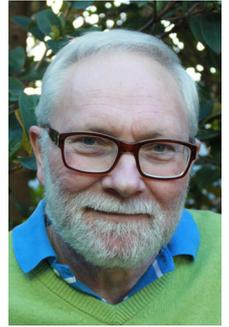


# THE TOWER MILL

by James Moloney

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## THE STORY

Susan Kinnane leaves school in 1968, eager to embrace university and the new freedoms opening up for young women. Her mother has other ideas, however, and when Susan becomes pregnant a struggle for her future sets them at loggerheads. The child's father, a student radical named Terry Stoddard, has been disabled during an anti-apartheid protest near the Tower Mill, and desperate to escape the deadening hand of her family, Susan opts for marriage to a former beau, Mike Riley.

She does her best as wife and mother, but Mike is as conventional in his way as Susan's mother and, most unsettling of all, she knows that little Tom would never have been born if things had been different. The marriage endures until Susan's unhappiness is made unbearable by shocking revelations about the injuries that disabled Terry Stoddard. Already acutely sensitive to the political climate, Susan finds it impossible to live in the Queensland of Joh Bjelke-Petersen, a state she now holds responsible for the fate of her lover, and after a visit to Sydney she refuses to return. But Mike has Tom and he loves the boy as though he were his own flesh and blood. Doubting her own motherhood, Susan makes a new life for herself, alone.

Freed in this way, she becomes a prominent journalist and for ten years sees little of her son. Then an enquiry into police corruption draws her back. Those who drove her from Queensland are being called to court – but so is Susan for her own choices. How does a mother explain to her son that it was politics that made her give him up? Is it even true? And what does Tom make of his mother now that he is a young man?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Moloney is one of Australia's most respected writers for children and young adults with titles such as *A Bridge to Wiseman's Cove* and *The Book of Lies*. Raised in Brisbane, he came to political consciousness amid the controversies of the 1970s and 80s, which he uses in *The Tower Mill* as the backdrop for a story about a mother and son whose lives are profoundly influenced by those times.

## DISCUSSION NOTES

1. Is Susan a bad mother? What do you make of her as a young woman, a young mother and then as a mother to an adult son?

2. Women who abandon their children are judged more harshly than men, as though the act of birth and the maternal bond constitute a sacred commitment that doesn't exist as strongly for fathers. Is this an accurate

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statement, or has feminism changed perceptions of women who leave their families to pursue a different kind of fulfilment? Do you feel Susan is justified in abandoning Tom to be raised by Mike Riley? Why do you think she describes herself as an ‘illegitimate mother’ (p.182)?

3. Susan is born into a conservative Catholic family and comes of age at a time of rapid social change in Australia. The Pill, the mini-skirt, university education for girls, and careers that continued after marriage all challenged the worldview of older women. Are the portrayals of Sister Bernadette and especially Susan’s mother, Joyce Kinnane, valid for the times? How much of Susan’s later behaviour is a consequence of her early battles with these conservative women? Did you or others in your family clash with parents over similar issues and did those clashes shape your own life choices?

4. What are Mike Riley’s character flaws and how does he contribute to the breakdown of his marriage to Susan? Is he a good father to Tom?

5. The author frames his story within real events, pertaining mainly to Queensland but with the rest of Australia looking on. Anti-apartheid protesters were beaten outside the Tower Mill Hotel, political and social dissent was curtailed by banning street marches, and police corruption was exposed by the Fitzgerald Inquiry. Whether living in Queensland at the time or not, what are your memories of the 1970s and 80s when these events were taking place?

6. Is it important that people who oppose the dominant view of both government and public opinion are allowed to voice their dissent? Compared to some countries, Australia has many protections in place to ensure this right, but considering events and attitudes explored in *The Tower Mill*, are these protections adequate? Are today’s young Australians as politically engaged as those in Susan’s generation? How do they express their dissent?

7. The party scene in Surry Hills portrays a dismissive attitude towards Queenslanders by other Australians. How do Susan and Mike emerge from this scene? Were you aware of this antagonism, as either a Queenslander or non-Queenslander, during the 1970s and 80s? Does it still exist today, and if so, why? Queensland isn’t mentioned in the back cover blurb at all – do you think this is deliberate? What role does an ‘us and them’ antagonism based on region or class play in Australia more generally today?

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8. How does today's Queensland, especially Queensland politics, compare to the state explored in *The Tower Mill*?
9. Tom tells his part in the story as a way of trying to understand his mother. How well is his search for maternal love portrayed in the novel?
10. While he never estranges himself from Mike and Lyn, Tom Riley gradually transfers his allegiance to his biological parents, especially Susan. There is an inevitability in this, perhaps, and it seems important to Susan that it come about. Why? What is Susan seeking in re-establishing herself in Tom's life? Does she even know herself? What does Tom gain?
11. Susan meets Tom's girlfriend, Hilary, in Brisbane's Botanical Gardens and afterwards feels unsettled by the things Hilary has said so bluntly. In fact, the encounter has a profound influence on Susan's behaviour during the final scenes of the novel. Why does this meeting break through to Susan? How valid is Hilary's assessment of Susan's relationship with Tom and her continuing influence?
12. At the story's end, several characters are seeking reconciliation on a number of fronts. What are these and are they adequately resolved?
13. In the final conversation between mother and son, Susan expresses regret that when Tom needed her to be his mother, she chose herself instead. Does this 'apology' weaken Susan by forcing her acceptance of the traditional maternal role she spends so much of the story rejecting? Does the entire novel invalidate itself by bringing her to these words, or does it deepen her character and thereby the novel as a whole? Is it possible to regret a personal choice and still know it was the right or only choice? What is Susan apologising for?
14. The novel explores themes around belonging, identity, loss, and the terrifying ambivalence at the heart of family life. What feelings lingered after you turned the last page of *The Tower Mill*?