



# BOY, LOST

by Kristina Olsson

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## THE STORY

'She is at once the girl Michael wanted, the woman my father loved, the grieving, wistful mother we adored. Still vulnerable, still innocent despite everything, a woman of infinite tenderness and quiet fury.' (p 12)

This is a family memoir told by a narrator whose lifelong search for answers about the sources of her mother's melancholy unearths a complex and emotionally troubling story. It is in part her mother's story; her step-brother Peter's story; her own story. But there are silences in this story, too. For her step-sister Sharon, and her siblings Ashley and Andrew are part players, as are their partners. Olsson has not revealed any of the later entanglements in this family, and clearly they too have been painfully fraught by the loss, and by the discovery of Peter, and the aftermath.

This story might be fiction, too, since Kristina writes in such a beautifully evocative way, and has also by necessity had to re-create events, in order to imagine many aspects of the story which are not available to her. She has some records to refer to about Peter; but she has no way to replicate the feelings her mother, her father, or her siblings had about the gap in their lives, about how that gap was filled, and how that 'filling' altered everything.

Kristina Olsson has combined the skills of journalist, novelist and memoirist to create a unique narrative which is both exhilarating and harrowing. One imagines so many outcomes for these characters, but in the end they have lived like anyone, through pain, bereavement, yearning and loss with quiet dignity, bemusement, grief, and with fortitude and grace.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristina Olsson is the author of the novel *In One Skin* (2001) and the biography *Kilroy Was Here* (2005). Her second novel, *The China Garden* (2009), received the 2010 Barbara Jefferis Award for its empowering depiction of women in society and was also shortlisted for the Kibble Literary Award. Kristina's journalism and non-fiction have been published in *The Australian*, *The Courier-Mail*, *The Sunday Telegraph* and *Griffith Review*. She has worked extensively as a teacher of creative writing and journalism at a tertiary level and in the community, and as an advisor to government. She lives in Brisbane.

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**DISCUSSION NOTES**

1. Yvonne/Mimi are the two sides of the woman who was the narrator, Kristina's mother:

- 'There is a steeliness that has always slept in Mimi's veins.' (p 24)
- 'It would be years until I realised it: the sense of melancholy around my mother was one of suffering.' (p 26)
- Was she strong, fragile, damaged, or simply like anyone else, an amalgam of those conflicting characteristics?

2. 'Their thoughts emerged slowly, as they might from people long inured to keeping secrets, people convinced it was the right thing to do. It wasn't that they hesitated, or didn't want to speak; more that the information, so long buried, took a while to process and to surface.' (p 17) When Kristina asks questions of her aunts Evelyn and Ann she is very aware that they, like her mother, have kept secrets for a very long time. Every family has secrets. It is a difficult thing to decide what should no longer be secret or how much of a secret should be revealed. Discuss.

3. 'I began to feel the nausea of uncertainty. Not just about my mother's version of her childhood but my version of my own, and with it my sense of myself.' (p 18) Everyone has the disquieting sense when they read a sibling's, or parent's, or friend's version of an event that life was not as one imagined it. Discuss in relation to your own experiences.

4. Post WWII Brisbane is largely the backdrop to this story, evoked richly in descriptions (pp 7-8) which offer a visceral and resonant setting to the story being told. Cairns is also vividly evoked. How important is setting in this memoir?

5. 'That's what you do, as a child: you take whatever is at hand and mould it into something bright or safe or consoling.' (p 25) Discuss.

6. 'But if he feels safe in them, no longer alone, surely this indicts us all.' (p 161) The fact that children like Peter find comfort in being 'imprisoned' in homes is a sad commentary on how society often allows children to fall through the cracks when they lack parental care. Discuss.

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7. 'I could see our mother's youth and energy and innocence would have been no match for the combined forces of Michael and his history, could have no impact on them.' (p 38) Can men like Michael rebel against such conditioning? Did he have to maintain such an attitude to women or might he have changed?

