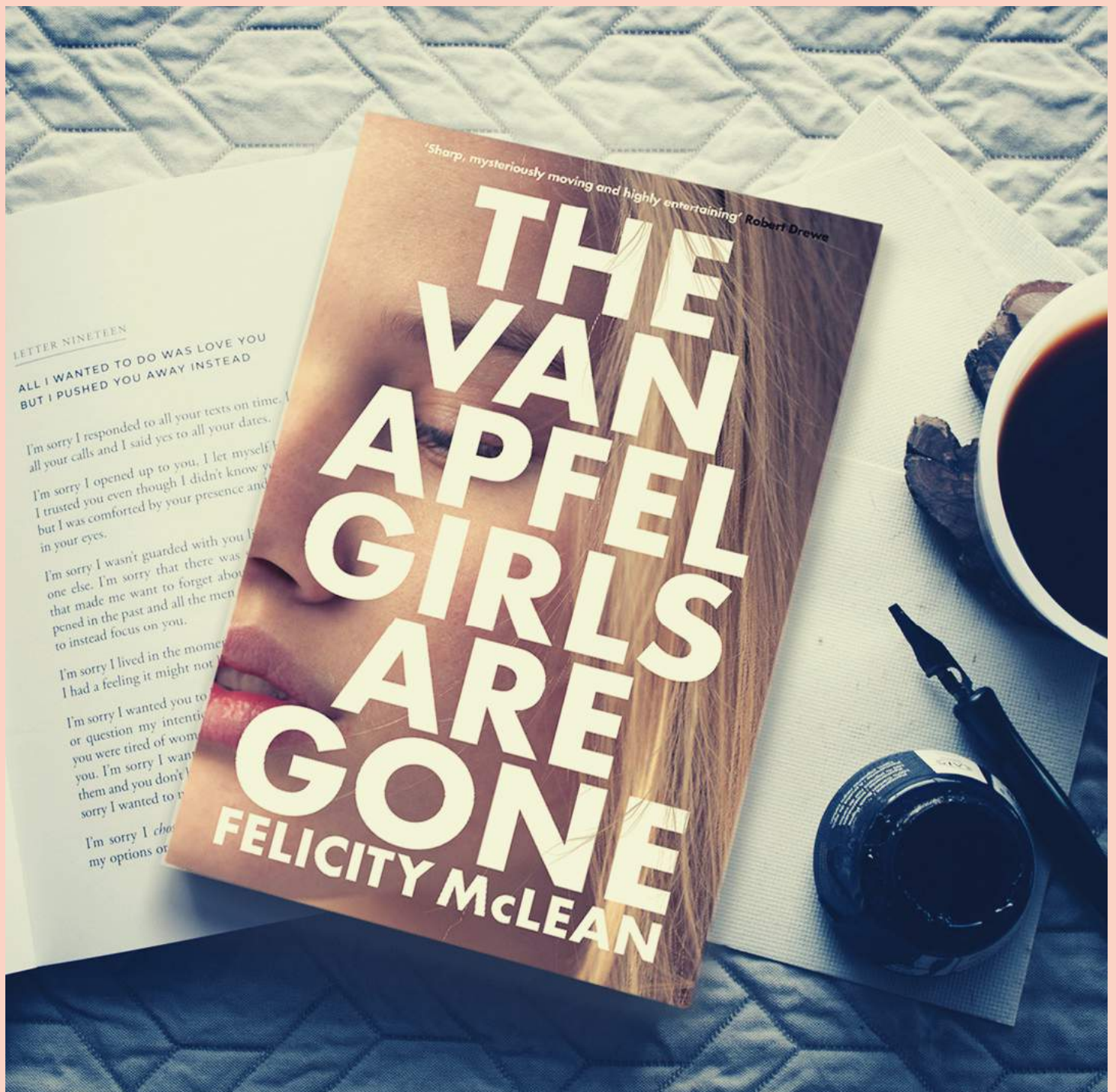


# READING GROUP NOTES



# THE VAN APFEL GIRLS ARE GONE

BY FELICITY McLEAN

## ABOUT THE BOOK

*'We lost all three girls that summer. Let them slip away like the words of some half-remembered song and when one came back, she wasn't the one we were trying to recall to begin with.'*

