

THE BREAK

Deb Fitzpatrick

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The Break charts the lives of Rosie and Cray who are both stuck in jobs they hate. They make a lifestyle change and move down south to Margaret River, a coastal community in the south-west of Western Australia. Liza and Ferg, their son Sam and his nanna, Pip, have been living on the family farm in Margaret River forever.

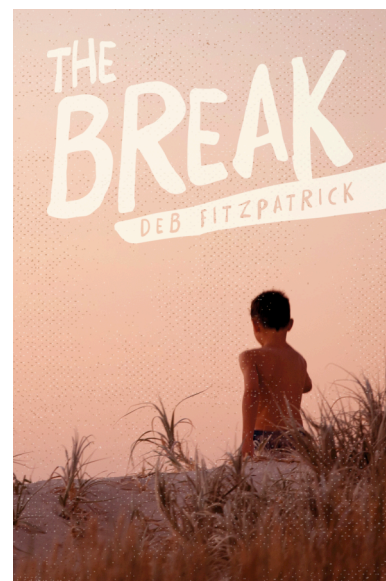
Their lives are thrown into disarray when Ferg's brother Mike, a recovering heroin addict, comes to live with them. The area is under pressure from developers, and the two families come together in the community's efforts to prevent unwanted change. But a natural disaster on the coastline they all love so much will turn their lives upside down.

The events described in this book have their climax in a fictional reimagining of the Gracetown cliff collapse, which occurred at Huzza's Beach on 27 September 1996, and took the lives of nine people. To date, the Gracetown cliff collapse is Western Australia's worst natural disaster.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deb Fitzpatrick lives and works in Fremantle, WA. She has a Master of Arts (Creative Writing) from UWA and occasionally teaches professional writing and editing at Curtin University. Deb is the author of *The Amazing Spencer Gray*, a novel for younger readers (2013). Her two novels for young adults – *90 packets of instant noodles* (2010) and *Have you seen Ally Queen?* (2011) – were both awarded Notable Books by the Children's Book Council of Australia.

The Break is her first adult fiction work.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The book is divided into three parts. Why has the author chosen to tell her story this way?
- The narrative is also punctuated by short italicised sections, each being a description of the natural world. What is the relationship of these short sections to the story, and to its characters? Why do you think the author has chosen to include them? Further, what do you think is the relationship between these nature pieces and the natural disaster that looms for the community?
- It can be possible to read the marri tree as a character in its own right. What is its actual and metaphorical role in the unfolding of this story?
- *'Life's not complicated at all,' Cray says to Rosie. 'It's we who make it complicated. We fill it with pieces of crap.'* (p. 86) Small-town life can be stifling for those who live there, and it can be a sanctuary for those who choose to seek refuge there. Consider the attitude of each of the characters to life living in and around the coastal community of Margaret River. What is it that Rosie, Cray and Mike hope to find by moving there?
- What are the feelings of Liza and Ferg towards their home? Do these differ from Pip's and Sam's? Ultimately, why is it that Liza and Ferg do not leave, even to take a holiday, as Pip wants them to?
- Is there something to be said for running away? Which of the characters might be seen to have run away?

- *Pip ... decided to keep out of things. She could only watch her children flounder, as though maybe they were just actors on a screen after all, not real people—her people—just outside, shouting in the car, parked on the farm that she and Jack had built from nothing.* (p. 157) Families and relationships can be knotty, difficult things. Why is it important to each of the characters to bother to negotiate them at all?
- What is the metaphorical import of the fall of Valstran? What do you think Sam learns from this?
- What is it that Sam sees in Chapter 59?
- How do the relationships between the characters shift and realign after the disaster? Does it change anything fundamental in each of them?
- What is the nature of Mike's epiphany in Chapter 38? What is it that he has already learned that will equip him to help his brother? What is his role as a character in this novel?
- In what ways do the lives of the two couples – Rosie and Cray; Liza and Ferg – come together? Through their relating to each other, do you think that we witness the microcosm of a broader community?
- How do we see the community interact at different stages of the novel, including in the local pub, at the environmental rallies and in the aftermath of the disaster? How might one define a 'community'? Why is community important in this novel (and at all)?
- What is the role of the media in covering tragedies like the collapse, and like the attempted suicide with which the book opens? Does Frank make a valid point when he says the public has a right to know? (p. 18) Does the world need people like Frank as well as people like Rosie?
- How does Cray, a surfer, make sense of the disaster and what is his contribution to the community's healing process?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

This book moves irrevocably towards the natural disaster that will redefine its characters' lives. Why was the Gracetown cliff collapse something you wanted to write about?

