



## READING GROUP GUIDE

An utterly wonderful novel of love, crime, magic, fate and coming of age, set in Brisbane's violent working class suburban fringe - from one of Australia's most exciting new writers.

### About the Book

Brisbane, 1984: A lost father, a mute brother, a mum in jail, a heroin dealer for a stepfather and a notorious crim for a babysitter. It's not as if Eli's life isn't complicated enough already. He's just trying to follow his heart, learning what it takes to be a good man, but life just keeps throwing obstacles in the way - not least of which is Tytus Broz, legendary Brisbane drug dealer.

But Eli's life is about to get a whole lot more serious. He's about to fall in love. And, oh yeah, he has to break into Boggo Road Gaol on Christmas Day, to save his mum.

A story of brotherhood, true love and the most unlikely of friendships, *Boy Swallows Universe* will be the most heartbreaking, joyous and exhilarating novel you will read all year.

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# Trent Dalton on writing *Boy Swallows Universe*



The book really began with two memories. In the first, I'm a boy sitting on an expensive leather lounge in working class Ipswich, and in this memory, I turn to a man with tattoos and muscles beside me and I say 'I love you, Dad,' and this man turns to me and he laughs and he says 'I'm not your dad, mate, but I love you too.' And people later told me that man was a bad man – a hard man with the hardest history - but also a very good man. He was, in many ways, my beloved and heroic mum's one true love. And I know he was the first man I ever loved too. And then he went away. I never saw him again, he just vanished from my life when one particularly troublesome part of his world finally caught up with him. And I grew up trying to reconcile the dark things everybody was whispering about this man around kitchen tables with the love I had for him in my heart and I always wondered if you could be good and bad at once ...

The second memory is exactly where my novel begins. Me, in a car with Arthur 'Slim' Halliday, a man once dubbed the 'Houdini of Boggo Road Gaol' for his extraordinary ability to escape from the notorious and inescapable Brisbane prison. Slim was a mate of this man my mum loved so much; he did odd jobs around our house, watched over us boys some days when Mum was out. A man I adored. A mystery man with a bad past, but a very good man to me, too. And when that world of ours crumbled, Slim crumbled away with it.

My brothers and I went to live with my father who I never really knew, and Slim and that curious and brief and sometimes even magical early world of prisons and prison escapees and men with dark pasts and presents was replaced with a new world of a Brisbane Housing Commission cluster swirling with a hundred social issues – alcoholism, unemployment, domestic violence, generational social curses – all of which I would later write about as a journalist....

This book is for the never believers and the believers and the dreamers. And this is what I hope the book will say to them:

1. Every lost soul can be found again. Fates can be changed. Bad can become good.
2. True love conquers all.
3. There is a fine line between magic and madness and all should be encouraged in moderation.
4. Australian suburbia is a dark and brutal place.
5. Australian suburbia is a beautiful and magical place.
6. Home is always the first and final poem.

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## Reviews for *Boy Swallows Universe*

'Trent Dalton is the most extraordinary writer - a rare talent. A major new voice on the Australian literary scene has arrived.' Nikki Gemmell

'An astonishing achievement. Dalton is a breath of fresh air - raw, honest, funny, moving, he has created a novel of the most surprising and addictive nature. Unputdownable.' David Wenham

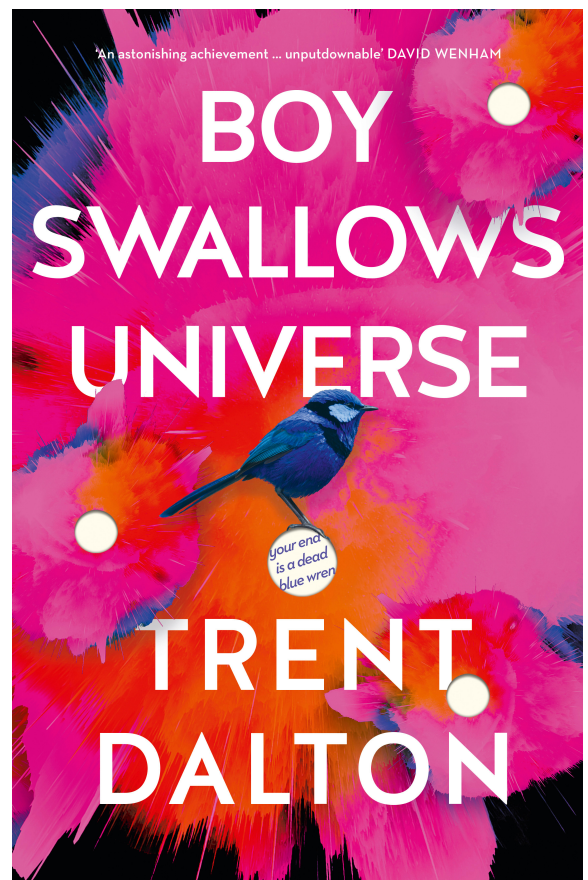
'I couldn't stop reading from the moment I started, and I still can barely speak for the beauty of it. Trent Dalton has done something very special here, writing with grace, from his own broken heart.'  
Caroline Overington

