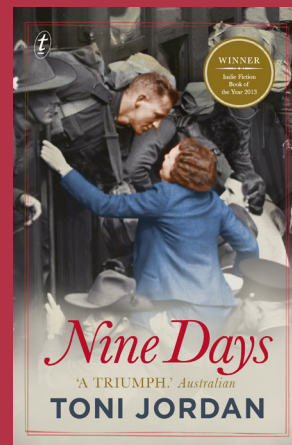


Toni Jordan on *Nine Days*

Jill Fitzsimons, Director of Professional Learning & Partnerships and English teacher at Marcellin College, interviewed Toni Jordan about her novel *Nine Days*.

Nine Days has been selected for the VCE English and English as an Additional Language (EAL) Text List 2019.

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Jill Fitzsimons: Congratulations on making it onto the VCE English/EAL text list, Toni. You and your characters will become extremely important people in the lives of a vast array of VCE English teachers and students!

One of the first things students and teachers will begin studying is the world of text and the explicit and implied values it expresses. Can you kick start this process for everyone by teasing out the different worlds in *Nine Days*? Which overt and hidden values do you associate with these worlds?

Toni Jordan: Thank you Jill! I'm thrilled. I think of *Nine Days* having two levels of worlds. The first level is the big picture things that the characters have in common with each other (and with other people as well): the location of Richmond, and the specifics of each particular day.

The values here are more general and universal, like fear for Australia and for the Allies during WWII, or the economic and political realities of their point in time. Then, if you zoom in, you see that each character has their own individual, specific world that is theirs alone. Each one of them makes their own world through their own thoughts, values and priorities. To me, these two worlds illustrate the difference between a communal and an individualistic world view, but it's not either/or. They're overlapping.

JF: Religious sectarianism is a strong external force in the novel but this will be a strange and unfamiliar concept to the majority of students. How deeply entrenched was religious prejudice in twentieth-century Australia and which characters did you use to highlight the conflicting perspectives of Catholic and Anglican families?

TJ: This kind of religious prejudice was a real force in the lives of many people, and one of those big-picture world views that pervade the whole story. Catholics and Protestants shopped in different stores, worked in different places and socialised very differently. Many families and relationships were torn apart. In *Nine Days*, this is seen most keenly in Connie and Jack, but there are hints in the lives of the other characters as well.

JF: *Nine Days* also explores the limitations of the Westaways' world, particularly in relation to class and gender. Even though Kip and Connie are also extremely bright and full of potential, Francis is the only one who is able to continue his education after Tom's death. How much control do you think Kip and Connie really had over their destinies, given the context of their lives?

TJ: Of course there are always individuals in history who become trail-blazers; women and working-class men who are the exceptions that prove the rule. People like that are fascinating, but I didn't want to create anyone like that for *Nine Days*. I wanted a family of average people. I think it was very common in the mid-twentieth century for grief to derail someone's career prospects, if they were a sensitive kind of person like Kip. It was normal for women, however bright, to leave school and find work.

I think that one of the hardest things to comprehend in fiction (and in real life!) is the line between what is under your control and what isn't. Education is a great way to make a good life, but it isn't the only way, and for many people, opportunity comes later. Kip accepts the limitations of his world and makes a good life for himself despite, or perhaps because, of his limitations. An admirable quality!

JF: *Nine Days* also underlines the impact of the war in the characters' lives. It would be incredibly helpful to hear more about the social pressure Jack experienced before he enlisted in World War II (even though so many families suffered terrible losses in World War I) as well as the impact of rationing.

TJ: One of the many benefits that feminism has brought to the world is the idea that there's no single way to be a man. In the middle of the last century, there wasn't such a view. Valued masculine traits in Australia were bravery, strength, and being a good soldier. Even today, in parts of our media there's an emphasis on Gallipoli as being the single most important event in our nation-building, and that there's something unique and important in our Australian definition of 'mateship'.

The pressure on young men, from their friends, family and society in general, to conform to these norms was intense. There was also a strong view that England was 'home', even though most people had never been there. In the early stages of WWII, when Jack enlisted, Japan hadn't yet entered the war, so the defence of England was considered more important than the defence of Australia.

And rationing lasted a long time and was intense! I wanted to include rationing in *Nine Days* because it's one of those things that seems so, so strange to modern people. The government tells you how much you're allowed to eat, and to buy, and everyone goes along with it? On the surface, it seems impossible to understand—but only ten to fifteen years ago, Victoria was in the grip of the tightest water restrictions in memory. Everyone bought egg timers for their showers and watered their gardens with buckets. I love this as a reminder that, if people are convinced that the reason is genuine and important, we can really band together and get things done.

JF: One of the things I love about *Nine Days* is the way it helps uncover the history of Melbourne, particularly Richmond. How different is Richmond today in comparison to the Westaways' Richmond?

TJ: Richmond is a vital part of the story—I don't think I could have set *Nine Days* anywhere else. Back in the Westaways' time, Richmond was pretty much a slum. Very unhygienic and polluted, very poor. A great deal of social disadvantage. Now, of course, it's gorgeous—full of trendy bars and cafes and lovely expensively renovated cottages.

In this way, it's metaphorical for the story I'm trying to tell, about this family. Over only four generations, the Westaways move from a very tenuous existence, with Jean in domestic service, to Stanzi being university-educated and Alec seeing no limitations on his future. This kind of movement over such a short span of time is really unprecedented in human history. It's wonderful, I think, that we lead such different lives from our grandparents—but I don't want us to forget where we've come from, or lose sight of the important things.

JF: Connie and Jack's love story is an exciting but incredibly sad element of the story. Can you explain what inspired you to create their story?

