

THE LITTLE BOAT ON TRUSTING LANE MEL HALL

ABOUT THE BOOK

In the middle of a scrapyard, in the port city of Fremantle, there sits an old houseboat. From here Richard runs his alternative healing centre, *The Little Mother Earth Ship*, and provides spiritual sustenance and counsel at the monthly meeting of the Circle of IEWA. Finn is a disciple of Richard, or maybe just his indispensable assistant. Together she and the moon-eyed August help run the centre. But warning letters from the council are piling up down the side of the fridge, and the arrival of the ash-blond mystic Celestiaa Davinaa is about to rock their world. How many alternative healers can one small boat hold before the whole enterprise capsizes?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mel Hall is a writer and musician based in Walyalup (Fremantle), Western Australia. Her fiction has been longlisted for major writing awards, such as the Peter Carey Short Story Prize (2019), the Fogarty Literary Award (2019) and the Carmel Bird Digital Literary Award (2018). Her novella *The Choir of Gravediggers* was published by Ginninderra Press in 2016, and her short fiction has appeared in *Westerly*, *The Sleepers Almanac* and other Australian journals. *The Little Boat on Trusting Lane* is her first novel.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kind of alternative beliefs and lifestyles do we encounter in the novel? Can they be viewed on a spectrum?
2. What is the nature of faith in this novel? Do you think that human beings share the same relationship to belief, regardless of what it is called?
3. In what ways are Finn and August alike? How are they different?
4. How would you describe the relationship that Finn and August each have to Richard?
5. Do you think it is true that you can't choose your family, but you also can't choose your friends?
6. What is the common ground shared by the members of IEWA?
7. How does Finn's relationship with Richard and the Circle of IEWA change across the course of the novel?
8. What roles do Ethann and Celeste each play in Finn's understanding of her sexuality? What role does traditional medicine play?
9. What does the novel have to say on the subject of chronic pain and how we live with it?
10. What is the nature of Celeste's 'aggressive healing'? What place is there in the world for belief structures and theories like hers? (See for instance her article on pp. 61–64.)
11. '*How could I have done all this damage? I've only been around for two minutes.*' (p. 225) How responsible is Celeste for what happens to August?
12. In what ways are Richard and Celeste alike and in what ways are they different?
13. How does the revelation of August's secret change the way you understand her character?
14. '*It's very Freo,*' she said, *unthinkingly. The nurse laughed, shaking her head. 'That is just one kind of Fremantle. I see plenty of other versions here.'* (p. 227) What other versions of her town might exist beyond Finn's awareness?
15. Why is it that different people experience the same place differently? What factors are at play?
16. Do you think that the novel's ending is a new beginning? What elements have found resolution?



17. How do you think different characters in the book would respond to the coronavirus pandemic? Would certain characters fall prey to conspiracy or 'conspirituality' theories?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Where did the idea for your novel come from? Were there any challenges associated with writing a novel about an alternative community?

I first had the idea for this novel while swimming laps at the Melville pool. As I swam, I imagined two people in a therapy room, both trying to visualise and describe certain kinds of pain. Out of the pool, the idea kept growing. I began writing about it every day before work, filling pages of my notebook with imagined conversations, Richard and Celeste's 'sermons', and images of the Shapes. I was drawing from my own experience of chronic pain and invisible illness; writing this novel became my way of giving shape and meaning to that. I found it really fun to write about this alternative community, but it was challenging at times, particularly because I didn't like some things that the characters say and do. I didn't always like certain characters, and struggled to find ways for them to grow in ways that felt realistic and right.

Was it a conscious decision to show how conventional and alternative medicines alike can be both problematic and helpful?

In writing this novel, I didn't mean to be making a particular argument for or against anything. But I did want to give words to what I feel towards chronic pain and invisible illness. What I feel is that chronic illness is maddening. A treatment will work for one person, and not for another. People might not believe that a person is ill, because they look healthy. A chronically ill person might be deemed a malingerer, and might begin questioning themselves and feeling quite bad. Also, when a person is chronically ill, they might seek help in many different places, and might find help or hindrance in both conventional and alternative forms of treatment. So yes, I would say it was a conscious decision to attempt to show that. Although, I think one aspect of chronic illness is that it doesn't provide much narrative closure. I think this made it hard to find the right ending for the book, if that makes sense. Because there's isn't really an end with this kind of illness. But there are moments of welcome reprieve, as Finn experiences when she extracts the Shapes, and watches them bob and glow.

In relation to the question above, do you think the same might be said of the way you have written about faith?

I was thinking about the nature of faith so much while I was writing. What is faith, and how is it different from belief? Is faith more closely aligned with hope? Is orienting ourselves, in hope, towards the possibility of things being different, and better, basically a good way to live? As a person who has lived with chronic illness, I have found faith – not in any particular god or thing – to be really helpful, although perhaps quite strange and difficult to explain or understand. I suppose that in the book I tried to show how faith, as perhaps an orientation, can be a way of helping one see through an immediately crappy situation, such as being in chronic pain.

Which character took you most by surprise?

Over the course of writing, August kept changing and surprising me. In the various iterations of the book, she began to grow and grow, and I began to like her more and more. I feel as though I would like to drop in on her and Finn, check how they're going, sit down for a cup of tea, and ask after Richard, though I'm not so worried about how he's doing.

What is next for Mel Hall?

I am currently writing a coming-of-age novel called *Judas Bones*.

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