Rachael was too talented. It was all I could do to give her the best opportunity for success.' (p. 31)

The reader mainly sees Rachael from the point of view of her parents. Does this give us a complete picture of her character, or is something missing? What other glimpses do we get to see?

Setting

'The ocean left a crust on my skin, grafting patterns on my shins. It had been a thrilling set, topped only by the awesome fireball that roared over the rooftops and made everything glow...Somehow the colours seemed brighter, the world sharper and I felt as if I could eat for ten: tonight was a fish and chips kind of night.' (p. 83)

'We drove up a sweeping driveway and the shadow of the attic windows and the tall, thin chimneys of the old chateau were outlined against the night sky. A single strip of light shone between the drapes in one room and the rest of the house was unlit, except for a tiny outdoor lamp above the service entrance. Rachael poked me in the hip. "Holy shit!" she mouthed.' (p. 180)

1. How has the author used setting to establish mood in the novel?
2. How does setting the novel in the vastly different worlds of Australia and France establish contrasts between the main characters, their roots and their ambitions?

Writing Style

1. Alex Cameron has chosen to tell this story in first person using both Camille's and Wolfe's points of view, which gives the reader two sides of the narrative. What is the effect of this? How does it shape the reader's understanding of the central theme of the novel – that of betrayal?
2. Dialogue is utilised throughout to reveal character. Choose a section of dialogue and discuss what insight it gives into the speakers.
3. Discuss how the author has used description of setting to evoke a strong sense of place in the novel.