

Hopscotch
Reading group notes

Blurb

Sydney, 2008. Pre-GFC.

Forced into an early retirement due to illness, Sam Rosen has lost any semblance of control over his life. His wife, Rhonda, confined to the carer role, is feeling her identity ebb slowly away as her former life retreats further and further into the past.

Their eldest son, Mark, is over-invested and as he lurches towards financial disaster, he can't bring himself to tell his wife Ingrid that they're losing money fast.

Middle child Liza has always been independent and content to scrape through on her child-care worker's wage in one of the most expensive property markets in the world. But when her biological clock goes off, she's out of time in a city where men are thin on the ground and grown-up ones even scarcer.

Baby of the family Jemma thinks that being mild-mannered will let her pass through life unharmed. And then, one night, everything changes.

Fast and funny, *Hopscotch* charts a year in the lives of the endearingly flawed Rosen family, and holds up a mirror to contemporary urban life in Australia, interrogating our endless capacity for self-destruction, longing and love, and asks why we think we could ever find peace in a city that's roaring with dysfunction.

The Author

Born in Melbourne, and raised in London, San Francisco and Copenhagen, Jane Messer lives in Sydney where she teaches creative writing at Macquarie University. Her books include *Provenance*, *Night by Night* and *Bedlam – an Anthology of Sleepless Nights*. She is a regular contributor to *The Conversation*, has been a Director of the Australian Society of Authors and a judge of the Australian Vogel Literary Award. This year she spent four months in Berlin with her son on a German Academic Exchange fellowship.

Plot Summary

The Rosen family, parents Sam and Rhonda and adult children Mark, Liza and Jemma, gather for Sam's sixty-ninth birthday. It has not been a good year. We then go back five months, and chart the events in each family member's life which has led them to this point.

Since Sam was diagnosed with a degenerative neurological disease, Rhonda has become his full-time carer, a role that does not sit easily with either of them. Mark is working furiously at a stressful job to pay off hefty investments, while his wife Ingrid has her heart set on getting pregnant. Liza's long-term relationship is faltering just when she most wants to settle down and start a family, and Jemma is the victim of a violent attack that begins to unravel all she thought she knew about herself.

But worse is to come. Rhonda discovers books about euthanasia hidden in Sam's study. Liza realises her partner has been cheating on her. The global financial crisis looms large, spelling disaster for Mark and Ingrid, and Jemma flounders as she tries to come to terms with the attack she has suffered.

As the Sydney winter edges towards spring and Sam's birthday nears – possibly his last, he thinks – the Rosens must each deal with the obstacles life has thrown at them in their own particular ways.

'Playing hopscotch, they'd chalk out the grid on the footpath. Mark's game was fast and reckless, as usual. Liza could combine any hop and jump combination. Jemma's ponderous jumping infuriated Liza, who'd call her a cheat because she was so slow.' (p.74)

1. Why is the book titled *Hopscotch*? What similarities are there between the children's game and the way the characters deal with the problems in their lives? What does this say about problem-solving more generally?
2. Why, in your opinion, do the women in this novel tend to cope better with their setbacks than the men?
3. What parallels can be drawn between the climax of the storyline and the storm and falling of the tree in Sam and Rhonda's garden?

Themes

Parenthood

The role and responsibilities of parents, especially in today's society, is one of the major themes of this novel.

1. Rhonda and Sam refuse to lend Mark the money he wants to cover his losses. Do you think, as parents, they make the right decision? Why or why not?
2. Mark hopes his reluctance to have a baby is not due to worries about money, but he suspects it is. He feels 'dragged along in the wake' of decision-making about his and Ingrid's family life (p. 170). Sam's experience of and expectations about fatherhood seem to have been very different. What do you think are some of the reasons this might be the case?

Career and family

Jane Messer describes several common dilemmas faced by families in today's society.

1. Liza's small charges are often the children of parents who both work full-time in the corporate world, and whose lives are a constant juggle of work and childcare. What do Dave and Maria Borgham's predicament, and to a lesser extent Yasmine's, tell us about the difficulties modern parents face balancing a career with family life?
2. In what ways does the novel explore the idea of family life and work life in modern Australian society?