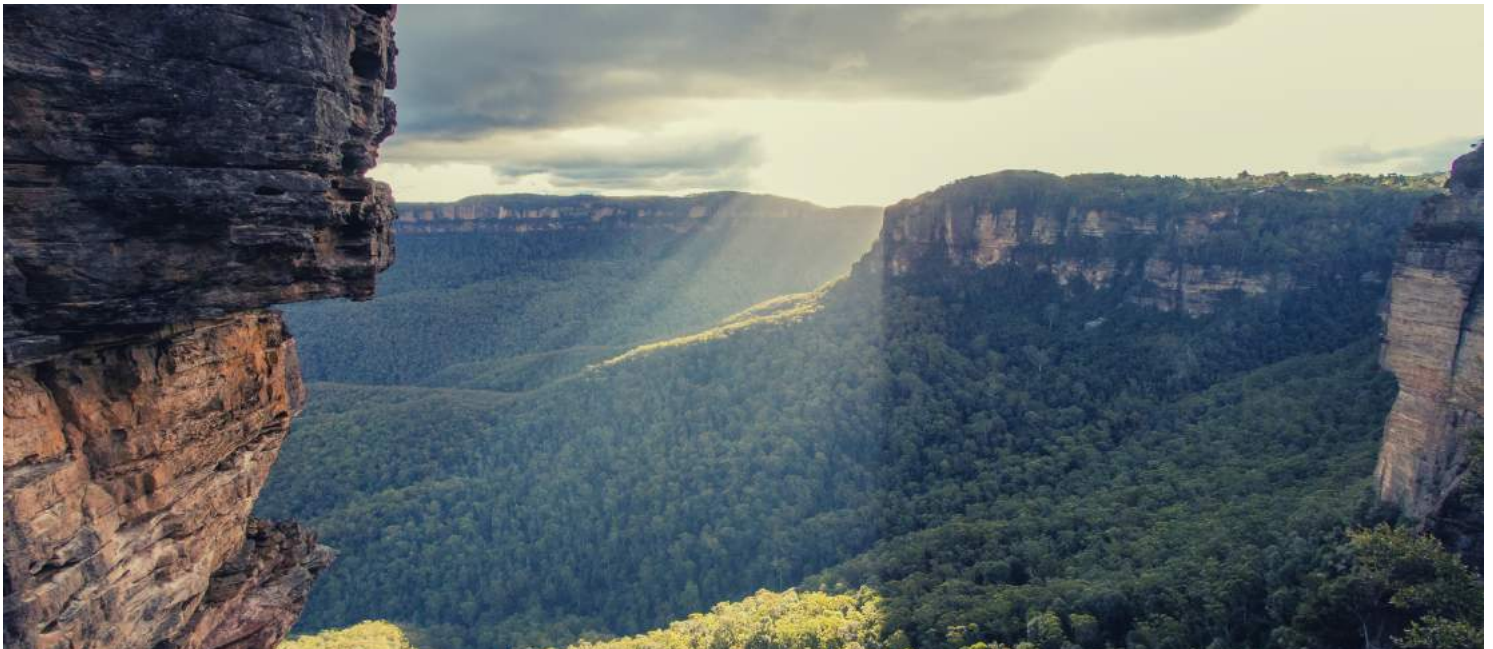
Tikka Molloy was eleven and one-sixth years old during the long hot summer of 1992 - the summer the Van Apfel sisters disappeared. Hannah, beautiful Cordelia and Ruth vanished during the night of the school's Showstopper concert at the amphitheatre by the river, surrounded by encroaching bushland.

Now, years later, Tikka has returned home to try and make sense of the summer that shaped her, and the girls that she never forgot.

Blackly comic, sharply observed and wonderfully endearing, this is *Picnic at Hanging Rock* for a new generation, a haunting coming-of-age story with a shimmering, unexplained mystery at its heart.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Felicity McLean is an author, ghostwriter and journalist. Most recently, she co-wrote *Body Lengths* with Olympian Leisel Jones, which won the 2016 Australian Book Industry Awards 'Reader's Choice' for Small Publisher Adult Book of the Year, and was Apple iBooks 'Best Biography of 2015'. As a ghostwriter she has collaborated with celebrities, sports stars, business leaders and others.



