

## THE DISTANCE BETWEEN DREAMS

EMILY PAULL

### ABOUT THE BOOK

Sarah Willis longs to free herself from the expectations of a privileged upbringing, while Winston Keller can't afford the luxury of a dream. Despite their differences, the pair are drawn together in a whirlwind romance that defies the boundaries of class.

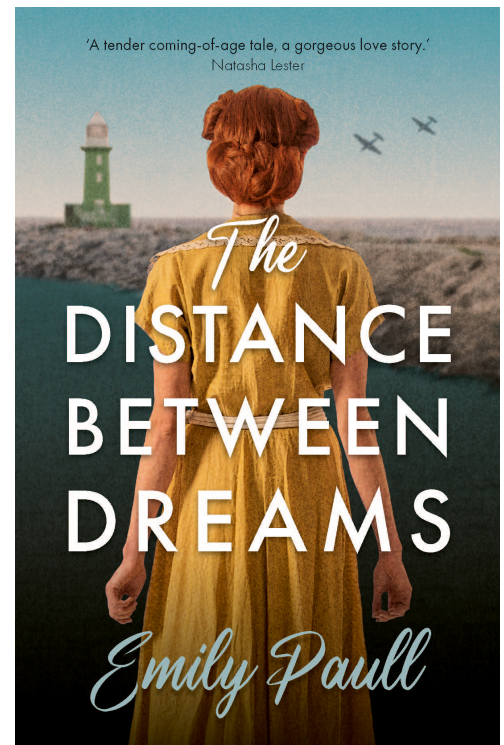
But when a dark family secret pulls the young lovers apart, and the Second World War plunges the world into chaos, it seems impossible they will ever find their way back to each other – or even hold onto the dream of what might be.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Paull is a Western Australian librarian, author and book reviewer. Having formerly worked in bookselling, Emily is an avid reader and a big supporter of the WA writing community, and regularly moderates author interviews around Perth. In 2019, her debut collection of short fiction, *Well-Behaved Women*, was published by Margaret River Press. Her novel, *The Distance Between Dreams*, was shortlisted for the 2023 Fogarty Literary Award. When she's not writing, she can often be found with her nose in a book.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is the novel called *The Distance Between Dreams*?
2. Why do you think this novel is structured in the way that it is?
3. Compare Sarah and Marly's personalities: what traits do they have in common and in what ways are they different? Why is this important for their relationship?
4. How would you characterise the way that both Winston and Sarah think about the concept of 'home'?
5. Though deception and secrets put a strain on Sarah and Winston's relationship, what other factors do you think contributed as well? Which of these factors can be attributed to the era in which they live?
6. Discuss the nature of Robert and Vivian's relationship. How do you envision their courtship and the early years of their marriage?
7. What contributes to Robert's controlling nature, particularly towards his sister and his daughter?
8. What sparks the animosity between Robert and George on the farm?
9. In what ways are the class struggles that Winston and Sarah face similar? In what ways are they different?
10. How much is ego a factor in the decisions made by Winston, Sarah, Jules and Marly?
11. Why does Sarah respond the way she does to Nick's proposal?
12. How does the experience of performing shape Sarah? What does it offer her that she hasn't had in her life previously?
13. Why do you think Winston continues to sketch, despite everything that happens to him as a soldier?
14. What is the role of the artist in capturing the experience of war?
15. Why does Kobayashi decide to help Winston? Why does he agree to Winston's terms?
16. Over the course of the novel, what does Sarah learn about herself? What boundaries or limitations does she discover in herself, if any?
17. To what extent do Sarah and Winston change by the end of the novel compared to when they first meet?



## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

### ***Where did the idea for this novel and its structure come from? What were the most challenging aspects of writing a novel in this way?***

I've been writing this novel for about seventeen years, so the idea has changed a bit along the way, as has the structure, but some things have always been constant – Winston and Sarah's relationship being the main thing. I was in my final year of high school, and I'd just been on a trip to Japan with my family when I first put words on a page for this story. One of the souvenirs I'd brought back from Japan was an album called *The Compound* by the band Search/Rescue, and as I listened to this album (volume up very loud) in my room, I had this idea that the tracks were telling a story. The thing is, I'm a terrible pantsner, so even though I wrote out a plan for the novel based on what these tracks were telling me, I never stuck to them. I think in my original plan, Sarah was a missing person and Winston, who was in love with her, was trying to work out what had happened. But as many writers will attest to, when you start writing sometimes your characters take over, and that's what happened with *The Distance Between Dreams*.

As for the structure, the book is in five parts and I liked the idea of these two characters, who were connected but couldn't *quite* connect with each other, slowly finding a way together, so there are alternating sections from Winston's and Sarah's point of view, and then the final section follows both of them. These different sections also help to navigate the jumps in time, because the novel does cover the entirety of the Second World War, and the book might have been four times as long if I'd tried to cover everything every character did in that time!

