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Driving Into the Sun, Marcella Polain (Fremantle Press)

Summary

Twelve year old Orla's world is shattered when her favourite parent, her beloved father, dies on his night shift, just before all their collective dreams as a family are about to be realised. There was to be a house in the hills, a horse she would ride and love, friends who would love her as well as her little sister, and maybe their mum would be more loving and less stressed. A child's interior world is densely evoked in this warm novel about an immigrant Irish family in Perth in the 60s. There's also the terror and uncertainty of negotiating a world where nothing makes much sense, and where adults behave in ways that are incomprehensible to children decimated by grief. Marcella Polain's storytelling is both thoughtful and lyrical and needs to be read slowly with frequent breaks to absorb the shifts, descriptions and interiority.

About the author

Marcella Polain is a Senior Lecturer at Edith Cowan University in Perth. This is her second novel. Her first novel, *The Edge of the World*, was published by Fremantle Press in 2007, and was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Polain is an award-winning poet and short story writer. She has received a Gold Medal by the Writers Union of Armenia and an international poetry award in Romania, and won the Anne Elder Poetry Prize in 2000.

Questions for discussion

- How does this novel address intergenerational trauma through the lives of Irish immigrant parents and their two girls growing up in suburban Perth during the 1960s?

- Think about your own experiences of childhood. How were your experiences similar to or different from the children in this novel? And to those of your siblings and friends?
 - In her acknowledgements, Marcella Polain comments that children “have a complex interior life worthy of respect”. How does she communicate this idea in the novel?
 - Which of the girls, Orla or Deebee, is your favourite? Discuss how their characters are revealed and how their relationships change through the novel.
 - Why do you think the girls’ mother is so strict with Orla and indulgent with Deebee? Do you think Henrietta is a loving mother?
 - A thread of disquieting happenings, abuse, neglect and half-truths runs through the narrative. We understand the mother needs to work and the children are left alone but she also knows there is a prowler on the loose. Why does she not make efforts to ensure her children are safe?
 - How do secondary characters such as Cora the neighbour and Kit the best friend give you a sense of the times in which they lived?
 - Henrietta burns her husband’s novel after his death. She fights with her best friend and her sister. She thinks her older daughter is a strange being. She dislikes her neighbours and warns the children to stay away from them. What does the author convey with this character and her actions?
 - How does grief manifest itself in the behaviours of the various characters?
 - What do you think happens to the children, especially Orla, at the end? Why do you think the author ends the novel in this way?
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The Children’s House, Alice Nelson, (Vintage Books)

The Edge of the World, Marcella Polain, (Fremantle Press)

Whisky Charlie Foxtrot, Annabel Smith, (Fremantle Press)