

THE LAST BOOKSHOP

EMMA YOUNG

ABOUT THE BOOK

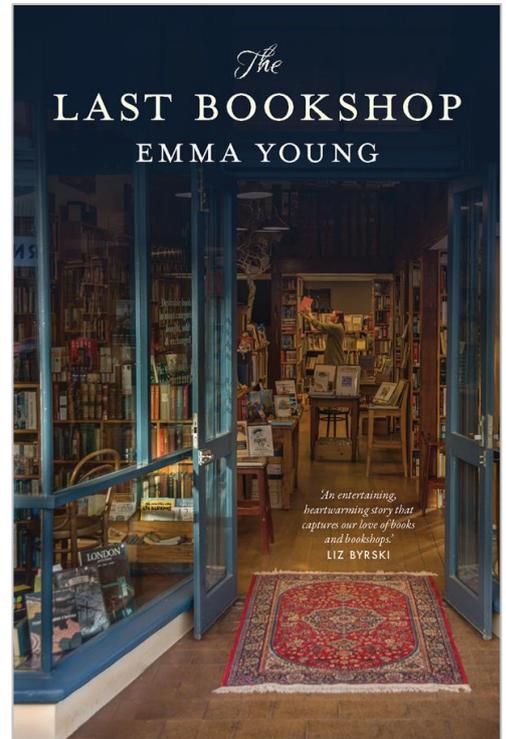
Cait Copper's best friends have always been books – along with the rare souls who love them as much as she does, like the grandmotherly June. When Cait set up her shop, Book Fiend, right in the heart of the city, she thought she'd skipped straight to 'happily ever after'. But things are changing, and fast. June's sudden interest in Cait's lacklustre love life and the appearance of the handsome 'Mystery Shopper' force her to concede there might be more to happiness than her shop and her cat. The city is transforming, with luxury chain stores circling Book Fiend's prime location. And meanwhile, a far more personal tragedy is brewing. Soon Cait is questioning not only the viability of the shop, but the life she's shaped around it. An unlikely band of allies is determined she won't face these questions alone; but is a love of books enough to halt the march of progress and time?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After five years in bookselling, Emma retrained as a journalist and has been reporting since 2011: first for community papers, then as a statewide digital journalist for *WAtoday*. Her work also regularly appears in sister publications the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. *The Last Bookshop* was shortlisted for the inaugural Fogarty Literary Award in 2019.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the nature of Cait's relationship with June? How does it fit, or not fit, the conventional models of family?
2. What role do books play in Cait's relationships, especially with June?
3. *'I'm not "resigned to spinsterhood". I'm just busy. Where on earth would I meet a guy? I hate going out and, like you said, I'm always at work. I've got enough to worry about trying to keep the business afloat. My job and my cat are actually plenty, thank you.'* (p. 19). Do you think Cait is in denial about how satisfied she is with her life?
4. In what ways is Cait limited by her bookishness, and in what ways does it allow her to thrive?
5. What do you think would happen to Cait if Book Fiend closed down?
6. Is James a good match for Cait? Does your opinion of him change?
7. How does Cait's attitude to Seb change over the course of the novel? What things about him does she notice that cause these changes?
8. Why is Cait so resistant to offers of support when things start to get tough?
9. What is the significance of C.S. Lewis in the story?
10. What is June's final lesson for Cait?
11. What do you think happens after the final scene? What choice does Cait make?
12. What does *The Last Bookshop* say about the role of books and bookshops in our lives, culture and communities?
13. What does it say about the role of planning in our cities? Is the situation it describes specific to its setting of Perth or is this a global phenomenon?
14. Do you think that other media (such as social media, newspapers and television) are helpful or harmful to the book industry?



15. Have you ever felt the author of a book you were reading understood exactly how you felt about something, but could not put into words yourself?
16. Can you remember reading a book that came along for you at exactly the right time?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

How did this book come about? Have you always wanted to write about bookshops?

The first element came from customer-service experiences. I've worked in retail and hospitality. You see people at their best, worst, most funny or enraging, their most vague and most precise. But somehow it all seemed magnified in my bookshop experiences. I used to think I should really write down all the weird anecdotes for a book. That idea stayed even after I quit bookselling and retrained as a journalist. But I never knew how to turn it from anecdotes into a plot.

