

‘An exacting act of detonation, *The Girls* bares a talented writer’s foundations at the same time as it raises the spirit of survival.’

KATE HOLDEN

BOOK CLUB NOTES

THE GIRLS



A memoir of family, grief and sexuality

Chloe Higgins

‘A tender and heartfelt book.
A beautiful achievement.’

FIONA WRIGHT



Plot Summary

In 2005, the author Chloe Higgins was seventeen years old. She and her mother, Rhonda, stayed home so that she could revise for her exams while her two younger sisters Carlie and Lisa went skiing with their father. On the way back from that trip, their car veered off the highway, flipped on its side and burst into flames. Both her sisters were killed. Their father walked away from the accident with only minor injuries.

In the rest of her memoir, Higgins takes the reader through the following decade or so of a grieving process that engulfed her and her parents. She talks about the immediate aftermath of the accident, the practical details, the new dynamic of her family. She talks about how loss affected them all, how her grief became depression, and manifested in an inability to 'sit still' or 'sit with' herself. She talks about how she sought out forms of coping – hospitalisation, writing, drugs, therapy, sex. And she discusses with affecting honesty the events that occurred in the years following that one terrible day: dropping out of university, taking heroin and cocaine, becoming a sex worker, living in a relationship with a married couple, fleeing the country to travel, and trying on different lives and personalities – all as a response to grief and a grieving process that is never over, but can be managed.

We see her struggle with memory and shame, both today and in the past, while also laying her life bare to the reader (author Kate Holden calls this 'an exacting act of detonation' on the book's cover) in a process, ultimately, of transformation.

Writing Style

Writing in first person, Higgins describes both events and the writing process itself with great candour. She interpolates comments from her readers and editors into the narrative, and shares with the reader the ongoing conversation about the book with her family. Along with the inclusion of quotes from her own reading about grief and memoir, and a fragmented, interlocutory structure which segues between past and present, Higgins keeps the reader alert to the subjective nature of her narrative, the shifting sands of a personal pronoun, and resists an urge to 'neat' or homogenous storytelling.

Themes

Possible themes for discussion include: parents and children, memory and trauma, trauma and the body, sisterhood, coming of age, sex, grief and shame, writing as therapy, reading as therapy, writing memoir, memoir vs. history, biography or journalism, true stories and authenticity, writing about grief.

The Author

Chloe Higgins writes about the things we're all afraid of: death, sex, love, and how we feel about our mothers. Chloe is the Director of the Wollongong Writers Festival, a casual lecturer and tutor in creative writing at the University of Wollongong where she is completing a PhD, and a member of the Finishing School Collective. Originally from southwest Sydney, she now lives in Wollongong and travels the world for three months per year. *The Girls*, a memoir of family, grief and sexuality, is her debut.

Questions for Discussion

- *'When my father speaks about the accident, he opens with the line: 'When I killed my daughters . . .'*
This is a book that starts with a tragedy. How did that beginning affect you as a reader?
- How is the book structured? Does the point of view change between chapters? What effect does this have when reading?
- How does time work in this book? Is it a linear account? Do the tenses change? Why do you think that might be?
- *'As with all memoir, the events in the preceding pages are not the only truth . . . Memory is fallible and frequently, when I contacted people to confirm details, I found we remembered different things. While I made all possible attempts to verify facts and recollections, this book can only ever be one interpretation of them'*
At several points in the work the author calls attention to a version of events that contradicts her own, or a loss of memory. How does this affect your reading of the book? Does it make events feel more or less 'true'?
- *'As trauma and time erode memory, fragments of stories told by other people are incorporated into my own narrative-making...'*
How else does the author make us aware that narrative can be slippery? Are there any other voices in the book besides her own?
- *'During these years, time acts strangely. Or perhaps it is my memory of it that is strange. My descent will be gradual and fragmented, over the course of several months.'*
How do you think the book signals this fragmented sense of story through the writing or structure?
- A slight refrain runs through the book: 'This is what grief looks like'. Why do you think the author makes a point of repeating this phrase?

- *‘Writing has become the way I process my emotions. It is how I make sense of things, and there is something calming about narrativising difficult memories. But equally, it is a plea for authenticity.’*
Authenticity is a central theme. What do you think is meant here by linking authenticity and writing? Is authenticity the same as accuracy? And do you think she has achieved authenticity in this work?
- *‘I am writing to expel the ugly parts of myself. These are not the only parts of me, but they are the parts I’ve chosen to focus on in this book.’*
Higgins’ writing style is both economic and creative, humorous and candid. It is very powerful and carefully crafted. What do you think she means by ‘ugly’? And what does that mean to you as the reader of this work?
- *‘At the site I collect objects, as if by keeping bits and pieces of the leftovers, I can keep the girls a little longer.’*
Objects are important to this story, whether an emblem on a shirt, a magazine, a plant. How do you think that relates to the author’s discussion of ‘travelling heavy’ in chapter 14?
- *‘Both then and now, shame is a substance that constantly coats my body. It ripples through almost every part of my attempts to be authentic, to remember— or forget—the past, to relax into the present.’*
Throughout *The Girls*, the author describes a tension between speaking out and silence, between comfort and revulsion. How do you think that might inform choices about writing, particularly in writing about sexuality, mental health and loss?
- What do you think motivated the author to write this story? What does she say about it in her afterword? And how might that be related to the final chapter of the book?
- *‘She and my father are the two people I admire most in the world. But we are very different people.’*
Relationships between parents and children are a key point of tension in Chloe Higgins’ narrative (she even jokes about it in her author biography at the beginning of *The Girls*). Why do you think we are so endlessly fascinated by that dynamic?
- *The Girls* is a true story, but it is also more than a simple telling of events. With reference to this or other books, does it make you think about how we define life writing? Is there, for instance, a difference between autobiography and memoir?

Further Reading

Suggested reading by the author for those who may like to read some of the writers who inspire her.

Levels of Life by Julian Barnes

Read Joyce Carol Oates' review in the *TLS*: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/julian-barnes-levels-of-life-joyce-carol-oates/>

The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion

Read Robert Pinsky's review in the *New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/09/books/review/the-year-of-magical-thinking-goodbye-to-all-that.html>

My Struggle by Karl Ove Knausgaard

Read Toril Moi's discussion of Knausgaard's six-book novel sequence: <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/how-to-read-karl-ove-knausgaard/10547858>