



# THE ASH BURNER

by Kári Gíslason

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## THE STORY

*'And yet I also understood that there was something about having me there that made it easier for them to get along – to be satisfied in the moment, the sun and the water and the late feeling in the air, each as the perfect companion for the others.'* (p 86)

Growing up with his father in a small Australian coastal town, all Ted knows about his mother is that she died when he was a boy. His father has brought them halfway across the world to start anew, but her absence defines and haunts their lives.

When Ted meets Anthony and Claire, an intense friendship begins, carrying them to Sydney and university. They introduce him to poetry and art, and he feels a sense of belonging at last. But as the trio's friendship deepens over the years, Ted must learn to negotiate the boundaries of love, and come to terms with a legacy of secrets and silence.

Influenced by novels such as *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Quiet American*, Kári began writing the novel as an experiment in point of view and memory. 'I am intrigued not only by triangles in relationships, but the nature of protecting and sometimes failing to save the ones we love. I also appreciate the way these novels create hope that memory and storytelling are ways of holding on to something of what we've lost,' he says.

A visit to central NSW to inter his grandparents' ashes provided the first threads of the story. Kári remembers his grandparents having a difficult marriage; one that saw them move from England to Australia twice, separate and come back together, and raise two daughters who had an unstable sense of family. Yet the daughters (Kári's mother and his aunt) wanted their parents' ashes to be placed together, perhaps to finally reconcile them.

The complexities of intergenerational family relationships will no doubt resonate with many readers. So, too, the struggles that inevitably come with growing up and forming a sense of self that is shaped by our own experiences, hopes and desires.

University of Queensland Press – Book Club Notes

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Kári Gíslason was born in Reykjavík in 1972. He moved to England at the age of ten, and then to Australia four years later. His first book, *The Promise of Iceland* (UQP, 2011), told the story of return journeys that he has made to his birthplace, and in 2012 was shortlisted for the Queensland Literary Awards. Kári was awarded a doctorate in 2003 for his thesis on medieval Icelandic literature. As well as memoir and fiction, he publishes scholarly articles, travel writing and reviews. He currently lectures in creative writing and literary studies at Queensland University of Technology. His second book, *The Ash Burner*, is his first exciting foray into writing fiction.

### **DISCUSSION NOTES**

1. *The Ash Burner* explores the ways in which our relationship with our parents can influence our first friendships and loves as young adults. How does Ted's search for his father's hidden past help shape his friendship with Anthony and Claire?
2. 'I knew that the sea had me; it was deciding where I was going next.' (p 3) What is the role of the water and swimming in this novel?
3. When Ted and Anthony first meet, Anthony quotes Emily Dickinson's line, 'the soul selects her own society', to explain what is happening between them (p 29). What is your sense of their friendship, and how it develops?
4. One aspect of Ted's relationship with his parents and with Anthony and Claire is that he finds himself placed in triangles, or perhaps circles, that he doesn't quite understand. How does Ted's position as the 'third person' influence his perception of events, and the way they are narrated to the reader?
5. The book takes place over ten years, from just before Ted's thirteenth birthday until the start of his life after university. In what ways does he change over that time?
6. Did Ted do enough to try to prevent Anthony's suicide? How is he affected by it, and by his decision to leave the party when he does?

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7. 'Better than anyone, he saw her beauty.' (p 75) The idea of beauty and of something or someone being 'too beautiful' occur regularly in novel. How do the characters in *The Ash Burner* differ in their understanding of beauty?
  
8. 'Low trees climbed up the squat rocks of the Head, and down its back to the water's edge ... behind us, an orange projector flickered through the leaves, and the sea was lit like a screen.' (p 92) Consider the role of landscape in the work.
  
9. 'Claire's parents had left Greece after the war. Like my father, they hadn't properly thought through what it would mean to live so far from Europe.' (p 82) In this work, are migrant experiences of displacement and return intergenerational in nature?
  
10. Art is important not only to Ted, Anthony and Claire but also to Theodore. What do the characters find in art that they can't find or express in other ways?

**FURTHER READING**

Kári Gíslason, *The Promise of Iceland* (UQP, 2011)

Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*

DH Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*

Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*

Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*