

Tree Palace

CRAIG SHERBORNE

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Praise for Craig Sherborne

'Much of the novel's action and characterisation unfolds through its authentic dialogue, and Sherborne's skills as a poet and playwright shine through. Readers will also enjoy his vivid depictions of nature—another strong feature of the novel is its rural setting. Told with warmth and humour, this contemporary, distinctly Australian story explores teen pregnancy; motherhood and parenthood; love and family; the roles and feelings of men and boys; and the power plays inherent in all human relationships. *Tree Palace* serves up a full slice of life—the bitter with the sweet.' 4 stars *Books + Publishing*

'Love comes in many guises and navigating the tricky terrain of this rag-tag blended family is negotiated by Craig Sherborne with grace and humour...a delightful take on what it means to be family.' *Hoopla*

About Craig Sherborne

Craig Sherborne's first novel, *The Amateur Science of Love* (2011), won the Melbourne Prize for Literature's Best Writing Award, and was shortlisted for a Victorian Premier's Literary Award and a NSW Premier's Literary Award. His memoir *Hoi Polloi* (2005) was shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's and Victorian Premier's Literary Awards. The follow-up, *Muck* (2007), won the Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Non-fiction. Craig has also written two volumes of poetry, *Bullion* (1995) and *Necessary Evil* (2005), and a verse drama, *Look at Everything Twice for Me* (1999). His writing has appeared in most of Australia's literary journals and anthologies. He lives in Melbourne.

A reader's introduction to *Tree Palace*

Moira and Shane are 'trants'—itinerants. They've just arrived in Barleyville with Moira's two children, Zara and Rory, and Shane's brother, Midge. The family of five has been drifting round country Victoria for the past few years, getting by on occasional Centrelink payments, and the proceeds from Shane and Midge's 'business' of stealing fittings from disused heritage buildings. Now

they've returned to the Wimmera-Mallee plains, where they're originally from, and found an abandoned house to squat in: their 'tree palace'.

Fifteen-year-old Zara has had a baby, but she tried to suffocate him in hospital and refuses to feed him or even be with him. Moira takes on the maternal role, never openly acknowledging to anyone the extent to which she has become the boy's mother. Moody Zara is enlivened by a job at the town's supermarket and, desperate to leave her family and the trant life, hopes to escape to with her indifferent older boyfriend. Meanwhile, Shane and Midge are planning a major job, and this time Rory, who's been getting himself into trouble, will come along with them.

It seems inevitable that things will go wrong. And indeed, Moira starts to become possessive of Mathew, Zara's boyfriend scorns her for thinking he'd set up house with her, and Shane winds up in jail. But Craig Sherborne has skillfully made the train of events more complicated than a series of crashes, and there is even a happy ending.

Sherborne has also created credible characters from an underclass who are rarely treated with any complexity in fiction. The novel is about the family they have forged, despite petty irritations with each other and sometimes a complete lack of understanding of each other. *Tree Palace* is also a novel about morals. There are a series of choices that confront the characters, characters who are not moral in a conventional sense, and yet who do sometimes make choices that are moral in important respects.

Questions for discussion

1. What is the significance of the epigraph, taken from Ezra Pound's 'The Garden'? Find the original poem and discuss how it relates to the novel.
2. Shane is proud of his illicit work. 'He was more a recycler than a burglar, that was his view' (85). Do you agree with this interpretation of his actions?

3. Following on from the previous question, how has Sherborne made sure readers have sympathy for characters who are dole bludgers, arsonists, liars, perhaps even attempted killers?
4. What did you expect the characters to behave? Did they meet those expectations? What do you think of the choices they make?
5. After coming home with Mathew, Zara describes herself as having 'a sickness.' Moira won't hear of it. Is Zara 'sick' (21)? Discuss how and why Zara's feelings towards Mathew change over the novel.
6. Frustrated with Zara's refusal to feed Mathew, Moira shakes her, tells her to get out and then immediately calls her back. Later Moira is described as feeling both 'angry and pitying' (72). Is Moira a good mother to Zara?
7. What about Shane's relationship with Rory? Shane is not Rory's biological father, but he likes being admired by him (49). Is Shane a decent role model?
8. When Midge hugs Mathew, he feels that 'This kind of holding was beyond language. He stood as if connected to the world's holy scheme' (49). What is 'the world's holy scheme'? Why is family itself so important to

Midge? And why is Midge so desperate to watch Zara feeding Mathew?

9. Moira tells Zara: 'If things don't get set right between you and him, and you and me, then it's like we done wrong by nature. We don't fit into the world right' (305). Do you think Moira is correct about this?

10. Faced with Zara's implacable belief that she will move in with Brent, Midge wonders: 'How do you stop innocence? He felt he should but it was too big for a man to stop, and beyond reasoning with' (257). Why does Midge feel he should stop innocence? What do you think?

11. Why does Sherborne describe breastfeeding as producing 'the bloom'?

12. Moira and Shane identify as 'trants'. Why are they so keen to settle down and own their own patch of land? What is the symbolism of the chandelier hanging from the tree?

13. The novel ends on an optimistic note. Is this optimism justified? Did you expect an upbeat ending?