There's also a section told from the point of view of Winston's father, George. This wasn't always in the book, but now I can't imagine the story without it. Winston has this idealised belief of what love is and how life should be, because he idolises his father, but his feelings for Sarah really change their relationship, and I loved showing that George was once a wide-eyed boy in love too.

As for the challenges ... I think the thing that I kept getting stuck on was Sarah. Female characters shouldn't always have to be likeable, and Sarah certainly does come across in a certain way until people get to know her, but I wanted my readers to understand why Winston adored her despite all of this. It took a lot of drafts to get Sarah right – at one point I was even writing a diary from her point of view to try and understand how she felt about what happened early on in the book, but I just couldn't get it right! I am indebted to Rachel Hanson, who edited this book, for her help in this area. She always understood Sarah's unique mix of spoiled and secretly uncertain, and taught me some ways to show that she didn't always fully believe in the things she was saying. (Shoutout to all the girls who are extroverted introverts like Sarah, and have been told they need to tone it down. I see you!)

### ***What was the most unexpected thing you learned from your research – and did your research help shape the story?***

Because I've been working on this novel for such a long time, I think I have forgotten more from my research than I ever learned. (Much the same as my knowledge of the Japanese language ... I studied it for most of my adolescence, but now it's nearly gone.)

I did a lot of research on the Thai-Burma Railway, and in particular about a war artist called Jack Chalker – a lot of the information about Winston's war sketches and the places he hides them come from Jack's biography and from information about him held by the Australian War Memorial.

Some of what I read about how sexual assault was treated by the police and the legal system in the early 1900s was quite upsetting too, with many sources indicating that the burden of proof was not only on the woman to prove that the assault had happened, but that they were of good moral character and hadn't somehow deserved what happened to them. This shaped some of what happens in George's story, and the big decision that he makes that shapes the rest of his life, and his son's.

***Where did the inspiration for your characters come from? Is there any part of you in any of them?***

Characters are always, and never, the author.

I think Sarah has a lot of me in her – she talks too much, she’s kind of a big personality and tends to take the lead in a lot of her friendships, and I’m a very outgoing, excitable type of person who has to remind herself to calm down and not overwhelm people with my enthusiasm. But I don’t think I am as naïve as Sarah; I also had a very pleasant childhood, and hers was awful.

I actually don’t know where Winston came from, but the way he looks up to and is close with his parents is something that I can relate to. He was the first character in this project to emerge.

My favourite character, other than those two, is Lachie Bell, who didn’t show up until later drafts when someone asked me why Winston didn’t really have any friends. I think he adds a lot of fun to the book, and I enjoyed having a go at writing about football. My brother helped me with some of the details there.

***As a book reviewer yourself, how did your experience of critical reading affect the composition of your own novel?***

It probably made the process a lot slower, as I second-guessed myself and imagined the kinds of things reviewers might pick up on. I’m actually a bit scared of seeing how this book will be reviewed, and I can’t decide if it would be worse to get a bad review or to not have any at all.

One of my friends who read an early version said that he could tell the story was written by someone who read a lot, which is my favourite piece of feedback ever. I think reviewing has made me a better reader, but it’s the reading itself that is most impactful on my writing.

***Your first published book – Well-Behaved Women – is a contemporary collection of female-focused short stories. Why did you decide to shift both genre and format for this novel?***

The short answer for this is that I didn’t!

Both books were written almost simultaneously. I think some of the stories in the collection probably pre-date this book, but it wouldn’t be by much. Over the course of my writing life, I’ve switched between writing shorter and longer stories, depending on what sort of format the idea itself called for. I like to write historical fiction as longer pieces, but often when I am writing about more contemporary issues or characters, I’m drawn to the short story. I love a short story with an open ending, which I know some readers like and some hate.

I had always thought that this book would be the first one that I published, but I was sending out short stories to competitions as a way to get my name out there and get feedback, and as a result of that I was approached by Margaret River Press about being part of a mentoring program that would end in publication. I got to work with the *incredible* Laurie Steed, and I am so grateful for that experience.

I haven’t written much short fiction since *Well-Behaved Women* came out (just before Covid) because I decided to resurrect the story that has become *The Distance Between Dreams* one more time, but now that the book is done, I am starting to think about a second collection. Maybe one day!

***What’s next for Emily Paull?***

I am working on revising another historical fiction novel, tentatively called *The Good Daughter*, which was highly commended for the 2021 Fogarty Literary Award. I’d love to find a publisher for it in the next couple of years. It’s about a young woman who finds a sense of self and burgeoning confidence through the joys of reading, bookselling and writing, set against the backdrop of life in Subiaco during World War One.

# BOOK CLUB NOTES

I'm also starting to work on a new novel, set on the goldfields at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and I haven't got all the details yet, but suffice to say it includes a beauty pageant, horse racing, seances and a scam. I had made a start on it late last year but sadly the only copy of it was on a USB that got damaged, so I'll be starting from scratch. A piece of advice from me – back up your writing in multiple places.



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