



The opal dragonfly

By Julian Leatherdale

First published in 2018

Genre & subject

Historical fiction

Australian fiction

Families

Artists

Synopsis

Miss Isobel Clara Macleod, youngest of the seven children of Major Sir Angus Hutton Macleod, Surveyor-General of the colony of New South Wales, had the singular misfortune to know that at seven o'clock that morning her father was going to die. September, 1851. Sydney, city of secrets and gossip. Seventeen-year-old Isobel Macleod is determined to save her father because she loves him. But when she dares to trespass in a forbidden male world, she will be plunged into social disgrace. A wave of ill fortune threatens to swallow up her family and their stately home, Rosemount Hall, 'the finest house in the colony' on the foreshores of Sydney Harbour. Is Isobel to blame for her family's fate or does the cause lie further in the past?

When Isobel was four, Major Macleod returned from an expedition with two 'souvenirs': an Aboriginal girl who became her friend and two opals fashioned into a dragonfly brooch for her mother. When Isobel inherits this 'unlucky' heirloom, she wonders if the terrible dreams it summons are a curse or a gift. Now Isobel's hopes for her future depend on a charming bohemian who encourages her hidden passion to become an artist. Will she now be permanently exiled from her family home? Or will she be transformed into a new self, like a magnificent dragonfly emerging into the sunlight?

Author biography

Julian Leatherdale's first love was theatre. On graduation, he wrote lyrics for four comedy cabarets and a two-act musical. In 2017, he wrote a short play *A Life in Ten Meals* for Blue Mountains theatre project *Breaking Bread*. In 2018 *The Man Who Became Santa Claus* was one of three plays selected to be workshop-developed and given a public performed reading by Weatherboard Theatre Inc.

Julian discovered a passion for popular history as a staff writer, researcher and photo editor for the 16-volume Time-Life's *Australians At War* series in the late 1980s. He later researched and co-wrote two Film Australia-ABC documentaries *Return to Sandakan* (about one of the worst POW atrocities of the Pacific war) and *The Forgotten Force* (about the post-war occupation of Japan by Australians as part of BCOF).

Julian was an image researcher at the State Library of New South Wales and wrote policy briefs for the NSW Premier in The Cabinet Office. He was the public relations manager for a hotel school in the Blue Mountains where he lives with his wife and two children.

Discussion starters

- What was your initial reaction to the book? Did it hook you immediately or take some time to get in to?
- What was unique about the setting of the book and how did it enhance or take away from the story?
- Set in 19th century Australia what would be the advantages or disadvantages of living during this time period? Would you like living in this time period? Why or why not?
- What events or characters have influenced Alice and Grace's feelings towards Isobel? Are the sister's feelings justified or reasonable?
- How did you feel about the characters? Who did you like or not like and why?
- Which character/s did you feel the most connected or drawn to? Why?
- What moral/ethical choices did the characters make? What did you think of those choices, are they justified? How would you have chosen?
- Are the characters' actions the result of freedom of choice or influenced in a larger part by the social fabric of the time?
- Do the characters seem real and believable? Can you relate to their predicaments? To what extent do they remind you of yourself or someone you know?
- How do the characters change, grow or evolve throughout the course of the story? What events trigger such changes?
- As the characters change throughout the book how does your opinion of them change?
- If you could hear this same story from another person's point of view, who would you choose?
- What feelings/emotions did this book evoke for you?
- Did the storyline change your opinion of an event, place or time period? How?
- Has this novel changed you—broadened your perspective? Have you learned something new or been exposed to different ideas about people?
- Is the ending satisfying? If so, why? And if not, why not...and how would you change it?

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