

The Bookshop on Jacaranda Street Marlish Glorie

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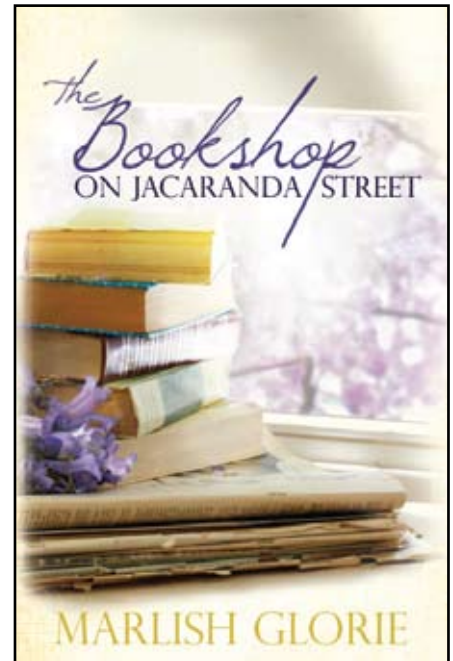
About the Novel

In Helen Budd-Doyle's new second-hand bookshop there is a maze. Helen Budd-Doyle initially describes it as 'a simple book maze', to which her son Vivian retorts, 'Isn't that an oxymoron?' *The Bookshop on Jacaranda Street* is a seemingly straightforward tale but it doesn't take long for it to reveal itself as a multi-layered story in which people's lives become interwoven in peculiar and unexpected ways. It is an elaborate story about family, and how its own unique cycle of falling apart, then getting put back together again, is the very machinery of this institution.

Grief is the foundation of this novel. It is because of grief that Arnold is an obsessive junk collector and Helen is a voracious reader. They are each still in mourning for the loss of their firstborn son who died at the age of eight, twenty years before the novel opens. Trapped in their individual expressions of mourning, their marriage runs along a fault line that ultimately undergoes a tectonic shift, causing their alliance to break, and a multitude of other events to unfold.

Helen leaves Arnold to go and live with her neighbour and close friend, Astrid. Motivated by concern for her son, Vivian, and financed by Astrid's recent win at the casino, she buys a dilapidated second-hand bookshop from Jim, an alcoholic businessman facing financial ruin.

Her other son Gabriel, who has just returned from a three year stint in the army, a career move made largely as an act of rebellion against his father's junk, tells the most outlandish lie in a desperate attempt to get his father to change his ways. Arnold, feeling numb with despair, is willing to fall for anything to retain his sanity. He decides to swallow Gabriel's tale about having a pregnant girlfriend.



At the heart of the novel is the Maze Bookshop, through which many and various characters pass, giving the novel its momentum and meaning. The Maze provides the Budd-Doyles with a much-needed bond and in fact it becomes their salvation as each family member becomes, in their way, involved with its running.

Despite the fact that the catalyst for this story is loss, *The Bookshop on Jacaranda Street* is infused with a good deal of ironic humour. The humour counterpoints and illuminates the sheer power of a grief which, for the Budd-Doyles, sets off a bizarre chain of events that serendipitously results in love, redemption and a happy ending.

About the Author

The path to becoming a writer has been a fairly straightforward one for me. As a child I was a storytelling addict, and then in adolescence I fell in love with reading. So there I was thirty years ago: in love with reading and addicted to storytelling, and the natural progeny of this was writing.

The Bookshop on Jacaranda Street is a conglomeration of diverse issues I spun together over a four-year period in the hope of turning it into a sensible story. Most of the central issues — grief, junk collecting, illiteracy, books, and overriding all these, as well as preconceived notions of how people should behave — are ones I've either experienced myself or been in close contact with, hence my preoccupation with them.

For a long time I mulled over all these disparate strands, until I reached the point where I decided, yes! I think I *can* start weaving a story out them.

I wrote this way deliberately, with the intention that the dissimilar issues bounce off one another or illuminate one another, as, for instance, junk is used as a metaphor for Arnold's grief, as well as a symptom.

This is typical of the way I write: marrying divergent themes until I have what I believe is a seamless narrative. It is a random way to write, but then I think that reflects how I see life — as a morass in which humankind stumbles along. And there's the sense of it all! Life makes no sense, and the best I can do as a human being is to make sense of my own attitude towards the world. I hope that comes through in *The Bookshop on Jacaranda Street*.

Discussion questions

- Grief creates a powerful undertow in this book. Discuss how the writer has presented the individual expressions of grief. Does Helen's behaviour run contrary to what you might expect? What about Arnold's? Consider what normal behaviour might be for a person who loses a child.
- Is Arnold's junk collecting unreasonable given the circumstances that prompted it?
- Helen seeks sanctuary in a church, Astrid at a casino. How important is sanctuary in our everyday lives, and where do we seek it?
- At one point in the book, Vivian says to Gabriel, 'Fiction is a lie which tells the truth.' Would you agree or disagree with this assertion? Give your reasoning.
- Helen acquired her bookshop in a somewhat unethical and risky manner — doing business with someone who was not only an alcoholic but was facing bankruptcy. (Conducting business with a person who is inebriated is deemed illegal but must be proven in a court of law.) In Helen's case do the ends justify the means?
- Another issue covered in the book is the need to believe in a lie for emotional survival, as Arnold and Astrid do. How often and under what circumstances might we believe in lies to suit our own purpose, or for emotional survival?
- Helen is a self-confessed literary snob. Do you consider this a character flaw? How does it contribute toward the story?
- Is character destiny? Discuss the importance of Gabriel's personality and how his impetuous actions move the story along.
- Arnold has a passive personality. Things happen to him; he is not generally proactive. Why do you think the writer has portrayed him like this: an impotent yet easygoing soul?
- Make a list of Helen's numerous flaws and consider why these flaws are important in the development of the book.
- If, like Helen, you wish that at times your life could be like a book, which book would you choose, and why?