

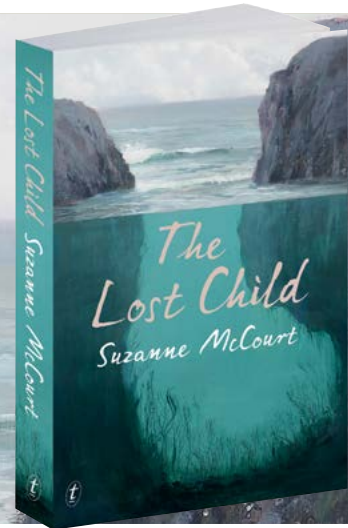
The Lost Child

Suzanne McCourt

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Fiction, Trade Paperback



Praise for *The Lost Child*

'*The Lost Child* is an assured and bittersweet coming-of-age tale with a vivid sense of time and place...The novel is a strong addition to the shelves of Australian literary fiction.' Books+Publishing

'Written in beautiful, slow prose...This is a promising debut...You can't help but be keen to see what she does next.' *Adelaide Advertiser*

About Suzanne McCourt

Suzanne McCourt grew up on the wild southern coast of South Australia and now lives in Melbourne. *The Lost Child* is her first novel.

A reader's introduction to *The Lost Child*

Sylvie's brother Dunc goes missing halfway through *The Lost Child*, but it is Sylvie who is lost when we meet her in the opening pages: not yet five years old and desperate for affection, Sylvie is confused by the rules of the world, and confused by the dynamics of her home, with her drunken and violent father and her once proud but beaten-down mother.

As Sylvie grows older, she continues struggle to find herself. Her mother, Nella, smothers Sylvie — infantilising her by spoon-feeding her and insisting on sleeping in the same bed so that 'our arms and legs are always mixed up and muddled' (149). Sylvie's father, Mick, leaves his family for another woman and refuses to acknowledge his daughter. Her mother's mental health deteriorates — she becomes paranoid and obsessive — and she undergoes shock therapy.

And Dunc disappears, presumed dead.

Surrounding Sylvie are webs of relationships, with and between her extended family, the townspeople and her schoolmates. Few of these relationships are uncomplicated and resentfulness, snobbery and plain cruelty are rife. Throughout the novel McCourt acutely portrays the minor but deep humiliations and the major traumas Sylvie experiences. There are, however,

important minor characters who support her with kindness.

Sylvie also finds solace in the wilds of South Australia's Coorong, in her schoolwork and in her fantasy comic world where she walks the silent walk of the Phantom.

The novel follows Sylvie until she symbolically attains womanhood and leaves town with her mother. This is a complex coming-of-age novel, where there are few easy answers for Sylvie, but profound lessons for her to learn.

Questions for discussion

1. Discuss the different ways in which both Sylvie and Dunc are lost.
2. 'The inlet is full of secret underwater things swirling near the surface.'(44) What is the symbolism of water and the sea?
3. How does McCourt depict the Coorong? For example, what kind of place does it seem? What kind of language does she use to evoke the landscape?
4. Other than Sylvie, who has your sympathy in the novel? Are there any characters you cannot sympathise with at all?
5. Why does Mick ignore Sylvie? Do you think he was 'tickled pink' at Sylvie's actions at the lake?
6. Nella is doubtful that Mick's experience in Darwin during the war damaged him. What do you think? Does the novel show clear cause and effect between people's experiences and their behaviour?
7. What sense do you get of Mick's relationship with Layle? Do you think Mick treats Layle as he did Nella? If not, why not?
8. How far does Sylvie manage to separate herself from Nella?
9. Why does photography become important to Sylvie?
10. As well as a coming-of-age story, this is also a novel of time and place. What sense do you get of smalltown Australia in the 1950s? What changes are foreshadowed?

11. Discuss Sylvie's narrative voice. How does McCourt manage to portray complexity while using the voice of a young child?
12. 'I won't tell Mum we saw Dad. You can forget everything if you want to.' (55) Talk about all the different ways that the novel proves that this is not true.
13. 'Nothing makes sense. And then a terrible thought: What if there are no answers to anything?' (139) Does Sylvie find any answers? Are there answers to anything?
14. What sense of identity does Sylvie gain?
15. Can we grow up without leaving our home town?