

## KINTSUGI

MARIE O'ROUKE

### ABOUT THE BOOK

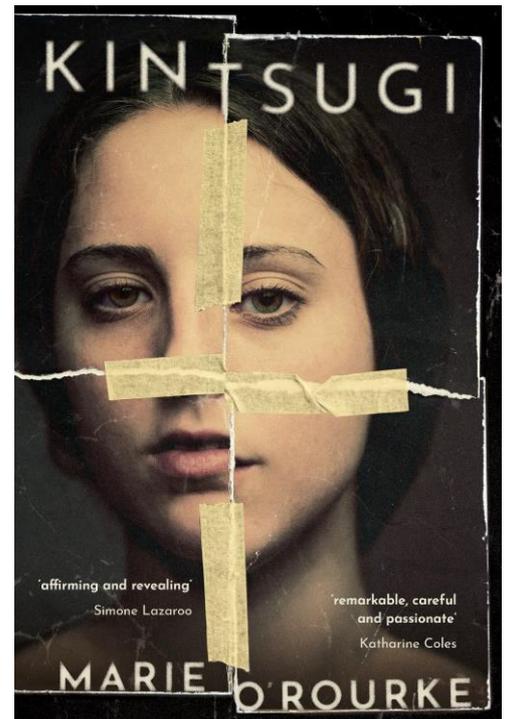
All her life, Marie O'Rourke has been a Good Girl, a perfectionist, using words to apply golden seams to an imperfect life in an attempt to make something beautiful out of things that are flawed or broken. A volatile father, the death of a sister far too young, a faltering marriage, the ghosts of lovers past – these are just some of the memory fragments that Marie puts together, using the bright glow of her narrative to turn imperfections into an exquisite whole.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Entranced by the power of words from an early age, Marie O'Rourke spent many years reading, analysing and teaching the stories of others before working up the nerve to start shaping her own. That story culminated in a PhD from Curtin University, where her research and writing pushed against the tradition of first-person, past-tense, chronological, narrative memoir, hoping to capture the shape-shifting nature of memory and identity. Marie's memoir was shortlisted for the 2022 City of Fremantle Hungerford Award and her essays have been published in many respected national and international journals including *a/b*, *Essay Daily*, *Life Writing*, *Meanjin*, *New Writing* and *Westerly*.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is this collection called *Kintsugi*?
2. Why do you think the memories in this work have not been placed in chronological order?
3. Why do you think the author has chosen a range of forms to express her recollections?
4. In your opinion, which is the essay whose form most complements its subject matter?
5. 'For remembrances of things past may preserve us, but they can paralyse too.' (p.9) Do you agree with this observation? In what ways do you think the author's own work might counter any personal paralysis?
6. How does Louise Bourgeois' mantra on p.9 – 'I DO, I UNDO, I REDO' – manifest in these essays, and what do you think these described actions might achieve?
7. Why is life hard for Good Girls and perfectionists (p. 17)? Where do you think the desire to be a Good Girl comes from?
8. Why is the narrator a 'marriage waiting to happen' (p.18)?
9. Do you think it is possible for somebody to break free from their designated role in a family unit, as a child, a sibling, a partner, a parent?
10. 'I write with a quote from Ander Monson pinned above my desk: "She wants to be in a way transparent. She is a vulnerability artist."' (p. 27) Why do you think this quote is so important to the narrator? How do these essays write into, around and through the idea and the experience of vulnerability?
11. 'Rereading is always a risk.' (p.67) Do you have a book that you read in your own youth which you revisited years later? Did your experience of reading it change?
12. What do you think the narrator means when she describes rereading and writing about *Middlemarch* as 'an exercise in averted vision' (p.91)?



13. How does the author depict the domestic arts in this collection? What is her intention in describing women's household work as an artform?
14. Do you think depictions of women's domesticity in these essays help to counter the dysfunction and male violence around them?
15. What does the narrator mean when she says '[s]imple acts of repetition build to something more'. (p.106)?
16. Why do you think the narrator places her recollection of motherhood inside a museum of words (p.108 and p.189)? Which of the exhibits speak to you most?
17. What does the narrator mean when she writes 'sometimes simile, metaphor, are the only ways we can come close to touching, recreating an image, a sound, a mood for someone else to share, even though sometimes (oftentimes) they don't make any rational sense' (p.168)? What is the role of the similes and metaphors in the examples she goes on to choose?
18. Why does the narrator invite the reader to 'Peer through this keyhole. You should.' (p.179)? What is the effect of ending the essay here?
19. Why do you think the whole collection ends with the essay it does?
20. How do the introductory epigraphs influence your reading of the essays? Did you find any of them particularly effective or surprising?