8. In this memoir, the narrator is imagining her own mother's feelings; piecing together a story from other people's reflections on it, for example,

'So now when Michael is not there she takes Peter and walks the streets of the town. At these times she is often surprised by loveliness, the mountains in the soft light of early morning, or the sea along the esplanade at dusk.' (p 45)

'Somewhere in its grainy texture there must be some clue, some portal I can pass through to stand right there, next to them, so I can understand what she was feeling, her connection with this man, what brought them to this point in their lives together.' (p 53)

But how can anyone really imagine a life? There might still be many aspects of the life of her mother which Kristina will never know, just as she will never reveal some aspects of herself to others?

9. Obtuse references to social and political issues such as post WWII privations, the new opportunities offered to migrants, women's changing roles, Vietnam conscription and the pre-millennium bug hysteria reveal the memoirist/novelist/journalist's restraint in not bringing them too much into the story, although she clearly has opinions she wishes to share with the reader, for example:

'Well, it's the 1950s, everyone is afraid. There is a cold war in full swing, reds under the bed, nuclear missiles, potential enemies everywhere. People are possessive of what they've worked for, what it stands for. The untroubled houses. The dun-coloured suburbs. Uniformity, decency, rules.' (p 137)

'Despite victory it was conservative and austere, and a new moral Puritanism was in the air, one that punished women for any perceived sexual transgression, that insisted on the chaste wife and mother but ignored the violence inflicted on them behind closed doors.' (p 39)

What picture of this era does the memoir present to the reader?

10. 'But the past always leaks through.' (p 139) Can we ever escape the past?

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11. When Peter finds his mother it might have seemed to be a ‘happy ending’, but the fact that the whole idea of a mother has always been ‘a shelter and an escape’ (p 190) to him, means that when he finds her he loses that comforting dream. Her joyous reaction to his arrival is followed by more complex developments in their relationship:

‘He realises that, all his life, he has only ever imagined having a real mother; he hasn’t imagined being this mother’s son.’ (p 221)

‘And partly, hidden deep, perhaps a desire to punish her too; no matter what anyone says – despite what his own head echoes – she wasn’t there, she wasn’t there. He needed her, she didn’t find him, he missed out.’ (p 225)

‘The moratorium on mourning they’d both endured since their separation, the unresolved grief that froze their hearts. They don’t know, now the separation is over, how to lift that moratorium.’ (p 227)

Discuss these quotes in relation to both this memoir, and also to the fact that finding one’s birth parents is now much easier than it once was.

12. This memoir is about a past history of institutional child neglect and abuse, which has been documented in a range of government reports, and one is tempted to hope that such mistreatment would not be countenanced in today’s institutions. But there is still plenty of evidence that children are removed by the vagaries of bureaucracies, that they are still subject to abuse, that successive government reports have not resolved many problems, and that family breakdowns and particularly property settlements also lead to insidious forms of neglect. Discuss.

13. Kristina Olsson has combined the documentary skills of a non-fiction writer or journalist with her creative skills as a novelist to create a lyrical response to the mysteries of her family’s past in this memoir. She has written that ‘there are obvious absences of women’s experiences and/or achievements in historical records, and this leads to difficulties for a writer in bringing the detail of women’s lives historically to the page. They simply aren’t there. In that way the use of informed imagination, as long as it’s IN SERVICE OF THE TRUTH, must be used.’ Discuss her writing style in this memoir.

14. ‘But it wasn’t simple and it wasn’t a story. It wasn’t entirely happy and it wasn’t even an ending.’ (p 220) Whereas the reader of fiction often desires a grandly, tragic or a grandly, romantic ending, instead this memoir presents a complex, ambivalent, and deeply moving ending which is real and very emotionally potent. For real human lives do not end with overly romanticised flourishes nor with deathbed soliloquies. Discuss.

### Further Reading:

Olsson, Kristina *In One Skin* (UQP, 2001)

Olsson, Kristina *The China Garden* (UQP, 2009)