



# THE SPARROWS OF EDWARD STREET

by ELIZABETH STEAD

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'I'm not sorry!' is the familiar riposte by the feisty Aria Sparrow, when forced to admit to her somewhat creative solutions to life's challenges. For as elder sister to the serially wan Rosy, she is expected by her ineffectual mother Hanora, to regularly sort out family troubles. Aria's successes are often underpinned by risky and unconventional behaviour, but she makes it clear that she has no qualms about who she upsets when there is a principle involved!

This novel takes place in Sydney in 1948 when Australian society was still reeling from the Great Depression, followed by World War Two. The Sparrows are a family in crisis, like many others at that time. For Sydney, like other parts of Australia, is peopled by unemployed men, many of whom never recovered from war, by destitute families, often separated by poverty from their men, and a housing crisis exacerbated by corrupt politicians and an inept bureaucracy. When the Sparrows are thrown out of their flat by the dreadful Mr Kellog, they are forced to live in a corrugated iron hut in the 'Camp' while they wait for the Housing Commission to find them suitable accommodation. Fortunately, both daughters are employed – Aria as a photographic model, and Rosy as a milliner. However, the widowed Hanora has long since abandoned the idea of being an active participant in the workforce, and needs as much looking after as do the camp children. Despite their own troubles, they meet some unlikely friends there, and observe the far greater desperation of others such as the hapless Mr Sparkle whom Aria takes under her wing, the tragic war hero Mr Gardiner, to whom Hanora reads poetry, the desperately depressed Mr Biddle, and the 'laundry ladies' who are the eyes and ears of the camp.

How women survived at that time, in a world peopled by unscrupulous and manipulative powerbrokers, lascivious would-be lovers, and damaged hope-less men, is vividly evoked in a novel which draws on social history to tell a vibrant story of loss, friendship, tenacity, love and resilience. Elizabeth Stead makes this harrowing tale a witty and often very humorous account of the camp inmates' lives. She observes human behaviour keenly and is a sly humorist who makes minute details the source of either acerbic parody or deeply felt human pathos. As we farewell our heroines at the end of the novel, their hope for the future is tinged with regret that they have to leave a place which in many ways has become their home, and where they will be sadly missed.

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## DISCUSSION NOTES

**1.** 'Three birds in a row. Three birds on a wire of tension, beaks shut tight for the moment.'(p 3)

When we first meet the Sparrows we are introduced to them as a family of birds and the metaphor is replayed throughout the book. What does the comparison suggest about them?

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- 2.** ‘Rosy had never coped well with life overturned, or life in general for that matter. She was like some sparrows I have observed, craving crumbs near a human’s boot, desperate and hungry but afraid to strike all at the same time.’(p 5)
- Sibling rivalry is one layer of the underlying tension in this family. Aria feels that her mother favours Rosy and leaves the work to her. But her mother says that it’s because Aria is an extraordinarily self-reliant person. Is Aria justified in her feelings?
- 3.** The history of the Housing Commission families throughout Australia after WWII is a little-known story, the remnants of which are still very visible in suburbs where the architecture of these houses is uniformly practical. (Read some of the online references below to discover more about this history.) What did you know about this era? What surprised you about the people in this Housing Commission camp?
- 4.** Mr Sparkle misses the camaraderie of the camp, when he can finally afford a home for his family. The novel evokes the bittersweet taste we all experience at some time; that our moments of adversity are often in retrospect some of the most emotionally satisfying periods of our lives. The same feelings are often described by returned servicemen who, despite the travails of war, often felt truly ‘alive’ in the company of their fellow soldiers and lived an intensely vivid period so that their return felt pale in comparison. Discuss.
- 5.** Rosy criticises Aria for meddling in other people’s lives, and yet her efforts are startlingly effective. Discuss.
- 6.** The world of modelling and commercial photography is warmly evoked by Aria’s friendship with the gay photographer, Leon, who is typical of the bohemian world which opens up to her. It’s unconventional, generous, reckless and creative, all qualities which Aria thrives on. Discuss.
- 7.** Aria’s cynical observations about the visit by the Housing Minister and his wife to the camp are not so distant from similar commentary about contemporary politicians who fly in and out of disadvantaged areas, seemingly driven by the desire to create a photo opportunity rather than from any real concern for the residents. Discuss.
- 8.** As a successful photographic model, Aria has learned to use her ‘currencies’ to get what she wants from men like the Minister. In ‘loving’ products as diverse as soap and vegetables, she has become adept at looking like she is enjoying something when she really isn’t. Hanora, too, has used her charms unwisely in turning to a married man after her husband’s death. When Aria visits the minister’s office she wears what her mother suggests, and later confronts Hanora about her complicity: ‘Was there a price to pay? Well, yes, of course there was a price to pay. Hanora knew it but was desperate, and Rosy knew it but was desperate; the Minister knew it and expected it, and I knew it but was prepared.’(p 236)
- What does this novel say about women in this postwar society? Were they victims, or cleverly manipulating men in order to survive in a cruel world? Discuss.
- 9.** Despite their travails, these women reveal a steely ability to cope with things without the benefit of counselling, although Hanora relies on medication and alcohol to calm herself, and Rosy is often depressed. Were these women made of tougher stuff? How would a reasonably well-bred woman of today cope if she found herself living in a boiling hot/freezing cold corrugated iron hut surrounded by damaged people?

