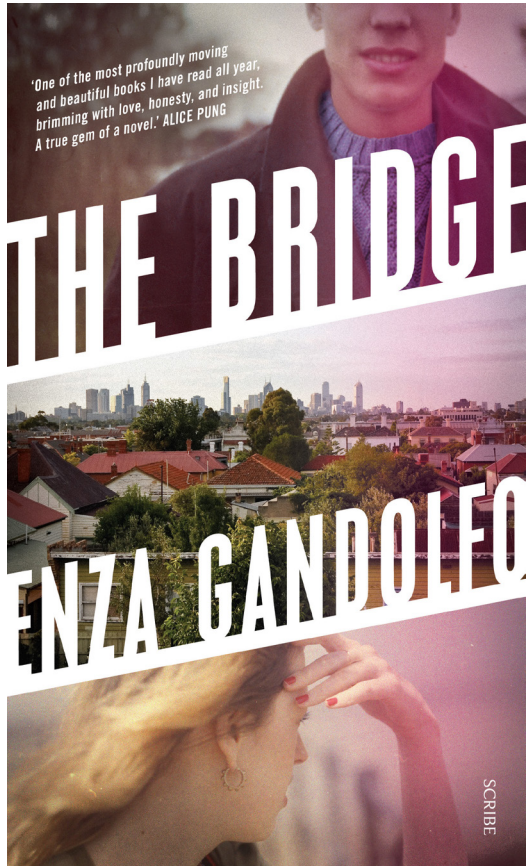


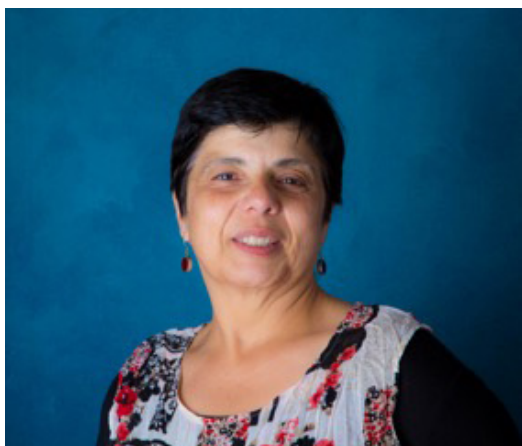
# The Bridge

ENZA GANDOLFO



## BOOK DETAILS

Format: Paperback  
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## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Enza Gandolfo is a Melbourne writer and an honorary professor in creative writing at Victoria University. She is interested in the power of stories to create understanding and empathy, with a particular focus on feminist and political fiction. The co-editor of the journal *TEXT* and a founding member of the Victoria University Feminist Research Network, her first novel, *Swimming* (2009), was shortlisted for the Barbara Jefferis Award.

*Did the dead exist? Were they watching? Were they ghosts? Not the kind he'd imagined as a child, draped with white sheets, with the ability to walk through walls, but the kind that lodged themselves in your heart, in your memories, the kind that came to you in dreams, that you could see when you closed your eyes and sometimes even when your eyes were opened.*

In 1970s Melbourne, 22-year-old Italian migrant Antonello is newly married and working as a rigger on the West Gate Bridge, a gleaming monument to a modern city. When the bridge collapses one October morning, killing 35 of his workmates, his world crashes down on him.

In 2009, Jo and her best friend, Ashleigh, are on the verge of finishing high school and flush with the possibilities for their future. But one terrible mistake sets Jo's life on a radically different course.

Drawing on true events of Australia's worst industrial accident — a tragedy that still scars the city — *The Bridge* is a profoundly moving novel that examines class, guilt, and moral culpability. Yet it shows that even the most harrowing of situations can give way to forgiveness and redemption. Ultimately, it is a testament to survival and the resilience of the human spirit.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. *The Bridge* is written in shifting perspectives. The narrative is mainly told through Antonello and Jo but also Paolina, Mandy and Sarah. What does telling the story through these different perspectives accomplish that a single narrative point of view can't?
2. The setting of *The Bridge* is Yarraville, in the 1970s it was a working class suburb in Melbourne's western suburbs. By 2009, it has been gentrified. Some of the working class characters in the novel see this gentrification as having a negative impact, they feel displaced. Do you think class is still an issue in Australia? How do you feel class impacts on your identity?
3. In her book *Traumascapes*, Maria Tumarkin writes that there is a 'distinctive category of places transformed

**PRAISE FOR THE BRIDGE**

‘One of the most profoundly moving and beautiful books I have read all year, brimming with love, honesty, and insight. A true gem of a novel.’

— ALICE PUNG

‘This exquisite, moving story from Gandolfo captures the raw, wide-reaching pain of the tragedy, long regarded as Australia’s worst industrial accident.’

— HERALD SUN

‘Superb ... Utterly heartbreaking.’

— ANZ LITLOVERS

‘*The Bridge* is my book of the year so far, brilliant writing’

— Kerrie, Dymocks Melbourne

‘[A] dramatic and dynamic novel ... This is a novel about everyday tragedy written in everyday language. Clarity prevails over lyricism. Dialogue is colloquial and lively. Carefully articulated sentences give way, in moments of anger, to more truncated phrasing and, in the closing chapters, to snappier prose that creates a sense of urgency ... Her skill as a storyteller and her ability to create complex and empathetic characters gives weight to her fiction and invites the reader to question her own integrity and sense of self-worth, not without compassion.’

— AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW

‘A poignant novel which examines class, grief, guilt and moral culpability, *The Bridge*, weaves together two vastly different yet interrelated narratives.’

— IL GLOBO

physically and psychically by suffering...’. They are ‘traumascaples’, she argues, because they are more than just the ‘physical settings of tragedies: they emerge as spaces, where events are experienced and re-experienced across time’. The West Gate Bridge collapse is a central event in the novel, it frames the narrative. Do you think tragedies like this leave scars? Should they be remembered and memorialised? Are there places that have a certain bad ‘association’ or negative ‘vibe’ for you where you re-experience or sense ‘psychic’ pain from the past?

4. Mandy says she has fallen out of love with her daughter. Is this believable? What do you think it would be like to be the mother of a drunk driver who is responsible for another person’s death? How would you describe Mandy as a mother?
5. Both the collapse of the West Gate Bridge and Jo’s crash are described as ‘accidents’. Both are a result of negligent behavior. How should we as a society deal with these accidents? Do you think it’s fair to send Jo to jail while directors of companies responsible for industrial accidents are often not punished (usually companies are fined)?
6. Grief is a major theme in the novel, and a number of the characters have suffered as a result of the loss of a loved one. People experience grief in different ways and in different stages. The five stages of grief, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with loss. How does Antonello experience grief? What about Jo? In what ways have their lives been irrevocably altered as a result? How have you experienced grief and can you relate it to the characters’ experiences of grieving?
7. In the novel characters feel guilt for what they have done, in Antonello’s case he feels guilt for what he did not do, an act of omission (some would say this is very Catholic). Until you can forgive yourself can there ever be forgiveness or a future let alone any sense of redemption? How does guilt impact on grief?
8. One of the themes of the novel is culpability – that is the extent a person, can be held morally or legally

DO YOU WANT TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE WEST GATE BRIDGE COLLAPSE?

- [The West Gate Bridge Memorial](#)
- [Report of Royal Commission into the Failure of West Gate Bridge](#)
- [West Gate Bridge collapse Disaster at West Gate online exhibition](#)
- [West Gate by Bill Hitchings \(1972\)](#)
- [West Gate Garden Monash University](#) (contains pieces of the collapsed section of the West Gate Bridge)
- [Backtracks: Recollections of Remarkable Australians Joely Taylor](#) (includes an interview with Tommy Watson – witness to the West Gate Bridge collapse 2015)
- West Gate Bridge Collapse, 1970 (Chapter 8) in Australia's worst disasters Malcolm Brown Lothian 2002

responsible for action and inaction. Some of the things that happen to the characters are a result of their own actions/inactions and choices; other things are outside of their control. How do different characters deal with questions of culpability? How do you think we deal with issues of culpability as a society/community?

9. Jo suffers from self doubt and anxiety, which manifests as lack of confidence in herself but also a lack of trust in others. Why doesn't she tell Ash about her concerns and doubts?
10. The West Gate was a known suicide spot until the safety barriers were installed. Sarah's friend Ada suicides off the West Gate. Antonello and Jo think about suicide. Mary's father committed suicide. How do you feel about the way suicide is dealt with in *The Bridge*?
11. Bad things happen to good people. Jo is not a bad person but her negligent behavior has led to the death of another person. Does Jo deserve to remake her life? Does she deserve to be forgiven and to forgive herself? Is it possible for her to atone and make amends? Do you feel empathy for Jo?
12. What do you imagine happens following the end of the novel? What do you think the future holds for Jo once she leaves prison? Will she ever fully recover?
13. Antonello wonders about the importance of an apology. 'Would it have made any difference if the companies had apologised after the bridge collapsed? Would it have made any difference if they'd come knocking on their doors and begged for forgiveness?' What is the value of an apology? Does it make a difference?
14. Antonello loses his faith after the collapse of the bridge. Jo does not believe in God but at times she wishes she did. What role does religion play in *The Bridge*?
15. Unionism like religion plays an important role in the lives of the characters, especially the bridge builders. Towards the end of the novel Sarah reads this quote from Engels and Marx on the plaque under the West

## NOTES

Gate Bridge: ‘Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battle lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers.’ How did you feel about the way unions and unionism was dealt with in *The Bridge*?

16. Jo thinking about her friendship with Ash thinks: ‘Their friendship wasn’t equally balanced. Were any friendships equally balanced?’ Mandy responds to Sarah’s question about Jo’s friendship with Ash: ‘Friendships are like marriages — they look different from the outside.’ Do you think friendships should be equally balanced? What makes a good friendship?
17. The nature and possibility of unconditional love is raised by different characters. Antonello doesn’t doubt Paolina’s even in the worst moments of their marriage. Mandy doubts her love for her daughter. Do you think unconditional love possible? What circumstances do you think might challenge unconditional love ?
18. Some literary critics think a novel should show a process of moral and emotional evolution especially in the main characters. Which characters change/ evolve the most in the course of the novel? How did your opinion of Jo or Antonello change as the story progressed?
19. Who was your favourite/the most empathetic character, why? What did you like or dislike about the characters? What are the strengths of Antonello and Jo? What are the weaknesses?
20. Some writers (Hemingway) maintain what makes a ‘character’ in fiction is how they act and speak, what they do. Others differ and say it’s what the character thinks and shares with the reader. What do you think makes an effective character in fiction? Who is the most effective/memorable character in *The Bridge*? Why?

