



Five bells

By Gail Jones

First published 2011

Genre & subject

Sydney (N.S.W.) fiction

Australian fiction

Winner of the Kibble Literary Award, Shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Prize for Fiction, the Adelaide Festival Award for Literature, The ALS Gold Medal, the Barbara Jefferiss Prize and the Indies Award.

Synopsis

On a radiant day in Sydney, four adults converge on Circular Quay, site of the iconic Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Each carries a childhood and a complicated history from elsewhere; each is haunted by past intimacies, secrets and guilt: Ellie is preoccupied by her sexual experiences as a girl, James by a tragedy for which he feels responsible, Catherine by the loss of her beloved brother in Dublin and Pei Xing by her imprisonment during China's Cultural Revolution. All are compelling figures with distinctively fascinating stories.

Author biography

Gail Jones was born in Harvey, Western Australia and educated at the University of Western Australia. She is currently Professor of Writing in the Writing and Society Research School at the University of Western Sydney.

Discussion starters

- How does the Sydney Opera House appear to the characters? What is its particular meaning and significance to each of them?
- Teachers and mentors play vital roles in the characters' lives. Discuss how Pei's father, Catherine's brother, and James and Ellie's teacher Miss Morrison influenced them.
- Pei not only forgives her guard and abuser, but cultivates a devoted friendship with her. Would you be able to do the same?
- Does the religious fervour of Catherine's mother have any influence upon her? Does she change the way her daughter views religion? How does she reconcile her mother's piety with her brother's atheism?
- Why does James decide to go to medical school despite his deep aversion to gore? What does his reaction to the chicken reveal about his character?
- Neither James nor Ellie ever forgot their young love. Do you think they would have made a good couple as adults, had tragedy had not intervened?

- Dr. Zhivago helps Pei to remember her father. For what other reasons might the film resonate with her? How might the themes of the great Russian classics mirror those of Five Bells?
- Why do you think Pei had made a routine of visiting with Doug Hua, Aristos, and Mary? How would you characterise her relationship with them, as opposed to that with her son? What does Pei mean to each of these people?
- All the characters either observe or visit the Museum of Contemporary Art, but with mixed feelings. Why does Pei love it? Why does Catherine find it troubling? Why is James, an art lover who is smitten with Magritte, uninterested in the museum?
- Five Bells is about four disparate people who happen to be at the same place at the same time. Did the book make you think differently about the people you pass by every day?
- Pei and Catherine both take notice of the little girl with the man on the stairs. What do you make of Pei waving at Catherine, Catherine's kiss, and the bond between them?
- The title of the novel is taken from the title of a famous Australian poem by Kenneth Slessor. Slessor wrote the poem to commemorate a friend who drowned in the Sydney harbor. How is James' life similarly eulogised in the novel?
- Every one of the four characters has a heartbreaking death or funeral story. Which did you find most poignant?
- What makes the "fifth bell", the little girl, so vital to the central message of the story?

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