'Enthralling - a moving account of sibling solidarity and the dogged pursuit of love.' Geoffrey Robertson QC

'Stunning. My favourite novel for decades. Left me devastated but looking to the heavens.' Tim Rogers

'Oh my God. Wow. It's just superb. I've always looked out for Trent's work because he has a magic about him; what he sees, how he explains things. He can describe a kitchen table in a way that makes you want to throw your arms around it. After reading *Boy Swallows Universe* I realise that his genius isn't really just about writing so much; it's about hope, and his instinctive and infectious "Yes" to one of the most plaguing questions of the human night: Can tenderness survive brutality? This novel confirms Trent Dalton as a genuine treasure of Australian letters.' Annabel Crabb

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Tim Rogers*



## Reviews for *Boy Swallows Universe*

‘There are truly great books that come out every year. Some years a great book breaks your heart. Another year a great book is so profound you can’t stop thinking about it. And another year a great book is so much fun you can’t stop reading it and talking about it. And once every so often a truly great book does all of those things and becomes your new benchmark for what a great book really is. *Boy Swallows Universe* is one of those books ... Trent Dalton has written an Australian novel unlike any other. It is a novel full of adventure, humour and good times. It is a story full of tragedy, sadness and loss. And it is a book full of dreams, hope and a dash of magic. This is a coming-of-age story that will knock your socks off and more. An addictive read that will give you withdrawals when you put it down. A true Australian classic you will read again and again.’ Jon Page, Pages and Pages Bookstore

‘As a brilliant journalist, Trent Dalton has always intimately understood how fact is often stranger than fiction. Perhaps it took someone like him to produce a novel so humming with truth. Call it a hunch, but I think he might’ve just written an Australian classic.’

Benjamin Law



## About the author:

Trent Dalton writes for the award-winning *The Weekend Australian Magazine*. A former assistant editor of *The Courier-Mail*, he has won a Walkley, been a four-time winner of the national News Awards Feature Journalist of the Year Award, and was named Queensland Journalist of the Year at the 2011 Clarion Awards for excellence in Queensland media. His journalism has twice been nominated for a United Nations of Australia Media Peace Award.



## Questions

Slim's view of the world is that: 'We all got a bit o' good and a bit o' bad in us...'

Discuss the ways in which characters in the novel are both good and bad at the same time.

What do you think is the meaning of the red telephone, and the mysterious voice that speaks to Eli?

Do good life lessons remain valid if delivered by evil men?

What sort of man do you hope (or fear) Eli Bell will grow into?

What do you think, ultimately, Eli Bell is searching for in life and in that secret room?

Why do you think August chooses to be mute?

Does the knowledge that much of this novel is based on Trent's own life change your reading of the book? Enhance it? Or does it not make a difference?

Do you think that the trauma that Mrs Birbeck talks about (p224) is a factor in Eli's journey?

Do you think the novel is optimistic or pessimistic about the world?

Were there similarities or differences in the book to your own memories of 1980s suburban Australia?

Discuss the idea that August may have knowledge of future events and how this is suggested and also at times debunked.

'Do your time before it does you,' says Slim. What does Eli take this to mean and how does he act on it?

The novel presents an interesting view of adults from a child's perspective. What does it say about adults and particularly adult men? And what does Eli learn from this?



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