

BOOK CLUB NOTES

'A remarkable longform journalism exploration
of the human heart and how it breaks ...
Dive in, soak up every word.'

TRENT DALTON

HEART SICK

three stories about love
and loss, and what happens
in between

JESSIE STEPHENS

'Thought-provoking, highly original and beautifully nuanced.'

JANE HARPER

'This book is a delight.' **RICK MORTON**

ABOUT THE BOOK

'Heartbreak does not seem to be a brand of grief we respect. And so we are left in the middle of the ocean, floating in a dinghy with no anchor, while the world waits for us to be okay again.'

Claire has returned from London to the dust and familiarity of her childhood home, only to realise something is wrong with her partner Maggie. Patrick is a lonely uni student, until he meets Caitlin - but does she feel as connected as he does? Ana is happily married with three children. Then, one night, she falls in love with someone else.

Based on three true stories, *Heartsick* is a compelling narrative nonfiction account of the many lows and occasional surprising highs of heartbreak. Bruising, beautiful, achingly specific but wholeheartedly universal, it reminds us that emotional pain can make us as it breaks us, and that storytelling has the ultimate healing power.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessie Stephens is a Sydney-based writer and podcaster. She's the assistant head of content at Mamamia and co-host of the podcast Mamamia Out Loud. She also hosts Mamamia's True Crime Conversations and Book Club podcasts, where she's had the pleasure of interviewing some of her favourite authors. *Heartsick* is her first book.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think this book is called *Heartsick* instead of *Heartbreak*? What is the difference between these two ideas?
2. In the Introduction, Jessie Stephens describes *Heartsick* as longform non-fiction, saying that this is a form of storytelling that 'elicits compassion and empathy most powerfully' (xvi). How does knowing these stories are non-fiction - that these are real people's experiences - impact the way you read this book? Would it have made a difference if you read this book as fiction?
3. Of the three stories in this book - Ana, Patrick and Claire - is there one that you related to most? Or one you found more difficult to read? Why?
4. How does the structure of the book, moving between the three relationships, affect your reading? Why do you think the author chose to write the stories this way?
5. What is similar and what is different in the way the three relationships begin? Is there one moment where everything changed, or love at first sight? Are there any signs to indicate that the relationship will not ultimately be successful?

6. 'The unknowing is where the desire lives. The gaps. Curiosities. A hole with no bottom. Peering into it evokes both terror and possibility.' (177). At the start of a relationship, the sense of 'terror and possibility' create heightened feelings of desire. What do you think is the role of this kind of infatuation at the start of a relationship, and how important is this feeling in the long-term?

7. It is often said that friendships fall to the wayside when we enter romantic relationships. How do friendships play out for the people in this book? And how do friends hold us together when our hearts are broken?

8. 'With her, he's more himself than when he's by himself. She reaches into him and finds things he didn't even know were there.' (80) Part of being in a relationship is seeing yourself through the other person's eyes – your faults as well as your attractive qualities. How does being in a relationship change each person's sense of themselves? Do you think this impacts their ability to deal with the loss of their partner?

9. What role does place have in these relationships? What changes or revelations are made when people start to share spaces, or travel to new places together? Consider Patrick's proposal in Alaska, or when Maggie moves in with Claire.

10. Do you think that Claire, Patrick and Ana are able to be honest with themselves, and their partners? What might be preventing them from being honest?

11. 'But perhaps a relationship is when love meets circumstance, two variables as important as each other.' (206). How do outside circumstances affect each relationship? Consider Claire's accident, Rob living in Sri Lanka, etc. Would a change in these circumstances have made a difference to the outcome of the relationship?

12. All three people struggle when their former partners begin a new relationship. What is the hardest part of seeing someone move on? Is it ever possible to be ready for that moment?

13. In the Preface, the author explores how early experiences of heartbreak are formative, shaping our sense of ourselves as worthy of love. How does each person's personal background affect their experiences of love? How does yours?

14. The thoughts we have while experiencing romantic rejection can be like 'the ramblings of a mad person' (296). In what ways do the three people in this book experience heartbreak as a kind of madness? How do they try to recover?

15. Are there any lessons you think Claire, Patrick or Ana learned from their various heartbreaks? What are the takeaways for you as a reader?

16. Do you agree with the author that talking about heartbreak and grief after a lost relationship can feel taboo? Are these restrictions self-imposed or societal?

17. This book is written in limited third person, following Claire, Patrick and Ana closely and telling their story from their own perspective. What do you think would be different if we heard from the other people in these relationships? What do you think Maggie, Caitlin, Rob or Paul would have to say?

18. Would you say that this book ends on a hopeful note? Why or why not?

SUGGESTED READING

Three Women by Lisa Taddeo

Normal People by Sally Rooney

Ghosts by Dolly Alderton