



GRACE'S TABLE

by Sally Piper

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THE STORY

'Because it was clear that what had been said today couldn't be unsaid, or forgotten.' (p 283)

As Grace prepares her seventieth birthday family lunch with her elder daughter Susan, she ruminates on her childhood relationship with her parents, her life with her deceased husband Des and their three children, Susan, Peter and Claire, and the friendships she has forged with three very strong women. She also reflects on her late-life relationship with Jack, and how her children refuse to acknowledge it. Food is the thread which weaves together these memories and it is obvious that the recipes and skills Grace has inherited from her mother, which she shares with her daughter and lover, are central to this delicate tapestry of family relationships.

Grace sets her table with twelve mismatched plates that are resonant with memories. But there are also bitter tastes to savour and events from the past which are still unresolved. As old grudges surface, she is forced to confront doubts not only about her flawed marriage but also about how she may have failed in her role as a mother. Grace is surprised by the wisdom of the younger members of her family, and acknowledges how we each deal with grief in different ways. The day ends with new perceptions of the past, and with the 'sand' having shifted in dramatic ways. Each member of this family has learned new insights into each other, and will adjust their relationships in future accordingly. They have also learned that anger and resentment resolve nothing, and that it is necessary to forgive in order to move on with their lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sally Piper is a former nurse and lived in the UK for nine years before returning to Brisbane to complete a Postgraduate Diploma and Master's Degree in Creative Writing at QUT, where she was supervised by Kristina Olsson. She had a story selected in the first *One Book Many Brisbanes* anthology in 2006. *Grace's Table* was shortlisted in the 2011 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards - Emerging Queensland Author category. She has had short stories, poetry and non-fiction articles published in Australia and the UK, appearing in writing journals, literary magazines and *The Weekend Australian*. She currently lives in Brisbane with her husband and two sons.

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DISCUSSION NOTES

1. 'Look after your things well, Gracie, and they'll last you forever' (p 3). This statement might be a metaphor for looking after people as well. Discuss.
2. 'Now she found love worked in less explosive ways. It was no longer waited on or waited for but taken, as needed, like sips from a cup. That's what Jack provided now, those small sips.' (p 28) Is love in later life necessarily circumscribed like this?
3. 'Who could deny Susan her feelings of betrayal; to have imagined a future for herself, only to discover it wasn't the right one.' (p 39) What future did Susan imagine for herself? This statement is never really explained in the novel. How did you interpret it?
4. Simmering grievances and tensions underlie the action: 'I don't think he knew how to take responsibility for what he ate' (p 80) is Susan's barbed riposte to her mother when discussing the unhealthy eating habits which contributed to Des's death. Clearly she insinuates that Grace was responsible for his over-consumption of fatty food, and later she suggests that Des accepted his wife's piled plates in order to please her, not himself. Is Susan being fair to Grace in this accusation?
5. 'But there were some things Grace didn't think age would allow her to forget.' (p 100) This novel is about the power of memories and family rituals, and also the impossibility of putting grief behind oneself. Discuss.
6. 'Most children, Grace had learnt, failed to notice much beyond their own shadow, especially when adolescence was forcing them to apply so many masks of their own.' (p 101) This is a statement which can be discussed in relation to your experiences as children and as parents. In the novel however, we find that Nick and Jorja prove to be extraordinarily sensitive rather than self-absorbed. Discuss.
7. '*Things were easier in your day.*' (p 104) Much contemporary rhetoric asserts that kids are faced with so many choices and challenges today, that parents have a tougher time in parenting them. Is this really true?
8. 'Girls, Grace suspected now, learnt the foolishness of expecting too much from love earlier these days.' (p 110) Does this statement suggest that romance is harder to maintain or to believe in? Or that girls have a more realistic expectation of their partners and therefore are likely to have more balanced relationships?
9. The difficulty of finding forgiveness in one's heart is a central theme in this novel. Grace remembers some act of Des's that he'd wanted forgotten (p 121), which is revealed later in the book to have been burning Claire's things. Often one major act in a marriage can cause an unbridgeable gap between the partners, unless forgiveness can be found. Discuss.
10. '... careless comments or actions didn't necessarily mean there was a lack of care, so much as a lack of understanding.' (p 149) This is a very important lesson for life, for we often tend to blame others for words or

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actions which seem heartless when they may simply be due to ignorance or a failure of understanding. Discuss.

11. Jane's snobbery over food brands (p 181) is unhappily typical of a society fuelled by reality television cooking shows. Honesty or authenticity is a central theme in this novel, and this societal trend is one example of inauthentic behaviour. Discuss.

12. 'The kitchen was the vault that stored her memories, witnessed her everyday actions, kept her secrets.' (p 180) Do you feel that way about your kitchen? Is the kitchen (and the recipe book) a metaphor for a family history in your opinion?

13. Until Susan's outburst (pp 262-3) we have believed Grace's version of the heartless and insensitive Des. But this puts a new spin on things by expressing a child's view of an adult's failing. Were you surprised by this scene given what had occurred before, which is largely seen through the prism of Grace's perspective?

14. Grace has also harboured a secret not shared with anyone but her mother; that of the baby conceived with Filip and later deliberately miscarried. How has this teenage tragedy determined her later emotional life and relationships? How did it affect her marriage?

15. 'There's no right or wrong way to grieve.' (p 272) Discuss this statement. (You might also refer to some of the advice listed in the sites included in **FURTHER READING** below and discuss how this sort of information might be helpful.)

16. 'Families were like sand dunes... reimagined.' (p 283) This quotation lies at the heart of the action in this novel. Discuss in relation to the novel and to any particular incident which may have altered your perceptions of your own family.

17. Grace asks Kath what she was like after Claire died to which she replies: 'Troubled. Distant. Frightening' ... 'balancing or teetering between madness and reason, calm and frenzy. Some days we had to watch you fall. That was frightening.' (p 289) Why haven't her friends (Kath, Ada and Bev) discussed this with her before? Perhaps the comfortable relationship between them has been preserved by their collusion in not traversing this painful old ground. And perhaps, too, they were overly critical of Des, biased by their dedication to Grace. Discuss.

18. 'And it made her wonder: if a child could get something so wildly wrong, why not an adult? How could anyone's perceptions of an event ever be trusted?' (p 288) Each individual's interpretation of an emotional event is different. How then do we reconcile these conflicting views to create a cohesive narrative? How do we avoid these interpretations creating irreparable conflicts and unresolved grievances amongst family members?

FURTHER READING

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement <http://www.grief.org.au/>

Family & Relationship Services Australia <http://www.frsa.org.au/>