# REVIEWS

'McLean is an experienced ghostwriter, having most recently co-written a biography with Leisel Jones, but this is her first novel. It's a revelation. She writes economically, including the right amount of detail to create a sense of the suburbs in the '80s, but not so much as to be twee. There is a whiff of *The Virgin Suicides* here, as McLean investigates the space between girlhood and womanhood, but in an unmistakably Australian setting. The result is a book that achieves a delicate balance between the mundane and the mysterious – and the debut of a striking new voice in Australian fiction.' *Adelaide Advertiser*

'Tikka is an unforgettable, if not entirely reliable, narrator full of black humour, brutal honesty and naive curiosity. This novel is one that will haunt readers long after they have turned the last page.' *Bookseller + Publisher*

'It's impossible to ignore *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Virgin Suicides* when reading Felicity McLean's debut novel, *The Van Apfel Girls are Gone*. The title itself is a nod to the trope of missing young women that so haunted the works of Joan Lindsay and Jeffrey Eugenides. Though cognisant of these influences, McLean's book sings its own song. It's a homage, perhaps, to bespoiled innocence as symbolized by the Appleyard college students and the Lisbon daughters but the reworked elegy of loss and remembrance has a power all of its own.' *The Australian*

**'a striking  
new voice in  
Australian  
fiction'**

**'will haunt  
readers'**

'A smart, classy thriller that blazes with the heat of Australia and slowly reveals its many layers.' Fiona Mozley, author of *Elmet*, 2017 Man Booker Prize finalist

'A smart debut. Beautifully atmospheric with its great sense of time and place.' Melina Marchetta

'Engrossing and goosebumpy from start to finish, this novel about three young sisters who vanish all together one night has the chilling feel of true events that are stranger than fiction, and the stuff of nightmares. But the magic of McLean's art is not just her gift for evoking, in almost hallucinogenic detail, her haunted narrator's childhood—a time and place linked to Australia's notorious true-life story of a baby dragged off in the night by a wild animal—but to do so in the most charming and irresistible of narrative voices. The result is a novel that is as delightful as it is terrifying, and just scary good.' Tim Johnston, bestselling author of *Descent* and *The Current*

'Sharp, mysteriously moving and highly entertaining' Robert Drewe

'I deeply admire the languid, lived-in prose of Felicity McLean's lovely novel *The Van Apfel Girls Are Gone*. This is a story as much about forgiving ourselves our own childhoods, as it is about acknowledging and embracing the people we've become because of those adolescent (and sometimes life altering) choices.' Hannah Pittard, author of *Visible Empire*

**'mysteriously moving  
and highly  
entertaining'**



# FELICITY MCLEAN ON WRITING THE VAN APFEL GIRLS ARE GONE

In 2016 I was invited to be part of a Sydney Writers Festival panel hosted by actor Bryan Brown. The event was held at the western Sydney theatre named in Bryan's honour. And the theme? Creativity and place. How had the landscape of my childhood influenced my writing? How did place speak to my creative process? Worthy topics certainly. But difficult to answer if – like me – you wrote other people's stories for a living.

Back then I'd ghostwritten half a dozen titles, for various people, but I'd never published anything where my experience of 'place' crept onto the page. (Ghostwriters are, by very definition, invisible.) And so I found myself on stage at the Bryan Brown Theatre reading aloud to several hundred people from my 'novel' – a novel that existed almost-exclusively in my head and that weighed in at around 5,000 words. It was, I explained, very loosely inspired by the setting of my childhood – a bush suburb on the fringe of Sydney.

Following the panel discussion, a tall figure in the front row was first on his feet for question time. What was the title of my novel, he wanted to know. Could I tell him more? What happened next? I pictured the two-hundred-or-so blank pages that followed the prologue. 'Good question, Bryan,' I admitted.

I got to work on *The Van Apfel Girls Are Gone* the next day, fleshing out the story of sisters Hannah, Cordelia and Ruth and their mysterious disappearance during the sweltering summer of 1992. I was intrigued with the idea of writing an Australian gothic novel because the notion of gothic literature (think: gargoyles and garrets) seems so at odds with our sparkling sunshine, our blistering skies. And yet. And yet perhaps all this sunlight serves to heighten the shadows? Is the nightmare worse if unfolds during the day? (Barbara Baynton, Elizabeth Jolley, Patrick White and Helen Garner are among a host of Australian authors who suggest maybe so.)



