

BOOK CLUB NOTES

The Italians at Cleat's Corner Store JO RICCIONI



BOOK DETAILS

Format: paperback

ISBN: 9781922070883

RRP: \$29.99



AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Jo Riccioni was born in the UK to an Italian father and English mother. She worked in Singapore and Paris before settling in Sydney, and she has a master's degree in literature from Leeds University. Her short stories have been read on the BBC and Radio National, and published in *The Best Australian Stories* 2010 and 2011. Her story 'Can't Take the Country out of the Boy' has been optioned for a short film.

In 1949, the arrival of an Italian family sets tongues wagging in the village of Leyton, an English farming community still recovering from the war. For seventeen-year-old Connie, however, the newcomers provide a tantalising glimpse of the wider world — a world beyond the gossip and petty concerns traded over the counter of Cleat's Corner Store.

Under their father's stern eye, the Onorati brothers adapt to their new life in remarkably different ways. While the charismatic Vittorio is determined to reinvent himself and embrace all things English, the solitary Lucio is haunted by the secrets of his past — events that tether him to the war in the mountains of Lazio.

The Italians at Cleat's Corner Store is a heartwarming, vividly observed tale of small-town life, exploring love, prejudice, and identity in the wake of World War II.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. *The Italians at Cleat's Corner Store* might be considered a coming-of-age novel, in which young characters learn important life lessons on the path to adulthood. What do Connie, Lucio, and Vittorio actually learn?
2. How important do you think it is in fiction for characters to learn things about themselves and change in the process? Can you think of examples of other novels in which the characters, both young and old, learn lessons, and some in which they do not?
3. The novel is set in two very different villages, in different countries, and in different time periods, and yet there are many similarities between Leyton and Montelupini. What are these similarities? What do they say about human nature?
4. Connie claims that Vittorio and Lucio are in fact very similar. Do you agree?

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REVIEWS

'A polished and absorbing debut from a new talent in Australian fiction.'

— CATE KENNEDY

'A rich debut novel. Riccioni weaves together romance and tragedy, and captures a vivid sense of history and place, in a story that is at once expansive and personal.'

— PORTIA LINDSAY,

Books+Publishing (FOUR STARS)

5. In what ways are art and religion closely entwined in this novel? Are they shown to be liberating or restricting to the main characters?
6. Does it matter that Mr Swann has used real models from the village as figures in the murals? How does knowing the subject change your perception of art? How does knowing the creator of the artwork — the painter, sculptor, poet, novelist, etc. — change it?
7. Towards the end of the book, Connie begins to feel that Lucio's paintings are more meaningful for a small village like Leyton than to the art world at large. Why does she feel this? Do you agree with her? Can art be appreciated equally by everyone?
8. Animals and hunting feature prominently in the novel. What purpose do they serve? Can you think of other novels where animals are used as a vehicle for the story?
9. Much of the action that takes place during the war in Italy was inspired by oral histories as much as recorded events. Has it changed your perception of Italy and what Italians experienced during the war? What role does fiction, as opposed to memoir and history, play in understanding the past?
10. Class and one's social standing are important in both Leyton and Montelupini. How much is being, or feeling, an outcast a spur to achievement for the characters in the book? Does this account for immigrant success, do you think?
11. The post-war period was a depressed time in England, but the war and its fall-out offer an opportunity for Vittorio, Lucio and Connie to pursue their dreams. How so?



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