

BOOK CLUB NOTES

SCRIBE

'A gorgeous evocation of
the wildness of youth ...
A beautiful, resonant book.'

PEGGY FREW
author of *Islands*

The Golden Book

a novel

KATE RYAN

DEAR BOOK CLUBBERS,

I have always been fascinated by — and remember — the intensity of childhood friendships, especially those between girls on the cusp of adolescence. This intensity can almost have the character of a love affair, though no physical attraction may be part of it. I think we can romanticise what it is to be a child, to simplify it too, to forget that the emotions which exist in adults are there in children too — love and hate and fear — and rivalry between children may run deep. Children are complex beings — and I wanted Jessie and Ali to reflect this. I am interested in the way our childhood best friends are often complementary selves, possessing traits that we would like to have. A best friend's family, its strangeness and difference, may be part of their allure too.

Both Jessie and Ali reflect something of me as a child. I was shy and quite anxious, but also an obsessive reader and physically confident and adventurous. I spent most of my spare time with my best friend, Michael, usually barefoot, exploring the neighbourhood. We played elaborate games in and around the grounds of a school we lived next door to, climbing trees and onto roofs. Our friendship was competitive (at least from my perspective). I always wanted to prove, as a girl, that I could do things as well or better than Michael, was tougher and braver.

As an adult I have become cautious and I sometimes wonder, as with Ali, what happened to my brave child self. In my own life I was twelve when we moved houses, and then my father died when I was thirteen. Both events signalled the end of my friendship with Michael and that particular feeling of childhood freedom and also brought amorphous fear.

I am fascinated by the inner world of children, all the things they choose not to share with the adults in their lives. I have always thought about what underlies fear too — why people appear more or less vulnerable to it, and what fear *means*. Losing a parent early made me very conscious of death. I still ponder its meaning and wonder how it is that people can be alive and then gone from the world. I brought all these thoughts to my writing about Ali and Jessie.

The Golden Book is my debut novel and of course there is a lot of me in it, aspects of my childhood and many of my concerns, especially in relation to

the nature of childhood freedom and what it is to love. I was very interested in different kinds of power when writing the book — and that words themselves might bestow it. Reading gave Ali power and agency that Jessie lacked and she also had advantages because of her privileged family background. She felt it made up for what she lacked in other ways. But there were qualities in Jessie and in Jessie's family that were enormously seductive for Ali too — a sense of freedom and artistry, an unpredictability, the absence of rules. Though from another perspective these same things could equate with neglect and chaos. It is fascinating to me to consider that any one situation can be viewed in multiple ways.

Thank you for choosing *The Golden Book*. I hope you'll enjoy reading it and the book will generate much interesting discussion as well as thoughts and memories of your own time of being twelve nearly thirteen, and how your child self might inform the adult you have become.

With best wishes,

Kate Ryan

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. *The Golden Book* can be seen as an investigation of fear. What does it say about why some people are afraid and others not?
2. How can love and hate coexist in a childhood friendship?
3. How does the novel explore the way family of origin influences the adults we become?
4. Are Jessie and Ali similar in any ways?
5. What is the role of the mothers Diane and Aggie in the novel?
6. What does teaching represent?
7. Is Cal an unlikeable character?
8. What does swimming mean to Ali?
9. Who should take responsibility for what happened to Jessie?
10. What is the role of words in the novel and in Jessie and Ali's 'golden book'?
11. What do Bettany and Patti represent in the novel?
12. Where do you see Ali at the end? Has she changed?

THE GOLDEN BOOK PLAYLIST

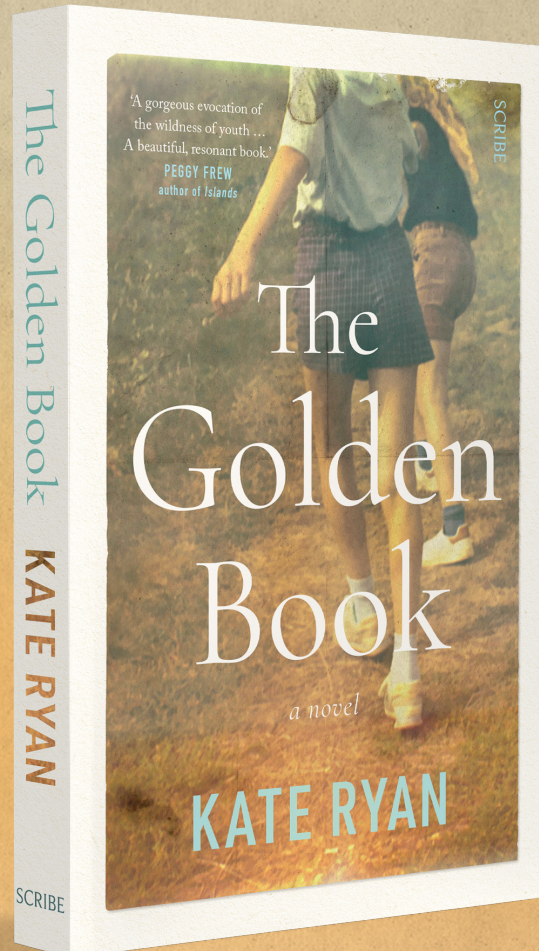
I love music, and certain tracks blast me straight back to particular times in my life with their moments of intensity — joy, pain, sadness, excitement, recklessness, and passion.

Music is woven throughout *The Golden Book*. For Ali, Jessie's taste in heavy metal is a huge part of what defines her. In Jessie's house there is always someone playing something, usually at the same time as someone else, and this contrasts with the quiet of Ali's home life as an only child. Aggie's hippie-ish tendencies are reflected in her love of Leonard Cohen, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan, music Jessie is contemptuous of. Cal is a Rolling Stones fan; Matty is obsessed with the Velvet Underground, and when Eli drives Ali and Jessie to the falls, a Tim Buckley track reflects the girls' position on the cusp of adult desire. Everyone in Jessie's house reveals their personality via music. Later Ed's love for, and ability to create, music are central to Ali's attraction to him — passion and creativity which she seeks to rediscover in herself.

LISTEN TO THE PLAYLIST [HERE](#)



Kate Ryan writes fiction and nonfiction and her work has appeared in publications including *New Australian Stories*, *The Sleepers Almanac*, *Meanjin*, *Kill Your Darlings*, the *Griffith Review*, and *Best Australian Stories*. Her picture books have been published by Penguin and Lothian. She won the Writers Prize in the 2015 Melbourne Prize for Literature and the novella category in the 2017 Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Awards. Her work has been recognised in other awards including the Josephine Ulrick Prize, Calibre Prize, Elizabeth Jolley Prize, and Boroondara Literary Awards. As well as writing, she works as an editor, teacher, manuscript assessor, and writing mentor. *The Golden Book* is her debut novel.



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