



THE PROMISE SEED

by Cass Moriarty



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THE STORY

'But you know what, kid? This seed is bursting with possibility; it's a seed full of promise. It might be dormant now, quiet, waiting and watchful, biding its time, but when the time is right, it will open up and come to life, and sprout into that beautiful, aromatic herb that's loved by millions all over the world, and it will serve its purpose. All it needs is the right environment. Water, good soil, nutrients, bit of sunlight. Keep the weeds away so they don't strangle it before it's got a decent chance to develop. Doesn't need much.' (p 211)

Written in two narrative voices, this novel begins in 1944 with a terrible incident: a baby girl is presumed suffocated by her six-year-old brother. His father has just been announced missing in action in New Guinea, so the loss of baby Emily shatters his mother's already fragile health, and he is consigned to a boys' home in rural Queensland.

Fast forward to seventy years later and the novel tells his story and that of a ten-year-old boy who lives next door with his mother. The two strike up an unlikely friendship and the old man senses that the boy has things in common with the child he was. They share the joys of gardening and caring for the man's chickens, and the boy learns to play chess. But the old man still carries the demons of his past and the boy is threatened by a demon in his present.

Eventually the boy is challenged by his loyalty to a mother who has often betrayed him, and an old man who, although a virtual stranger, has provided the only solace he has ever had.

Will this boy's promise be nurtured, or nipped in the bud?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cass Moriarty lives and writes in Brisbane. After completing a Business Communication degree at QUT, she worked in public relations and marketing. She began writing fiction after the birth of her sixth child. *The Promise Seed*, her first novel, was shortlisted in the Emerging Author category of the 2013 Queensland Literary Awards

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DISCUSSION NOTES

1. The novel opens with this quote: *'I wasn't raised in this country. Wasn't raised, really at all.' 'If a person is not raised, then what? He grows from a seed?'* Barbara Kingsolver, *The Lacuna*. Discuss the relevance of this quote to the novel's themes.
2. The writer has told the boy's story in third person and the old man's in first person. Why did she do that? What effect does it have on the narrative? And why don't we learn either of their names?
3. Parental neglect is a central theme in this novel: *'I looked at the boy and I thought about the families in our street, and I thought about my notion of family. Fathers defined by their absence rather than their presence. Mothering a state of benign neglect. Home the place you were barely noticed. Or ignored. Manipulation and self-preservation acting as poor substitutes for unconditional love.'* (p 222) The old man was abandoned by his mother, and the boy is put at physical and emotional risk by his mother and by malevolent people like Snake. Ironically both find safe haven with strangers – at the Home, and in foster care or out-of-home-care (OOHC). Many kids today are put at risk like this, and many go unreported. What can be done to protect them?
4. The boy's life sets him apart as many kids' lives are set apart: *'he felt disconnected and alone – far more alone than during the days he spent by himself riding his bike or reading. His family and his life seemed so far removed from what he heard discussed in the playground at break.'* (p 63) *'The result of this paradox was that being at school was like an unnatural confinement.'* (p 64) Imagine if you had to spend your school days with kids whose parents cared for them, when your own mother didn't. How alienating would that be for a child? What sort of behaviour might result?
5. *'He liked the routine of it, the rules.'* (p 75) Often kids who come from neglected backgrounds crave the rules they find elsewhere. Discuss.
6. The old man's plight as a boy is vividly conveyed: without a family or anyone to support him, his prospects were always dubious; his loss of any education, a job, accommodation and livelihood were almost pre-ordained. *'There're people out there merely existing. Scraping by, one day at a time, with such worry and sadness and fury within them that it would kill you to know about it.'* (p 149) He is determined that the boy's promise won't be blighted like his was. What chance does this boy have of leading a happy life when shadowed by the traumas of his past? What comfort does he derive from his box of treasures? Where does the old man find any solace?
7. This novel makes clear that a child can suffer guilt for the rest of his life, even for an incident he doesn't fully understand: *'I told myself I was shielding my daughter. Or was I shielding myself?'* (p 110) The old man's traumatic memories of Emily's death made it impossible for him to love his own child or to settle with a partner. Discuss how guilt can leave its legacy on future relationships.
8. *'Course, I know now that adages like that aren't always true. Sometimes things can't be fixed. Sometimes sorry does come too late.'* (p 136) Could the narrator's visit to Sarah Flower have ended

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differently? Is it also sometimes possible to ‘fix’ things by taking a risk like he did?

9. The old man admits to himself (pp 169–70) that the boy has ‘gotten’ to him; that his studied indifference to the world around him has been punctured. But this would appear to others an unlikely friendship: ‘I suppose I should’ve known it wouldn’t end well. Fancy an old guy like me thinking he could be friends with a kid like that without someone taking offence. *Unnatural*, they said, down at the cop shop. *Not normal*.’ (p 251) Why do we find it so hard to accept that such an alliance could be genuine?

10. ‘The Home. For most of my childhood, the place was home.’ (p 16) The Boys’ Home is remembered with affection (p 172) by the narrator. This stands at odds with so many cases of abuse being uncovered currently. Discuss.

11. ‘I figure I’ve known one my whole life, and all she’s ever brought me is a sense of peace, though God knows she’d have reason to do otherwise, if any ghost would.’ (p 214) Why does Emily’s ‘ghost’ bring peace to the narrator, despite the tragedy of her death?

12. The novel is full of lyrical description of nature, for example the description of the creek (p 253); and also of the joys of propagating food, planting gardens, and caring for animals. What does nature represent in this novel?

13. This novel has been compared to *Mr Wigg* by Inga Simpson, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* by Karen Joy Fowler, and *Lost and Found* by Brooke Davis. Do you agree with these comparisons? Why?

14. How are we shaped by our childhood and our families? ‘And if you don’t know any different, how can you hope for something better? How can you have a shot at what’s possible if you don’t even *know* what’s possible?’ (p 223)

15. The closing line in the novel is deeply touching and enigmatic. What do you imagine the old man might have said?

FURTHER READING

Read resources such as: Child Abuse and Neglect Statistics CFCA Resource Sheet – January 2015

<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/child-abuse-and-neglect-statistics>

Read other novels with similarities to this one (such as those listed in 13. above).

Read memoirs of children sent to homes such as *Boy, Lost: A Family Memoir* by Kristina Olsson (UQP, 2013).