**BOOK CLUB NOTES** 

ALL

THAT

## REMEMBER ABOUT DEAN COL

TANIA CHANDLER

## ALL THAT I REMEMBER ABOUT DEAN COLA

Dear Book Clubbers.

Thank you for choosing All That I Remember About Dean Cola.

The initial spark for the novel came to me on a winter's day in Hobart, while visiting MONA. I was inspired by two artworks: *The Cloaca Machine*, a weird part alien-robot, part surgical-looking installation that mimics the machinations of the human digestive system — the sum of our parts but completely soulless; and *The Mice and Me*, a life-like sculpture of a child in a frilly party dress lying inside a coffin-like cabinet, which the artist describes as an ode to staying young forever. Back at my hotel, I wrote in my journal:

I want to write a novel infused with the essence of these two ideas:

- 1. We are more than the sum of our parts
- 2. An ode to staying forever young

All That I Remember About Dean Cola is my third novel. It took five years to write and I'm very proud of it. I still find it hard to categorise. Psychological drama? General fiction? Literary fiction? A literary mystery combined with a coming-of-age story? I think it's best if I leave it up to you, the reader, to decide.

The storyline for *Dean Cola* came to me in a rush, all at once, and I jotted it down that weekend in Hobart. After dozens of restructures and hundreds of drafts, the final story ended up being pretty much as it was in those initial notes (I would have saved myself years of work if I'd just stuck with the original outline!). When *Dean* first came to me, I didn't have time for it because I was working on my second novel. But it wouldn't leave me alone and when it started pervading my dreams I guiltily, in spare moments, started writing it.

I adore my protagonist, Sidney. She first appeared as an intriguing, vivid character, but she wasn't fully formed; she developed over time. Initially, I wanted to explore 'madness', but the more I researched psychotic disorders, in particular schizophrenia, the less I wanted to write a 'mad person does a bad thing' novel. I wanted to write the complete opposite: a novel that challenges the stereotype, perpetuated by the media, that people with mental illness are more evil or dangerous than the general population.

My favourite things to write about are time, memory and altered states — *Dean* contains all of these. And, having waged my own life-long war against mental health issues, it is very close to my heart.

Thank you for reading *All That I Remember About Dean Cola*. I hope it sparks lots of thought-provoking conversations and discussions for your book club.

Warm regards, Tania Chandler

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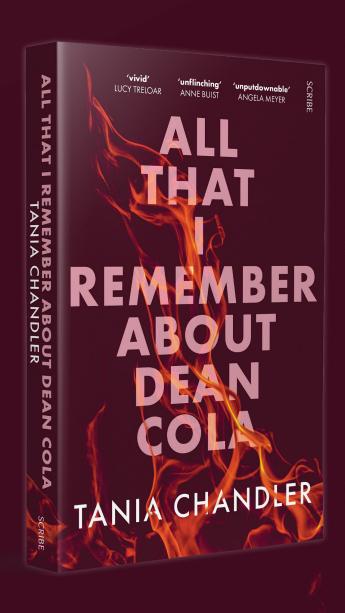
- 1. All That I Remember About Dean Cola is structured in non-chronological order. It starts in present day and via letters, diary entries, and flashbacks moves into the past and then finishes back in the present. How would the story have been different had it been told in chronological order? Which elements would or wouldn't have worked?
- 2. Fire can represent many things. Passion, desire, rebirth, resurrection, eternity, energy, change, purification, hope, hell, destruction and renewal. Discuss the recurring images of fire throughout the book.
- 3. Dean Cola appears in diary entries, letters and Sidney's memories, but never in a real-time scene. Why do you think the author chose to do this and why do you think the book is called *All That I Remember About Dean Cola*?
- 4. Was Dean Cola a good or bad person? Discuss your reasons.
- 5. Sidney's perspective alternates between first- and third-person point of view. Why do you think the author chose to do this? What effect does it have on the narrative and characterisation?
- 6. 'Memory is very interesting. It's like a file of experiences we've built up over a lifetime. Recording, saving, and also recalling information. Even in well people, sometimes information is saved inaccurately or not saved at all. It can fade or change over time and become distorted when it's remembered,' says Aimi, Sidney's psychiatrist. What are your own experiences of memories fading or changing over time?
- 7. Oh, yes, I love a metaphor (and a simile), says Sidney in a letter to her mother. Discuss the use of these literary devices in the novel.
- 8. Sidney's hallucinations are gradually revealed, conveying powerfully the way that such phenomena must seem everyday and unremarkable to those who experience them. How did you feel about Voices?
- 9. One of the author's intentions was to destigmatise mental illness or neurodiversity by moving away from tired cliches of the 'crazy person' and to challenge the stereotype, often perpetuated by the media, that people with mental illness are more evil or dangerous than the general population. Has your perception of people living with complex mental illness changed since reading the book? If yes, how?
- 10. The book deals with many heavy themes, including sexual violence. Sidney was assaulted at a party in 1989. A recent Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey found that in almost 9 in 10 incidents, women who experienced sexual assault by a male in the last 10 years did not contact the police. Common reasons for this included women feeling like they could deal with it themselves or not regarding the incident as a serious offence. One in 4 women who did not contact the police also said it was because they felt ashamed or embarrassed about the incident. Why do you think Sidney never reported the incident that occurred in 1989? Do you think much has changed since then is it any easier now for women to report sexual assault?
- 11. The ending of *All That I Remember About Dean Cola* contains a grace note of ambiguity a subtle lady-or-the-tiger choice for the attentive reader. Do you think Sidney had anything to do with Christos's death?

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Tania Chandler is a Melbourne-based writer, writing teacher, and editor. *All That I Remember About Dean Cola* is her third novel.

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