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

### ***What was the genesis of this memoir? Why did you choose the essay form to write it?***

*Kintsugi* was born over the course of completing my PhD in Creative Writing, which gave me the privilege of four full years of dedicated writing time. I didn't have any clear plan of where I wanted the writing to take me and tried to just follow the associations and ideas that were triggered by the process of reflecting on key relationships in my life. I've always been inspired by writers who push a reader to simultaneously feel *and* think fiercely, who ask questions both intensely personal and philosophical, and knew I wanted to try to work in that space. To me, the personal essay provided the perfect vehicle for that.

It's a form that hasn't enjoyed the same popularity in Australia as it has in the Northern Hemisphere, but it's great to see that slowly shifting in recent years. The word 'essay' can still conjure horror high school memories, with many people expecting something dry, analytical and detached. But the original meaning of the French verb *essayer* is simply 'to try' or 'to test', with its corresponding noun, *essai*, and I love the capaciousness within that word, and within the essay genre. There are no rules about the form that trial or test should take, and as the memories I chose to explore are so varied in substance and texture, I love that the essay allows me the freedom to slide across and through modes, with poetic imagery, personal narrative and cultural theory blurring and bouncing off one another.

Another important thing about the personal essay is that it makes no demand for a clear narrative arc or neat resolution, which is why it's so well suited to exploring the muddy waters of life and self and memory. As humans, we don't necessarily think, feel and act in ways that can be matched to predictable, recognisable patterns. The personal essay form not only allows for but really celebrates that fact.

### ***On p.9 you say: 'For remembrances of things past may preserve us, but they can paralyse too.' Did you find that your own work helped to counter the paralysis of memory?***

I often speak about my resistance to framing memoir as therapy—to me, that line of argument dismisses the intense crafting that good memory writing demands. Having said that, there's no denying that consciously working to shape and reshape my life on the page, thinking of how I might make myself and those close to me 'well-rounded characters' forced me to look at things past from a variety of perspectives, some of which challenged my long-held ideas about who I was and how I had lived my life. It pushed me to be more empathetic than I had previously been to those who had hurt me but, perhaps more importantly, more

empathetic to myself, allowing me to acknowledge the many factors that created and perpetuated those situations/relationships I found so personally painful.

It was only toward the end of finishing my first draft that I discovered the Japanese art of kintsugi but it immediately struck me as the perfect title and philosophy for the collection. Drawing attention to sites of damage with seams of gold—rather than attempting to camouflage them—each piece of kintsugi implicitly embraces imperfection and celebrates the strength and beauty within breakage. Putting my far-from-perfect self on the page demanded an honesty and vulnerability which has, oddly/ultimately, helped me to feel less vulnerable.

***When did you discover that some part of your salvation lay in books and reading? What are five books that have changed your life?***

I learned to read early and can still remember the pure thrill of discovering that I could sink into a world of words for myself, anywhere, anytime. As the youngest child with a large age gap between myself and the next sibling, books were not only company but also offered an ideal escape from the turbulence at home. After a false start in a Bachelor of Commerce, moving into the study and then teaching of literature only amplified my appreciation of the transformative power of words and stories.

Many of my favourite books manage to make an appearance within the essays of *Kintsugi*, but if being pressed to name just five that changed my life, I need to narrow down the parameters a little more! I decided to go with five that changed my life because they somehow altered my perception of books and writing. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* definitely deserves a vote, as my first taste of 'real' literature and one that wasn't afraid to explore big—and often confronting—emotions within its key characters. I also need to mention Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* for its glorious celebration of the human body and the sensory relationship it can have to both other bodies and the natural world around it. I credit James Joyce's *Ulysses* with inspiring my lifelong love of experimental writing and really teaching me that sometimes all you need to do is let words wash over you, and focus on feeling rather than fixating on definitions and details. Helen Garner's *True Stories* was probably the first non-fiction I ever loved and it helped me to appreciate that you can create beautiful prose about ugly subject matter. Lucky last has to be Anne Carson's *Nox*, which blew wide open my idea of what memoir/personal essay might be and do.

***What is next for Marie O'Rourke?***

A friend and I have a standing joke about my inability to ever write anything happy; even when I start from a point of happiness, I seem to find myself digging below that surface to see what lurks beneath. But my life now has quite a different shape and texture to the one I lived while writing *Kintsugi*, and I like to think I might be able to somehow capture that strengthened sense of self and purpose.

Another aspiration is to explore hybrid personal essay and memoir à la Anne Carson, Ander Monson and Claudia Rankine. I would love to play around with poetry and prose, word and image, perhaps archival documents too. I recently inherited a box of letters my grandad wrote to my nan while away at war and my mind is ticking over ways I might work with them. Reading Rachel Cusk's Outline trilogy, and the work of Annie Ernaux has also spurred my interest in tackling some form of autofiction, which is, in its own way, another hybrid form.



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