

SKIMMING STONES

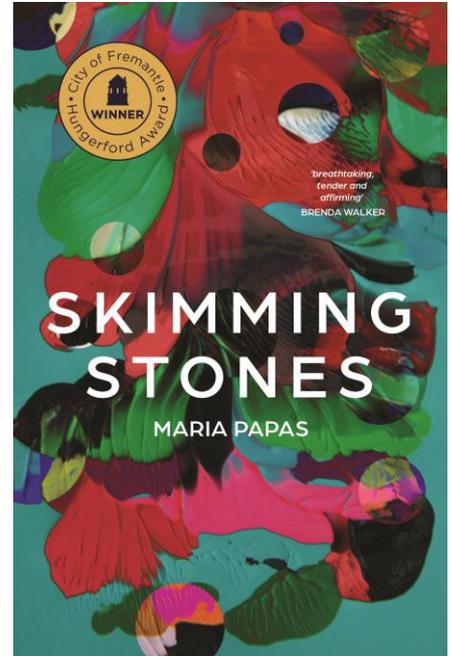
ABOUT THE BOOK

Some events send out ripples across the lake long after the stone has been cast ...

Grace is a paediatric oncology nurse. When faced with a dramatic hospital emergency, Grace finds herself remembering the time when her own sister faced treatment for leukaemia. Now, caught in a love affair with Nate – an old friend from the time of her sister’s illness – Grace embarks on a journey back to the lakeside landscapes of her childhood home, and back into a past in which she and Nate were witness to a life-and-death drama over which they had no control.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maria Papas is a Perth-based writer whose fiction, creative non-fiction and academic essays have appeared in various journals including *TEXT*, *Griffith Review*, *Axon* and *The Letters Page*. She holds a PhD from the University of Western Australia, where she is an Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Humanities. In 2020, the creative component of her PhD won the City of Fremantle Hungerford Award. Currently, she also works as a high school teacher and a sessional academic. When she is not writing, you can find her by the coast or with family. She grew up in Bunbury, and the landscapes of the south-west often feature in her work.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is this novel called *Skimming Stones*?
2. What do you see as the role of the lake in this work and the place of the natural world in Grace’s life more generally?
3. What kind of a mother is Emma and Grace’s mother? How does her culture heritage sustain her?
4. How does this Greek heritage sustain Grace?
5. What kind of a man is the girls’ father?
6. Do you think he is mainly responsible for what happens to the relationship between him and their mother?
7. Do you think that Emma’s illness affects the outcome of this relationship?
8. ‘Nate knew cancer like I knew cancer. We were both from cancer. We shared it like a password between travellers in a foreign country. Or that moment in a crowd when someone says something or another and they carry just the right inflection, an accent you recognise, the sound of home. That’s what it was like between him and me. He knew where I had come from.’ (p.14). Given the connection between the Grace and Nate, do you think it is inevitable that they become lovers?
9. What is it that each has carried forward into adult life from having travelled in the ‘foreign country’ Grace describes?
10. Is the cancer ward a microcosm of the ‘real world’ or is it entirely different?
11. Why do you think the author has chosen to include the characters of Harriet and Samuel in this novel?
12. What is it that Grace has to learn from them, and from Harriet in particular?
13. When the novel opens, Grace is on the cusp of making a big life decision. Do you think that her return to the lake affects her ultimate decision?
14. Why do you think the author chosen to end the novel where she does?



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What was the issue you wished most to explore when writing *Skimming Stones*?

Skimming Stones was written in part fulfilment of the requirements of a PhD. The other part produced a series of essays. Both, however, were concerned with the question: 'How do we tell narratives of trauma, illness or grief in ways that better capture how such stories are lived?' I understood that illness, grief and trauma are often presented in narratives as central problems to be overcome. Characters look for a meaning or purpose that arises out of these experiences. They want an ending, something certain, a reason for the events that have occurred. But, in real life, some things don't have meaning, you can't make sense of them, and no matter which way you look, there is no acceptable ending. I also understood that when something shocking occurs, there is no easy arc from beginning, middle to end. Rather, memory has a way of repeating events – and not as wholes either, but in fragments when you're least expecting them. So, what I most wanted to explore were all the fragmentations, discontinuities, repetitions that occur while those in trauma, illness or grief process what they're going through or what they have experienced. I also wanted to explore a narrative arc that allowed my characters to come to terms with or recognise what had happened to them, but without creating a situation where this 'coming to terms' involved a neat and resolute end.

Did your thoughts about the meaning of time inform how you structured this novel?

Absolutely. Time and the ways in which we experience time were at the core of my narrative structure. I don't believe time is linear at all. People often draw on their memories and experiences. They tell stories about them. They are affected by them. Things don't just happen and then stay in the past. When you least expect it, you catch a smell of something that triggers your memory – food, for example, or perfume, or even the scent of summer – and suddenly, for a moment, that past has caught up with you again. Sometimes, you think forward too. You imagine some hopeful future because you need to at the time. Throughout my novel, Grace observes that time is circular. I think this too. I think time does rise through us in the form of memories and experiences, and this knowledge helped shape my structure enormously.

What was something unexpected that you learned from writing this novel?

Throughout the earlier stages of writing, I thought I was making sense of the ways in which people experience big things like illness. All along, though, I was creating a family, and I didn't realise until the characters started to take shape, how much I was exploring my own Greek heritage through these characters. It wasn't central to my narrative, but Grace does make connections between the metaphorical displacement she experiences through bearing witness to her sister's illness and the displacement many people feel when they journey and shift through countries and cultures. My parents arrived in Australia as young people (my dad as a child and my mum in her early adulthood). I was born here, and although my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles have all shared so much of their cultural heritage, stories, histories and landscapes with me, I still felt a desire to make tangible all the things they've talked about. More and more, I found myself drawing on the Greek language and mythologies, and before I knew it, I was quite immersed in it. I guess something unexpected that I learned was how deep my desire was to explore these cultural stories.

What is next for Maria Papas?

I always think you need a concern or something you want to discover or work through in order to be able to problem solve the writing of a novel. I haven't had a big concern for a while, but I do have something I want to discover. I am not actively plotting, character building or writing chapters just yet, but I recently purchased a blue journal. It's the colour of the sky on a clear day, and it has one of those fold-over covers with a little press-stud that holds everything together. I'm calling it my Aegean book, and I'm writing little bits day by day, listening to my parents' stories about their respective islands, observing the world around me and waiting for the fiction to take shape. I also have some children's writing in mind. I have always loved the energy of children's books but I'm not quite sure yet where that's heading just yet.