

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

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## *You Belong Here, Laurie Steed (Margaret River Press)*

### Summary

Jen and Steven meet at sixteen and marry at eighteen. Soon they are the parents of three young children.

Initially, the kids keep them together until love turns to lies, and the family implodes. As they become adults, each child faces fundamental questions about love, loss, and life in the shadow of their family legacy.

*You Belong Here* follows the Slater family from 1972 to 2002, finding faith, flaws, and redemption in a raw but hopeful meditation on what it means to be a family in modern Australia. It is a story about trust and connection. About what keeps us going, in spite of ourselves. About a place where we belong.

### About the author

Laurie Steed is a writer and editor from Western Australia. His fiction has been broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and published in annual anthologies such as *Best Australian Stories* and *Award Winning Australian Writing*, in literary magazines such as *Meanjin*, *Westerly*, *Island*, and *Kill Your Darlings*, as well as in *The Age* newspaper and elsewhere. He has been awarded multiple fellowships, including from the University of Iowa, the Baltic Writing Residency, the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation, the Katharine Susannah Prichard Foundation and the Fellowship of Australian Writers (Western Australia). He won the Patricia Hackett Prize for Fiction in 2012, and in 2014 he was the first Australian Fellow selected in the history of the Sozopol Fiction Seminars held in Bulgaria. He lives in

Perth, Western Australia, with his wife and two young sons. *You Belong Here* is his first novel.

## Questions for discussion

- Throughout the story the author uses various places – also songs – to evoke memories or emotional responses for the characters. How important is a sense of place to you as a reader? How, when reading a novel, do you respond to references to familiar places?
- In an interview, Laurie Steed observed ‘how sometimes families crave intimacy but instead create distance; how one can love and hurt at the same time; and particularly, how, in the face of trauma, intimacy breeds intensity, and so a person might seek numbness over closeness, fear over love.’ (1) Explore these observations in relation to the novel, and the ways in which the different characters navigate the family situation.
- Consider the impact on each family member caused by the marriage breakup of Jen and Steven. Do you think they were all equally disturbed, or do particular characters stand out in this regard? *But then, Alex couldn't make head or tail of any of it. He felt sad and sorry for his sister, his brother, and the fraught, familiar way that the family closed ranks when one began to sink.* (p. 147) What holds the Slaters together do you think?
- The author has said that he thinks ‘love as a concept is incredibly liberating. That it’s exquisite to shout clearly and confidently, “I love this.” That there is freedom in holding the entirety of the past, good, bad, trivial and significant in your hand, and saying “This matters to me and maybe this matters to you too.”’ (2) Do you agree? And in what ways do you see love demonstrated in the novel?
- Jay writes his letter to Alex as a list. Why do you think he does this and what is he trying to achieve?
- Steed has said that *You Belong Here* began as a collection of short stories that were linked but not connected. So he set about the process of making a narrative thread that ran through the whole book. And, in an interview, he also said that he ‘sees the world in a set of fragments’ (3). Do you see this ‘fragmentary approach’ replicated in the story?
- The author has chosen to write the novel using multiple points of view. What advantages might there be in using this writing device to

tell the story?

- Research suggests that family behaviour patterns are passed down through generations, and that these patterns dictate how we deal with life, and determine our opinions, beliefs and hence our decisions. Jen is desperate for the patterns of her own dysfunctional family to not be revisited on her children: *I would have given anything, Adam. Anything to save them from what I had to go through.* (p. 77) Do you think Valerie will repeat this pattern, or do you feel she will have a better chance at life than her mother, uncles, and grandparents before her?
- The book's blurb describes it as a 'hopeful meditation on what it means to be a family in modern Australia.' Do you agree that the story is hopeful? Does that apply to all characters in the novel?
- Discuss the significance of the book's title, *You Belong Here*.

#### References

Curtin, A. (2018, Feb 28) 2, 2 and 2: Laurie Steed talks about You Belong Here. Retrieved from <https://amandacurtin.com/2018/02/28/2-2-and-2-laurie-steed-talks-about-you-belong-here/>

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Steed, Laurie. "You Belong Here: New Novel by Local Author Laurie Steed." Interview by Caitlin Nienaber, RTR FM 92.1, 1 March 2018 <http://rtrfm.com.au/story/you-belong-here-new-novel-by-local-author-laurie-steed/>

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