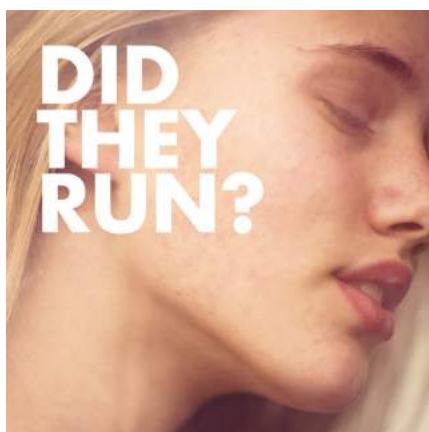
Moreover, 1990s suburbia offered too irresistible a setting for such a strange story. It was a time when smiling 'Safety House' signs were screwed tight to every neighbourhood letterbox, but the Azaria Chamberlain case played out on the nightly news. (Also, when Sunnyboy ice-blocks were still available in the local supermarket. What a time to be alive.) Then there's the geographical setting. The fictional valley in my novel is an inversion of Joan Lindsay's towering Hanging Rock and it's there, in the valley, that the story finds its blurry in-betweeness. Its sense of existing on the threshold. Where childhood becomes adulthood. Where mangroves meet the river. Where it's possible for children to disappear forever, their footprints washed away by the tide.

Ultimately, what I wanted to create with *The Van Apfel Girls Are Gone* was a story that was dream-like and eerie. Haunting for what it didn't reveal. No one truly learns what happened to the Van Apfel girls. Not even Bryan Brown gets an answer to that.

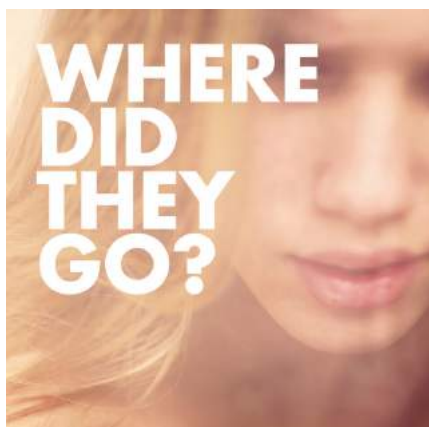
## **PUBLISHER CATHERINE MILNE DISCUSSES THE VAN APFEL GIRLS ARE GONE**



When I took *The Van Apfel Girls are Gone* to Acquisitions, I only had the starting point of the novel – just a few chapters. This is normally a high-risk strategy for a publisher, but it turned out to be one of the easiest acquisition meetings I've ever had. And the reason? Everyone just fell in love – irresistibly, immediately, intensely – with the voice of the narrator, Tikka.



'We lost all three girls that summer. Let them slip away like the words of some half-remembered song and when one came back, she wasn't the one we were trying to recall to begin with.' So begins Tikka Molloy's recount of the summer the Van Apfel sisters – Hannah, the beautiful Cordelia and Ruth – disappear. Eleven and one-sixth years old, Tikka is the precocious narrator of this fabulously endearing coming-of-age story, set in the 90s in an eerie Australian river valley suburb with an unexplained stench. The Van Apfel girls vanish from the valley during the school's 'Showstopper' concert, held at the outdoor amphitheater by the river. While the search for the sisters unites the small community on Sydney's urban fringe, the mystery of their disappearance remains unsolved forever.



Brilliantly observed, sharply funny and entirely endearing, this novel is part mystery, part coming-of-age story – and quintessentially Australian. Shimmering with heat, cicadas and thrumming with the darkness at the heart of the Australian dream, this is King Lear meets Lindy Chamberlain, *The Virgin Suicides* meets *Jasper Jones* meets *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

# QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that Tikka is a reliable narrator? Why, or why not?
2. Everyone in Tikka's town has a story about Cordelia Van Apfel. What's your opinion of Cordie?
3. There are a number of unresolved mysteries at the heart of this novel. Do you feel like you know what happened the day the girls ran away, and in the days leading up to it? What do you think Mr. Avery's role was? Mr. Van Apfel's role?
4. The river in Tikka's hometown stinks, but she seems to be the only one who can smell it. What do you think this means?
5. Why do you think the author included the Lindy Chamberlain storyline?
6. How do you feel about Laura and Tikka as adults? Did seeing them in the present change the way you felt about them as children?
7. For a tragic novel, there's a surprising amount of black humour in *The Van Apfel Girls Are Gone*. Why do you think this is?
8. Where do you think the Van Apfel girls have gone? Are they still alive?

