

# BOOK CLUB NOTES

## What is left over, after Natasha Lester

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### About the author

A few years ago, Natasha gave up her job as a marketing executive for Maybelline cosmetics to return to university and study creative writing. She then completed a Master of Creative Arts as well as her first novel, *What is left over, after*, which won the 2008 T.A.G. Hungerford Award for Fiction.

Natasha has recently been awarded a Fellowship at Varuna, The Writers' Centre, to work on her second novel, which she hopes to fit in around being a mother to two daughters and one son. Her short stories and poems have been widely published in journals such as *Overland*, *indigo* and *Wet Ink*.

### About the novel

Gaelle is a beauty editor for a fashion magazine. At thirty, she is ambivalent about motherhood, and has begun to sleep around — not because she does not love her heart-surgeon husband Jason, but because the very fact of love, and belonging, is a terrifying thing.

The story begins in Sydney and unfolds in a small town near Dunsborough, Western Australia where Gaelle has fled carrying little more than her clothes, her camera and her cosmetics. Alone in her Siesta Park rental, Gaelle hopes to escape a pain that is unspeakable. But neighbours don't knock on doors in Siesta Park; they come right in. And so Gaelle meets thirteen-year-old Selena whose friendship, unlooked for and unwanted, helps Gaelle begin to heal wounds both new and old.

Close to the ocean but far from home, and prompted by a direct and persistent Selena, Gaelle gives in to the tides of storytelling. The stories of Gaelle's childhood, of her mother and of her own turn at motherhood become vivid and inseparable as she recounts them to her new friend.

This novel tells of, and itself joins, a powerful tradition of women as custodians of stories. Like Isabelle Allende's *Eva Luna*, it celebrates the inventive power of storytellers such as



Scheherazade. Rich in allusions, the novel appropriates the fates of unfortunate heroines like Desdemona, and reclaims the fairytales told by women in King Louis' court.

The book also draws on a strong visual perception of reality. During her self-imposed exile, Gaelle uses the camera lens to look at the world. Reluctantly at first, Gaelle shares her camera with Selena, seeking to balance light and darkness in the exposures — and perhaps also in herself.

*What is left over, after* is the powerful story of motherhood and loss, of the complexities of grief and disconnection — and what it takes to become connected again.

## Discussion questions

1. Gaelle's mother says 'A wonder tale is often about a clever woman who does not belong because she does not conform' (p. 86). In what ways do Gaelle and her mother fail to conform? Is this a choice they make consciously or deliberately?
2. Compare Gaelle's and Selena's personalities: what traits do they have in common and in what ways are they different? Why is this important for their relationship? Given the age difference between them, what is it that enables them to connect?
3. Gaelle often refers to her mother as the 'child-woman'. Why? In your opinion, what is it that demarcates childhood from adulthood? Is Gaelle also a 'child-woman'? In what ways is she different from her mother?
4. What is Miss St Clair's significance for Gaelle as a child in San Francisco?
5. Even as an adult, Gaelle's aesthetic ideas of home — a house with history, worn edges and copper pots — are shaped by her childhood at her grandparents' farm in France, where she has experienced a sense of place. What kinds of things from your childhood do you continue to see as beautiful or comforting today?
6. Silence is an important part of many conversations in the novel. What emotions do you think fill the silences between Gaelle and Jason? What thoughts?
7. What kind of place is Siesta Park? How are the people who live there different to those in Gaelle's Sydney? Why is this significant for Gaelle's transformation?
8. In the tale invented by Lili and recounted by Gaelle, the queen gives birth to a girl with a horn, wings and tail that can only be lost when she discovers her humanity. In your opinion, what makes one human? What is the metaphoric relevance of the princess in this novel?
9. What is the significance of the book's title, *What is left over, after*? What might the 'after' be referring to?

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10. Gaelle tells Selena that 'Mothers don't always behave the way they do in stories' (p. 80). Do you agree? Why? What kind of expectations do you think are placed on mothers in your community? What happens when mothers depart from these expectations?
11. After her hotel-room meeting with Lucas, Gaelle tells him: 'I got what I wanted' (p. 35). What do you think drives Gaelle to sleep with Lucas and other men?
12. Gaelle fears becoming like her mother. Discuss in which ways she does or does not become like Lili. What do you think Lester might be saying about the nature of inheritance — genetic, emotional, social — and what is it that we pass on?
13. At the novel's conclusion, Gaelle decides to 'find out if there is some truth after all in the fiction of love' (p. 227). Given the emphasis on storytelling and fiction in the novel, why do you think that the novel ends at this moment?