

# WRITING\_\_WA. LOVE TO --- READ LOCAL

## *The Sisters' Song*, Louise Allan, (Allen and Unwin)

### Summary

Spanning 70 years, *The Sisters' Song* explores the relationship of Nora and Ida, two sisters growing up in rural Tasmania. Life takes the sisters on diverse paths: Ida longs for children yet is unable to have any of her own; Nora bears three children but finds motherhood highly challenging, especially when she has to sacrifice a music career. When Nora's daughter Grace faces similar challenges, she makes a different choice. Nora and Ida have a complicated relationship based on both love and duty: over time, their lives intertwine in complex ways. With themes of motherhood, family, tragedy, health, and music, this is a rich and satisfying novel.

### About the Author

Louise Allan is a debut author from Western Australia. She grew up in Tasmania and now lives in Perth with her husband, four children, and two dogs. Allan won a Varuna residential fellowship for the manuscript of this novel and it was shortlisted for the T.A.G. Hungerford Award in 2014. A former doctor, Louise also enjoys music, photography, walking, and nature.

### Questions for Discussion

- The sister relationship is an integral part of this story. Natasha Lester commented in a Goodreads review that “the relationship between the sisters is complicated, tricky, difficult, sad but ultimately beautiful.” How would you describe their relationship? Which sister do you most identify with?
- In this novel, one sister tells the story of both sisters' lives.

How different do you think the story would be if told from someone else's point of view? Who would you choose to tell the story?

- Motherhood is a major theme of *The Sisters' Song*. Is the idea that motherhood is the ultimate fulfilment for a woman still current? Do you think that women today are required to make the same sort of sacrifices that Nora made, or can they have both a happy family life and a fulfilling career?
- Neither sister achieved the life they envisioned for themselves. Ida's inability to have children meant that she found her joy in many other ways: domestic activities, caring for others, gardening, music. Where do you find your joy?
- The sisters' grandmother plays an important role in this book. Her kindness and resilience are a force for good in the lives of the sisters. Who are the people in your life who have played this role for you?
- The sisters' mother suffered great tragedy, which shaped her ability to be a warm and loving parent. Nora also seemed unable to be a warm and loving parent. Do you believe we inherit parenting styles? How possible is it to transcend the vicissitudes of our circumstances? Which of the characters in this novel showed the most resilience, and which were the most victimised?
- The rural Tasmanian settings, while beautiful and tranquil, can also be isolated and harsh. How important do you think place was to the narrative?
- Music is a strong interlinking thread throughout the novel, highlighting the effects of having – or not having – a natural talent for something, the power of ambition, and the impact of having dreams thwarted, as well as illustrating its ability to connect people. What else did music represent in this novel?
- The novel illustrates that past practices for responding to mental health issues such as post-natal depression were limited in their effectiveness. Nora's treatment was rest and hospitalisation, with the option of shock treatment if she didn't improve. How far have we come in treating this condition?

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