



Book Club Book of the Month November 2021 ***Skimming Stones* by Maria Papas (Fremantle Press)**

Summary

Grace is working as a paediatric oncology nurse when a chance meeting reconnects her with childhood friend, Nate. She is drawn into an affair with him even as she articulates reasons why she should not do so. After a seemingly innocuous mark on a patient develops into a large bruise, and the young girl is rushed to ICU, Grace is thrust back into the past. She recalls her sister Emma's illness, and meeting Nate through the shared experience of bearing witness to their siblings' cancer diagnosis and treatment. Weaving between the past and the present, *Skimming Stones* not only explores the effect a life-threatening illness can have on a sibling, but also the value of intergenerational connections and cultural heritage, the power of language and the impact of the past on who we become.

About the author

Maria Papas is a Western Australian writer whose fiction, creative non-fiction and academic essays have been published in *TEXT*, *Griffith Review*, *Axon* and *The Letters Page*. She holds a PhD from the University of Western Australia, the creative component of which became the manuscript for *Skimming Stones*. This won the City of Fremantle Hungerford Award in 2020 and has since been published by Fremantle Press. Maria is now an Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Humanities at UWA, and works as a high school teacher and a sessional academic. When she is not writing, she can be found by the coast or with her family.

Questions for discussion

1. *Skimming Stones* opens with the sentence, "After my sister's illness, the colours of summer became brighter, and the sunsets grew deep" (p. 9). Have you ever had an experienced that has had a similar impact on you?
2. What do you think Grace means when she says, "I looked forward without really knowing that I inevitably also looked back"? (p. 9)

3. What is the impact of writing a story about childhood illness from a sibling's perspective?
4. How do Grace's childhood experiences impact who she is in the present day?
5. Why does Grace allow herself to be drawn into an affair with Nate even while articulating reasons she should not do so?
6. What is the effect of Emma's absence in the present-day storyline?
7. Maria Papas recently wrote that "Stories of illness or trauma do not happen in a linear way." How does the structure of *Skimming Stones* convey this idea? (<https://fremantlepress.com.au/2021/11/05/mariapapasblog2021/>)
8. What are the differences in the way Grace's mother and father attempt to cope with Emma's cancer diagnosis and treatment?
9. To what extent is Grace connected to and/or influenced by her Greek heritage?
10. What is the meaning or significance of the title, *Skimming Stones*?
11. How does Maria Papas use comparison and contrast in *Skimming Stones* and what is the effect of this?
12. Maria Papas draws on her own experiences to write *Skimming Stones*, saying that it "came from a time when I was all but living at hospital with my child." What words, phrases and descriptions offer the texture of lived experience?
13. Papas also writes that "I wasn't looking for a hero-type who would overcome their troubles. I was looking for the shape of language, the structures of repetition, and the time shifts between future, past and present ... I wanted to see that the uncertainty I felt was normal." How does Maria Papas convey this sense of uncertainty in *Skimming Stones*?
14. What does the story reveal about vulnerability, the need to protect those who are immune compromised, and who shoulders the responsibility to do so?
15. Of her affair with Nate, Grace says, "We understood. We heard. We knew." (p. 15) How important is it to know that someone else understands your experiences, your story?

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