Relationships and marriage

1. Sam and Rhonda's marriage has survived infidelity, the trials of raising children and, until now, illness. Mark and Ingrid's, on the other hand, is at breaking point by the end of the novel. What do you think are some of the reasons Mark and Ingrid's marriage seems more vulnerable than Sam and Rhonda's?

Characters

Mark

'He should see a doctor. Get a shrink. Take a holiday. Leave his job. Wind back the years to when he was unmarried, then marry her again and be different. He was undone. Everything was hard. Why was that?' (p. 148) ... 'He hovered at the almost mark of taking an action.' (p. 102)

1. What do you think it is about Mark that makes it so hard for him to change his life? What is it about modern society in general that might contribute to this?
2. What do you think are the factors contributing to the increasing occurrence of Mark's oesophagus spasm problem?
3. When Mark asks his parents to lend him money, Ingrid is incensed and ashamed, and both Sam and Rhonda feel deep bafflement and disappointment at what they see as Mark's greed, imprudence, and lack of moral fibre. Sam says Mark is 'generationally unprepared for this kind of problem' (p. 307). What does Sam mean by this? What does the difference in Mark and Ingrid's opinions about asking for the money tell you about each of them?

Liza

1. Liza is very different from Mark in her ideas about what constitutes a good life, and yet they are siblings raised by the same parents. Why do you think they are so different?
2. After taking up every cause as a teenager and working at noble and low-paying jobs in her twenties, how have life's realities shaped Liza's current views about work and relationships?
3. Liza's predicament – the search for the right partner, the ticking of the biological clock – is an increasingly common one for women in today's society. Do you think Liza does the right thing when she decides to take the Canterbury job, and not to take the morning-after pill? What do you think the outcome will be for Liza and Tomas?

Jemma

1. 'Melody isn't everything.' (p. 24) At the opening of the book Jemma strongly believes she is a mezzo-soprano and not an alto. But by the end, she has recognised that she is an alto after all. How do the events of the book bring about Jemma's realisation of who she truly is, and who she is comfortable being?

Rhonda

1. 'To every woman there was the unravelling. She was on the verge of no longer being herself. She had sailed through the births of the children, managed well enough through the death of her father and of Sam's parents, but this slow withering of [Sam's], this she was finding hardest of all.' (p. 76) Why do you think things have come to a head for Rhonda at this point in her life?

2. Rhonda's father said Sam 'didn't have the backbone' (p. 212). How does Rhonda embody the idea of having 'backbone'? How is it lacking, in her eyes, in Sam and in Mark?

Sam

1. 'Sam thought of leaning over to kiss Rhonda in thanks for this birthday meal, but didn't move. Not because the effort was beyond him, but because he didn't feel like being kind to the one person he could be unkind to.' (p. 3) ... 'Misery had winded him. He ignored her, but needed her.' (p. 77) What inspires Sam's small cruelties to Rhonda?
2. 'Liza said he had problems with passive aggression when it came to Rhonda. Jemma said he was the best father in the world. There, truth be told.' (p. 93) What does Sam mean by this? What does he think of himself as a father and husband?
3. Why do you think Sam has reacted to his disease with such procrastination and inertia? How do you think you would react in a similar situation?

Setting

The novel is set in four very different parts of Sydney: the eastern suburbs, the suburban lower north shore, the inner city and the inner west.

1. 'In these overly warm months leading to the confetti of feelings that was Christmas, Sydney was unpredictable, bipolar, emotional.' (p. 305) How does the setting of the novel, the city of Sydney and its different areas, lend itself to the plot and to our perception of the characters?

Writing Style

1. Jane Messer begins and ends the novel with the scene in which the Rosens gather for Sam's birthday party, and the reader is privy to a mixture of character points of view. What effect does this have on your understanding of the characters and how the events of the book have changed them?
2. Jane Messer employs humour as a technique throughout the novel. Is this effective as a way of making the reader more sympathetic to the characters? What other effects do you think the author's use of humour in quite a serious novel have?
3. The majority of the novel focuses on a single character at a time, coming to us from a third-person perspective. How does this play into the idea of a game of hopscotch? Does it make you more or less sympathetic towards the characters?