



Book Club Book of the Month April 2020

The Salt Madonna, Catherine Noske (Picador)

Summary

Hannah Mulvey left her island home as a teenager. But her stubborn, defiant mother is dying, and now Hannah has returned to Chesil, taking up a teaching post at the tiny schoolhouse, doing what she can in the long days of this final year.

But though Hannah cannot pinpoint exactly when it begins, something threatens her small community. A girl disappears from class. Odd reports and rumours reach Hannah through her young charges. People mutter on street corners, the church bell tolls through the night, and the island's women gather at strange hours ... And then the miracles begin.

A page-turning, thought-provoking portrayal of a remote community caught up in a collective moment of madness, of good intentions turned terribly awry. A blistering examination of truth and power, and how we might tell one from the other.

About the Author

Catherine Noske is a writer and academic currently teaching at the University of Western Australia. Her research focuses on contemporary Australian place-making and creative practice. She has been awarded the A.D. Hope Prize, twice received the Elyne Mitchell Prize for Rural Women Writers, and was shortlisted for the Dorothy Hewett Award (2015). She is editor of Westerly Magazine.

Questions for discussion

- 1) Going to the mainland is seen as an escape to some and a betrayal to others. In what ways is the island setting crucial to how events unfold?
- 2) Discuss the significance of the girl being named 'Mary'. What does it mean for her real name not to be used?
- 3) Hannah is aware of the unreliability of her own memory and admits to guessing at times. She is telling the story of someone who has been silenced. How do the first person point-of-view sections (where Hannah speaks directly to the reader) impact the reader's understanding of the main narrative (which is in third person point-of-view)?
- 4) How does Father John's grief and loneliness influence his decision-making?
- 5) The church women – Mrs Keillor, Betty, Val, and Mary's mother Ellen Burnett – lack real agency in their lives. Discuss their willingness to believe in miracles. What power does their heightened faith give them?
- 6) What conditions made the Chesil Island community so susceptible to the call to worship?
- 7) Discuss the symbolism of salt and water.
- 8) Discuss the importance of benevolent characters such as Darcy, Sophie, Thomas and Mr & Mrs Holt in a story where a community descends into chaos.
- 9) What can we take away from what happens to Ghost and the black horse?
- 10) The mob mentality spurs verbal abuse and/or physical violence against others. How are we positioned to view the mob during these incidents?
- 11) How much were you able to empathise with characters with dubious moral compasses – Father John, Mrs Keillor, Mr Burnett, Ellen Burnett, Nugget, etc.? Are they beyond redemption for their role in committing, covering up or failing to report abuse?
- 12) Hannah discloses: "The darker secret is that I'm not really sure if I do blame myself, or blame myself enough" (page 260). Do you think Hannah is at fault for what transpired?

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Breath, Tim Winton, Penguin

Drylands, Thea Astley, Penguin

The Secret River, Kate Grenville, Text