

THE PLAYERS

DEBORAH PIKE

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Players begins in an orchard in the Perth Hills where a group of young students are rehearsing *The Marriage of Figaro*. Beautiful Veronika is born for a life on the stage. Privileged Sebastian hopelessly woos her, while big-hearted Cassie longs for Sebastian. Gloria grapples with the unresolved trauma of her father's disappearance in Timor-Leste, while Felix sees the play as the last chance to express his creative freedom. And Josh, the outsider, carries a dark secret from his childhood he is unable to share. Across a decade and across continents, we become immersed in the lives of six unforgettable characters, following them as they navigate the highs and lows of love, friendship and ambition.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah Pike is a writer and academic based in Sydney. She grew up in Northam and Perth, WA. Deborah completed an Honours degree in English at UWA and graduated with a PhD in English from the University of Sydney. She is an Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Notre Dame, Sydney. Deborah has travelled widely and lived in Paris for several years where she worked at the Shakespeare & Company, the OECD, and the University of Paris VII. She is author of *The Subversive Art of Zelda Fitzgerald*, which was shortlisted for the AUHE award in literary criticism. *The Players* is her first novel.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Veronika is a passionate but not always a likeable character. What are her redeeming features?
2. Do you think we are supposed to feel sympathy for the 'villainous' characters of Charlie and Ana?
3. What do Sebastian's choices in women reveal about his character? Does he make different choices over time?
4. Which character invites your greatest sympathy? Who invites your least?
5. Why do you think both Felix and Veronika are drawn to theatre (in particular) as a form of creative expression?
6. How is each character affected by their experience of being in the play? How does it shape their fates?
7. Sacrifice is a theme in the book. What do each of the six players sacrifice?
8. How does the circulation of desire work as an organising principle for the novel's structure?
9. Each of the Players in *Figaro* is typecast into a role in which they play a version of themselves. To what extent do they wrestle with, embrace or reject their *Figaro* roles over the years following the play?
10. To what extent do the lives of the characters in the years beyond the play remain performative?
11. What aspects of the novel are metatheatrical – i.e., they draw attention to the story itself as performative, a piece of theatre?
12. Each character in the book has a 'double' or a counterpart. How does doubling work in this novel? Does each character only have one double?
13. To what extent does each character reach their 'happily ever after'?



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Can you identify the genesis of this novel? Was there a character you began with first?

It was a long while ago now. I was living and working in Paris at the time. After a hectic period at work, I took a break and caught a flight to Amsterdam. A 'macro' vision of the novel came to me seemingly out of nowhere as my plane touched down. There it was – a novel about putting on a play, images of a cast from diverse backgrounds. The Australian bush. The afterlives of the actors. Travel and the cognitive dissonance of moving across the globe.

Each of the characters began to 'speak' to me rather loudly after that point, and often at the same time, and then I had to work fast to understand them, and find out who they were and what they were telling me.

I was first interested in the question of what brought these various characters to the play and what inspired them to act. So I began exploring their childhoods. Veronika's came first.

What was the most challenging aspect of writing the novel?

There were a few challenging aspects. The first was how to deal with so many competing voices. It was structurally quite difficult to bring it all together. The plot in the first draft was also rather elaborate. I had to pare it down significantly.

Working with points of view very different from my own was also challenging. Not because I found the points of view particularly difficult to inhabit, but because writing with cultural sensitivity, and with sensitivity to different identities, is so incredibly important and there's a lot at stake. I am fully aware of the debates and pitfalls in relation to this question – for me, honouring the differences and multiplicity of the characters was crucial. Plausibility, respectfulness and authorly humility were my ideals. It meant reading a lot, both fiction and non-fiction, and working with cultural consultants and sensitivity readers, which was an enormous pleasure and a very satisfying process.

I believe that art brings people together. The novel demonstrates this (even if the characters argue a lot!). It is a way to bridge a divide. Despite seemingly incommensurable differences in identity, culture, material, social, psychological and familial circumstances among individuals, we are bound by a common humanity. This common humanity in no way erases inequities or differences.

What were some of your literary influences in this novel?

My main influences are probably theatrical. Obviously, Pierre Beaumarchais' play, *The Marriage of Figaro*, has influenced my novel – its themes of desire, power, exploitation, class conflict and revolution, disguise, gender and performativity. The play is still relevant today, especially in the #MeToo era. I was interested in how the text itself 'travelled': the play is both bounded and unbounded by space and time. *Figaro* is better known as an exquisite opera by Mozart, but in France, people know it also as a play, as students are obliged to study it (often strenuously against their will) for their Baccalaureate.