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**10.** ‘Every now and then he howled like a lost dog.’(p 139)

Tom Gardiner is an extreme example of the effect of war, which has left him a shell of a man, and whose mental disturbance has also taken its toll on his once beautiful wife. What does this novel say about war and how governments treated soldiers when they returned? Have we improved in this respect?

**11.** When Mr Biddle commits suicide, it highlights the underlying desperation in the camp. As Aria writes: ‘I can’t speak of other suicides in the camp. I’d been told about them, and I’d thought briefly of keeping a record of births, deaths and miseries for the Ministry of Housing.’ (p 245)

Do governments routinely ignore such statistics when it suits them? How many people are suffering homelessness today?

**12.** The novel evokes the atmosphere of the camp in visceral imagery: ‘I’d have to say that this spring day had only dirt under its feet, dust in its eyes and no blooms of any kind, let alone wild freesias. The air was as heavy as wet towels.’(p 14)

The conflict between the Sparrows’ old and new lives is evocatively portrayed by contrasting two pieces of furniture: ‘The cocktail cabinet and the fuel stove regarded each other as one alien might regard another, with suspicion and a readiness to protect their territory, but I was pretty sure the stove would win.’(p 78)

Choose another such paragraph and discuss its emotional impact.

**13.** People are also richly described: ‘Loneliness had Mr Sparkle practically whitewater-rafting down his river of words.’(p 51) Were there other such descriptions which were particularly descriptive of a character?

**14.** ‘I wish so much that Rosy could see the colour in the darkness.’ (p 47)

This is an apt description of the difference between the sisters. Aria can see colour anywhere. Discuss.

**15.** ‘I’d begun to think of the camp as an ‘ark’, a sort of parallel universe separated from everything else by the fork in the road and its boundaries of poverty and despair.’ (p 85)

Discuss this description with reference to people living in Aboriginal reserves, street people, or orphans and abandoned children. How close is each of us to boarding this ‘ark’?

**16.** Father Beale is not a very positive representative of Christian charity. Discuss.

**17.** ‘I have always been very sensitive to the atmospheres surrounding human events. Odd? Yes, but not to someone who understands the language of iron.’(p 146)

Aria suggests that living in the camp makes her more aware of people’s sorrows and joys. Does adversity breed empathy, and affluence a dearth of feeling for others?

**18.** When Aria reveals that she too had had a secret abortion (p 206) one senses that there may be other things she has not told her family, nor the readers of this text. How reliable a narrator is she? Did you notice any other asides or suggestive ‘gaps’ in this narrative?

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**19.** 'I am a hybrid' (p 241) writes Aria when she confronts the dichotomy in her nature. She's prepared to play the game to get what she wants but is horrified to find her fellow models stealing clothes and behaving badly. Is this novel a tale of moral choices as much as it's a story of human survival? You might wish to read Elizabeth Stead's other novels, including *The Gospel of Gods and Crocodiles* and compare them to this one, or read other novels about women in this era e.g. Estelle Pinney's *Time Out for Living*.

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### FURTHER READING

'Late 1940s: Houses Must be Built: Timeline' Queensland Government Housing and Homelessness Services [http://www.public-housing.qld.gov.au/about/doh/history/timeline/3\\_late1940s.htm](http://www.public-housing.qld.gov.au/about/doh/history/timeline/3_late1940s.htm)

'About Homelessness in Australia' National Homelessness Information Clearinghouse [http://www.homelessnessinfo.net.au/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=482&Itemid=272](http://www.homelessnessinfo.net.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=482&Itemid=272)

Wiseman, Neil 'Rough children of post-war housing camps reined in by Junior Red Cross' *Sunday Mail*, August 29, 2010. <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/sunday-mail/rough-children-of-post-war-housing-camps-reined-in-by-junior-red-cross/story-e6frep3f-1225911316100>