Like many Western Australians, I have a strong relationship to the south-west coast of WA. It's where we go to relax, to play, and to explore a rich and varied environment. I lived and worked in Margaret River and Gracetown in the mid-1990s, and when the cliff collapse happened in 1996, it felt very close to me. I had learned a lot about the community in my time there, and the matter of how individuals and a community cope with such a tragedy was very interesting to me. I wanted to create some characters and see them moving in and out of that setting, learning how to become members of a community. Further, I wanted to explore the idea of community amid tragedy.

How did you begin the writing process? With the collapse, or with the characters?

My writing began with two things that for me are wrapped up together: the characters and the landscapes around them. I wanted to capture the feeling so many Western Australians have when they are in the Margaret River region – and that feeling is inextricably linked to the natural places that we immerse ourselves in when we are down there. Whether it's the ocean, the forest or the farming land, even the night sky, the sound of gravel under your tyres or the fog of your breath on a freezing down south morning, these places are very much part of that 'down south' experience, so, for me, drawing my characters had to be done from *within* that landscape. In fact, all my books have had the natural environment at their core.

Is the Western Australian coastline important to you – as a writer and as a person?

Yes. It's immensely evocative, and therefore quite moving for me. It's water and sand, yet so much more than that, and represents so much about our lives and life itself. The WA coastline has also been important to other writers whose work has influenced me: Robert Drewe and Tim Winton. For me it's not necessarily about being 'a beachy person' – I don't have to get wet to get something meaningful from my explorations along our long coast – though of course I do love to throw myself in the drink over the summer months! And every time is like the first time, somehow.

I should say, though, that the bush, the forest and the desert all capture my awe in similar and yet different ways as does the coast – it is nature itself that I find so affecting, and therefore such an important part of all of my books. *90 packets of instant noodles*, for example, is about a fifteen-year-old boy who spends three months on his own in a shack close to the Bibbulmun Track in the south-west of WA (a little further inland

from where *The Break* is set). The book deals with the experience of an adolescent being alone and immersed in forest and how that sort of 'time-out' in nature, away from the usual distractions and complications of our urban lives, can re-set our minds and hearts as to what is really important, and what really holds meaning in our lives.

It seems that Rosie's anxieties often stem from the process of differentiating herself from her parents. Do you think her concerns are particular to a woman in her early twenties?

Rosie struggles to reconcile how she sees herself with how she thinks her parents see her. She is trying to forge her own views and make her own choices, but the opinions of her parents, as they often are with people in their twenties, are never far from her mind. She is anxious to stake her own moral, social and political claim, but she's aware that doing so is to defy much of what she has learnt from them, and therefore defies them to an extent – and this is despite the fact she has long been 'independent' of them.

Rosie is also very keen to place herself outside of many of her peers. She is critical of a couple that is about to marry, and who have just bought a house; indeed, she and Cray outwardly reject the trappings of affluence.

I suspect that rebelling against the views and behaviours of adults close to us is largely the territory of younger people, though I don't think it's restricted to young women.

It often seemed to me that this is a story about the pleasure – and pain – of being a woman defined by relationships: a wife, a mother, a daughter. Do you think of this story as somehow belonging to the women: to Rosie, Liza and to Pip?

Yes, the comforts and joys that relationships offer and can be offered, and the pain that necessarily goes with them – *The Break* definitely explores the tender yin and yang of that. The story is the women's, in many senses, though it relies on the men to see it through. Rosie's search is the dominant one, yet it's Cray who has brought her to Margaret River in many ways. The key worker on the farm may be Fergus, but emotionally it's the women – Pip and Liza – who keep the show on the road. Because it's the emotional that can bring everything down. And when Mike rocks up, there's a lot of conflict to work through.

As a parent, did you find it difficult to write about the tragedy that visits Liza and Ferg?

It's funny how you can separate writing from your own life, even when it might be quite close to the bone! Somehow, when the words are coming out on the page in front of me, they are the characters' words and feelings, even if those are drawn from my imagination. I'm not someone who cries as I re-read my books' saddest bits. For me, what was hardest about this was making sure I was true to the experience parents (and the wider community) might go through in a tragedy such as this, and within that I had to make sure Liza and Ferg's reactions were clearly their own. Of course, I reflected on my own young family and how we would cope in such circumstances – but I don't let myself go too far into those thoughts, because they are so very upsetting. I leave that up to my characters.



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