I was influenced by Anton Chekhov – in particular, *The Seagull* – and the way each of the characters in the play is in love with the 'wrong person' and the havoc and heartbreak (and sometimes comic pathos) that ensues as a result. Veronika is not unlike Chekhov's character Nina. It's also metatheatrical. *The Cherry Orchard* was perhaps somewhere in the back of my mind as well – the narrative possibilities of such a setting. I do enjoy Restoration comedies, including the plays of Aphra Behn. Undercurrents – the bittersweet ironies – of William Congreve's dark, satiric comedy of manners, *The Way of the World*, are in my novel somewhere.

In terms of literature, Honoré de Balzac's *The Human Comedy* inspires me – his is a vivid panorama, depicting the complexity of human beings from varying levels of society. I like Dickens' work for the same reason. There are hints of *Great Expectations* in there as well. I have long loved the work of Henry James, especially *The Portrait of a Lady*. I admire Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*. I dare not compare

my work to these geniuses for a millisecond; nonetheless, James' and Hardy's very flawed heroines are an inspiration, and their compelling romantic dilemmas are hard to beat.

My research for the novel led me to engage with and be informed by work from different cultures and traditions, including the writings of Luís Cardoso and José Ramos-Horta, in addition to Australian writers such as Katharine Susannah Prichard.

Not all of my influences and tastes involve theatre and literature. I grew up glued to sitcoms and screwball comedy. I can appreciate classic rom-com films. It dawned on me recently that in some ways *The Players* is structured a lot like *Love Actually*, except without the ageing rocker character played by Bill Nighy.

Where did the title 'The Players' come from?

The novel has had a few titles. Because I saw it as a *bildungsroman* of sorts – a coming-of-age story – I was interested in how people 'become' who they are, how they self-actualise; there are no doubt turning points, events, circumstances in one's life which accelerate that process or mould a person in one way or another. I was interested in how the play could be that sort of a moment for each of the characters.

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote a great deal about this. While reading his work, I got distracted by a line from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. The speaker in the roundelay opening the book exclaims that woe is deep but insists that joy is deeper still and that woe must be sent away because 'All joy wants eternity'. So *Joy Wants Eternity* was the title for the first draft of the manuscript as I was drawn to the idea of joy being the more profound emotion than woe, as a kind of Nietzschean affirmation. And joy is a thread throughout the book; artmaking as connected to joy. However, that title grew somewhat portentous after a time. And I feared the novel was overburdened with mixed philosophical references.

I then switched to *Dramatis Personae* – literally, the characters of the drama. That was the second and third draft titles. I found it apt because it's a character-driven novel, largely about the theatre – so felt it would sit nicely. I later discovered that one of my poetic heroes, W.B. Yeats had written an autobiographical book of the same title about his artistic influences. I was convinced it was the coolest title ever. But it didn't stick.

I went back to *Zarathustra* (as you do), and in it Nietzsche writes briefly about a pair of 'players'. One reader suggested 'Zarathustra's Players' as a title, but it didn't sit quite right with me. On a train journey coming back from lecturing on posthumanism, it came to me – *The Players*. And it felt right. There is the reference to the old word for actor – a player. But there is also the connotation of the sort of player who manipulates, deceives, ruthlessly seduces. While the characters in *The Players* aren't as bad as all that, perhaps they are players without realising it. Characters are also 'played'. Again, without necessarily being aware of having been played, or of having 'played with' another. So that is how the title came to be.

What is next for Deborah Pike?

Currently I am working on non-fiction book for Bloomsbury. It's about overlooked writers of (mainly) early twentieth-century modernism. It's a sort of global literary archaeology. It's been fascinating. My hope is that by inviting readers to consider a broader array of voices, perspectives and writings from the period, we might also rethink some of our more commonplace understandings about it.

In terms of fiction, a few strong plotlines have come to me quite vividly. The characters of *The Players* are still very much alive and they bother me every so often, urging me to shape their destinies further. But I also have a lot of other voices jostling around, who want to me to tell other sorts of tales. Writing for me is just a form of overhearing, heeding to the characters' stories, trying to relay them as best I can. They tell me if I get it wrong. It just won't feel right. And when I've got it right, they leave me in peace. At least for a while.



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