TJ: I really wanted to show that the effects of war are not only felt by men. Historically, women have made up only a small proportion of soldiers and medical and support staff, but women suffer horrifically in war—as

casualties in theatres of war, as well as suffering horrible consequences through their losses at home. I see both Connie and Jack as victims of war.

JF: Connie's dilemma seems particularly hard to reconcile from a 21st century perspective. It seems her only options were the Good Shepherd Sisters in Abbotsford or the unscrupulous Mrs Ottley. What social attitudes created business for women such as Mrs Ottley or alternatively, provided an opportunity for the Sisters to live out the mission of their Church? Why do you think Charlotte's pregnancy was so much easier for her?

TJ: The difference between Connie's and Charlotte's pregnancies is an example of the way the world has changed over the last seventy or so years. There was no supporting mothers' benefit, and no institutionalised childcare back when Connie was pregnant, and women like Connie had very few options.

There were no jobs for pregnant women. Being unmarried and pregnant was such a source of social disgrace that families frequently disowned their daughters and sisters. The Good Shepherd Sisters ran a laundry using the slave labour of young women considered to be at 'moral risk'; this was hard, punishing work. Adopting out the baby fooled nobody and would make her an object of gossip for the neighbourhood, and likely mean she would never marry. Abortion was illegal and dangerous. Times have changed, thankfully, and Charlotte's pregnancy was very different.

JF: Despite Stanzi's early unhappiness, she eventually finds happiness. Can you provide any insights into why her life is so different from her grandmother's life, Jean?

TJ: I feel quite sorry for Jean. She's very much a woman of her time, and being a widow with three children would have been very stressful for her. She would also have been shamed by the way her husband died, and this shame is what drives her to care so much about social pressures and what other people think. She wants to be 'respectable', which is hard to understand now but was a real aim of many people back then. Stanzi, I think, has advantages that Jean didn't have—education, time to think, less pressure—but she's been able to let go of this idea that outward appearances are what matter.

Gossip, and peer and societal pressure will always be with us, but it's part of our moral challenge to develop a strong enough character to do what's right. This comes out in Frank's and Alec's stories also: Frank is unable to withstand the pressure to do what he knows is wrong, and he pays the price for being weak. Alec has his challenges, but he has the strength of character to stand firm and not betray his values.

JF: Kip and Francis are incredibly different boys and men. Do you think Frank ever really redeems himself? Does he end up single because he was so awful to Annabel?!

TJ: I think Frank ends up being single because of the kind of person he is, which is the reason he's so awful to Annabel. I like to think that he's a good uncle to the girls, and that he finds some peace with his lack of character, and doesn't end up too lonely. The person Frank lets down the most is himself.

JF: Libby, Alec, Charlotte and Stanzi's household allows the reader to see the way the idea of family has changed over time. Can you elaborate on any other changes you wanted to show by telling the unfolding story of the Westaway family over many years? For example, opportunities for women?

TJ: One of the most important parts of the story for me was showing the working lives of women. When I was at school, back in the 1970s, sometimes I'd hear someone talk about how the 1960s were a turning point for working women. I didn't understand that, because the women in my family always worked. My grandmother grew up in a Catholic orphanage, where she worked in the laundry from the age of ten, and then she went into domestic service like Jean.

My mother worked from the age of fourteen. Working-class women have always worked, although the nature of it has changed over the decades, and that work has been a vital part of their identity. The women of my family, and other working-class women, always made their own money and negotiated their own way in the world, and were often the heads of families. They were strong, independent women who faced incredible hurdles in every aspect of their lives, and still managed to bring up their children to have better lives than they did themselves. I think this is an important part of Australian history.

JF: Students will use your text in a section of the VCE English/EAL course called Reading and Creating. Depending on their school's course outline, students will respond to your text analytically or creatively in Unit 3, but only analytically if they choose to write on *Nine Days* in their end-of-year exam. Either way, this requires an understanding of the decisions you make as a writer and how your choices create meaning, especially in relation to the ideas, themes and concerns of your novel.

For example, the choices you made about language and form. Many students find this a little daunting, but are quick studies with a little encouragement and guidance! Could you help students understand some of the choices you made as a writer? For example, your choices about narrative structure, narrative voice, imagery, sentence structure, language, recurring symbolism, and so on. We would love our students to find their voice, and really enjoy their writing and exploration of ideas!

TJ: This is a difficult question, because often I don't fully understand what I've done until I've done it—but I know that the most important part of *Nine Days* is the non-chronological structure, and I was inspired in this by the photograph on the front of the book which is the same photograph that appears in the story.

When I first saw the photo of a woman being lifted up to kiss a departing soldier through the window of a train, I realised it told the story of a romance that was derailed by war. But when I thought more about it, I realised it was a broader story than that. There's a wider photo than the narrow one that's been cropped to make the jacket cover and in this wider shot, it's apparent that there are a lot of people waiting at the train station: people also farewelling soldiers, and also people holding up the young woman.

This made me think that the story of war is a big story. It's not just the story of the soldier, or of the woman waiting at home. It's a story of a whole family and a whole community, with ripples moving backwards and forwards in time. I realised that if I wrote the story chronologically, starting from the beginning and moving through to the end, it wouldn't show the connections between the different people and the way they're linked in subtle but important ways.

Connie and Alec, for instance, aren't even alive at the same time but they have an important bond all the same: you could say that Connie saves Alec's life. Connie's and Charlotte's pregnancies, Frank's and Alec's response to peer pressure, Jean's and Stanzi's attitudes to life, Jack's and Kip's different ways of falling in love: all these things became clearer to me when I realised I could cut across time instead of following it in a straight line.