Then one day I read an article in *The Monthly* about a librarian who ran a home delivery service for the elderly. She got to know clients' quirks and areas of knowledge and they'd have fulfilling discussions. That sounded beautiful, not only these unusual yet profound friendships but discovering the value, knowledge and interests of people otherwise quite lonely and shut away in our society. I knew I had found the kernel of a plot. But still it needed a driving conflict.

This was provided partly through seeing bookshops I'd worked in, and others, having to chop and change locations, sometimes leaving beautiful and iconic locations. And partly through reporting on the changing fortunes of businesses in retail precincts and strips. I reported on businesses rising and falling because of factors beyond their control. Manoeuvres of placemakers, landlords, agents. Changing consumer habits, the move to online shopping, the growing popularity of shopping malls, boom-bust economies. It became clear the only thing those businesses *could* control was their value to the communities they served, through flexibility, service and personality.

Looking back, across the years this story acquired many more layers than my early desire to share funny tales from behind the counter.

There is a strong theme of community around books in the novel. What role have these sorts of communities played in your own life?

As a bookseller I always felt this lovely spark discovering a customer had read and liked the same thing as me. It was the best feeling to recommend something else they'd like and have them buy it. All booksellers live for those little moments. An invisible web of book lovers becomes briefly visible through a brief conversation. I lost that for a while when I became a journalist.

I always felt like a bit of a fish out of water in news. Most journalists live and breathe breaking news and are confident, assured, sociable, outgoing people. I've always loathed conflict and I found writing controversial stories confronting, and industry events intimidating.

As I've got more confident, this feeling has abated and I now have many friends but it took ten years.

By contrast my discovery of large groups of writers and readers in Perth has only happened in the past three years but it's felt instantly like coming home.

As I've taken my writing seriously, and joined associations and won places in professional development programs I can go to a big writing event and see people I have only met a few times but relate to with instant ease. And as I have promoted and worked on this book, I have reconnected with the bookselling community in a really joyful way.

As much as writing and reading are blissfully solitary activities, you still want to discuss them. Conversation is one of humanity's great defining characteristics. And now I can have more of those conversations than ever before. People now seek me out to talk about books, or to ask for a recommendation, and that feels absolutely amazing.

How did you go about balancing the humorous and serious elements? Was it difficult?

I started out wanting to write a funny book bringing bookshops to life. I also yearned to write something uplifting and powerful communicating the power of literature, the serendipitous connections of one book leading to another book, a biography, a movie adaptation, a rabbit hole that expands your mind and obsesses you for weeks or months. But I also wanted a good story, and I knew a book about a girl meeting weird walk-ins and visiting oldies to talk about books might not be much of a page-turner!

Hence the introduction of conflict. About the industry, the rent and of course love. Which was never meant to be a central narrative, but of course in real life, love's never a sideline. Not to mention the life challenge that Cait has to deal with in the course of the novel.

So after a few years of writing my light, funny, heartwarming book was full of drama and fights and jealousy and abandonment and crying ... SO MUCH CRYING. I got paranoid that it wouldn't be any fun at all. And I think people should enjoy books, even sad ones. So I methodically went in and looked at every bookshop scene and made sure I used as many of my funny anecdote ideas as I could pack in. That was time-consuming but fun. And I tried to let loose that caustic humorous side of myself as I wrote. Life is like that: there is humour in everything, even in the saddest times it's how you keep yourself going, so I just tried to meet sadness as I meet it in real life: with jokes.

What is next for Emma Young?

This is the most exciting question! From July 2021 I will embark on a six-month sabbatical/book tour/family holiday. With my husband and son (who will by then be nine months old), I will setting off in a campervan to travel Australia. It was supposed to be Europe, but then COVID happened – not to worry, it enables me to make this more of a book tour.

As well as visiting bookshops, schools, libraries and book clubs to spruik my book and inspire others to put pen to paper, I will be doing final adjustments on my second manuscript *Thunderbolt Lodge* (which is a total departure from the current work!), with a view to have some news on a publisher by the end of the year. I'll also dive back into the book three – the first draft was completed in late 2020 so it will be ready for a second pass.