



## ***THE GEOGRAPHY OF FRIENDSHIP***

by Sally Piper

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### **THE STORY**

*'Now she knows they weren't running from each other. They were running from themselves. She thinks she probably still is.'* (p. 87)

Old school friends, Samantha, Lisa, and Nicole, embark on a trek together through an isolated national park after twenty years apart. After initiating contact, Lisa has convinced the women, now in their early forties, to revisit a five-day hike they took many years earlier, which was traumatic for each of them and irreparably damaged their friendship. Each chapter moves alternately between the perspectives of the women as they reflect on how events of the past have changed them, and how each step on this new journey enriches their understanding of each other, and provides an opportunity for them to redeem their friendship.

Their first walk began with an encounter with an unpleasant and aggressive man at the trailhead car park. Lisa's customary anger spilled over when she was taunted by the man for her careless driving, and she retaliated. Only after it is too late for them to turn back do the friends realise that the stranger is hell-bent on terrorising them. Years later they've returned to this same path to confront what happened during the earlier hike, now carrying baggage of their own. Samantha's concerned that her marriage to Harry is failing; Lisa is bitter about her divorce from Matt and feels guilty about her aggrieved daughter Hannah; Nicole has never married and starts to question whether the walls she has put up to protect herself may be preventing her from letting anyone get too close. But mostly the baggage they carry is the memory of what happened on this lonely track years before. This is a novel about guilt and shame. As young women they blamed each other, and each harbour guilt about their actions. The second hike also forces them to re-examine their culpability and question their earlier judgements – 'how much did they provoke him at his game?' (p. 202)

*The Geography of Friendship* is also a meditation on landscape, and on the changes wrought by human interaction with it. The author lovingly details the flora and fauna the characters observe with more seasoned eyes. They also observe the domestication of the once wild landscape with more frequent encounters with other walkers, established signage and camping sights, changing their perception of the adventure and freedom they once pursued in the wilderness.

Over the course of five days the geography of the landscape works changes in the geography of the women's friendship, so that they not only retrace their steps but begin to heal and forge a friendship anew.

University of Queensland Press – Book Club Notes

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Sally Piper's debut novel, *Grace's Table* (2014), was shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Literary Award – Emerging Queensland Author category and she was awarded a Varuna Publishing Fellowship for her manuscript. Sally holds a Master of Arts in Creative Writing from Queensland University of Technology. She has had short fiction and non-fiction published in various print and online publications, including the first *One Book Many Brisbanes* anthology, *The Weekend Australian*, *WQ* plus other literary magazines and journals in the UK. She currently mentors other writers on the Queensland Writers Centre 'Writer's Surgery' program.

### **DISCUSSION NOTES**

1. The landscape the women are trudging through is like 'the geography of their friendship'. It has been weathered and damaged. Read the following passage and discuss in relation to the theme of the novel: 'From where they sit, Lisa can see all around the peninsula. Craggy headlands push into the sea from north to south and granite-strewn mountains fold away to the west... How much of what happened here has been carried with them into the everyday, washed up in their lives like those fragments of stone.' (pp. 34–5)

2. Each of the women in this novel has distinct character traits: Samantha is insecure, Lisa is angry, Nicole is singular and remote. Discuss the quotes below relating to each of them.

*Samantha*: '... maybe all she wants is to have her presence noted by its absence?' (p. 15)

*Lisa*: 'Lisa's anger has always been curious about its capabilities ... she thinks of it as something that existed inside her but was outside of her control. A force with its own free will.' (p. 26)

*Nicole*: 'She thinks company is overrated. A condition forced upon people at birth till they don't know how to be alone anymore. It's something she unlearned to need a long time ago.' (p. 112)

3. Samantha's marriage to Harry began with passion and love but seems now to be increasingly mundane: 'Samantha thinks familiarity has been their enemy. They live their lives with insufficient surprises.' (p. 17) 'As it is, they might still have one another, but mostly they are lost in the same home.' (p. 18) However by the end of the novel, she acknowledges '... contentment in belonging.' (p. 244) Is this enough to sustain a relationship?

4. Lisa's marriage to Matt descended quickly into a war over his input at home and her contribution to the finances: 'She had two jobs. Only one was paid for. Barely covered after-school care.' (p. 132) Who is most at fault here – Matt for his selfishness or Lisa for her anger?

5. 'Lisa feels a sense of smugness at having known this place at its purer, less trammelled best.' (p. 40) Is this what walkers strive for? To be 'first' at a place? To see it at its most unspoilt?

6. 'She recognises it as the same promontory of land. But it is also nothing like it was. It's had to give in many ways to satisfy the demands of walkers.' (p 60) Discuss the effect hikers have on national parks and wild places.

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7. This novel is not only about women and their feelings but also about the men they encounter and notions of masculinity. In particular, it's about 'a man determined to terrorise them.' (p. 59) His theft of Nicole's bikini and the foul things he does with it; his deliberately hiding the trail and also tying a water dragon up with their stolen tent rope is a chilling scene revealing his evil (pp. 171–2). 'The only rules he played by were his own.' (p. 179) But it is also about these women's relationships with men. Harry thinks his casual care for Samantha is enough; Matt thinks he can treat Lisa like a servant; Samantha recalls her virtual rape on a camp trip (pp. 66–7). Discuss any one of these examples and what they say about male/female relationships generally.
8. 'There was only a girl's account. A doctor can't hold a stethoscope to the soul, put a stitch to shame.' (p. 251) Discuss Nicole's humiliation at the hands of the man and the power such experiences have over women more generally. Why do such instances of abuse and harassment often go unreported?
9. *The Geography of Friendship* explores issues around parenting – Lisa and Matt have fought a war over Hannah's head which has left her keen to become independent and to avoid their mistakes. But has their personal vendetta damaged her? Sam and Harry's eldest son brings home a girlfriend to stay overnight and they discuss his sexuality (pp. 71–2). But how would they have reacted if he was gay? Samantha and Harry's middle son was called to the headmaster's office for taking secret photos of a girl, and they paid a bribe to keep the girl quiet and get their son off the hook (pp. 119–120). How should they have handled these issues?
10. Samantha compares their current walk in which she notices every detail of the natural landscape to last time when they looked only for signs of the man (pp 79–81). As adults, each of these women pays more attention to nature. Is this just because they are not walking in fear or is it because nature is now more present to them in their maturity?
11. Courage is a theme that comes up in relation to each character: '... what she hasn't been able to shut out is the ugly geography of her own failings in the face of him. This is the thing that haunts her. Not the man.' (p. 141) Was Lisa right to challenge the man? Were Nicole and Samantha cowards or sensible in their reservations? Lisa's goading the tormentor finally gets to him (p. 214). But at what cost to all three of them?
12. The unnamed man's pursuit of them causes the girls to turn on each other which is often the outcome of fear. The symbolic scar Lisa wears on her cheek was not (as a reader might have surmised) inflicted by the man, but by the garnet ring Nicole was wearing when she slapped her across the face (p. 192). Why does fear often manifest itself in aggression towards others?
13. Each of these three friends has been damaged by the loss of their friendship as well as by the frightening experiences they had during their first hike 'But then their friendship had unravelled and Samantha doesn't think she's felt good about herself since.' (p. 77) The reason for Nicole's aloneness is revealed: 'She lost her faith in humanity that day.' (p. 218) Lisa doubts herself: 'And what if in trying she only ends up making things worse?' (p. 100) Does this journey resolve anything for each of them?

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**FURTHER READING**

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