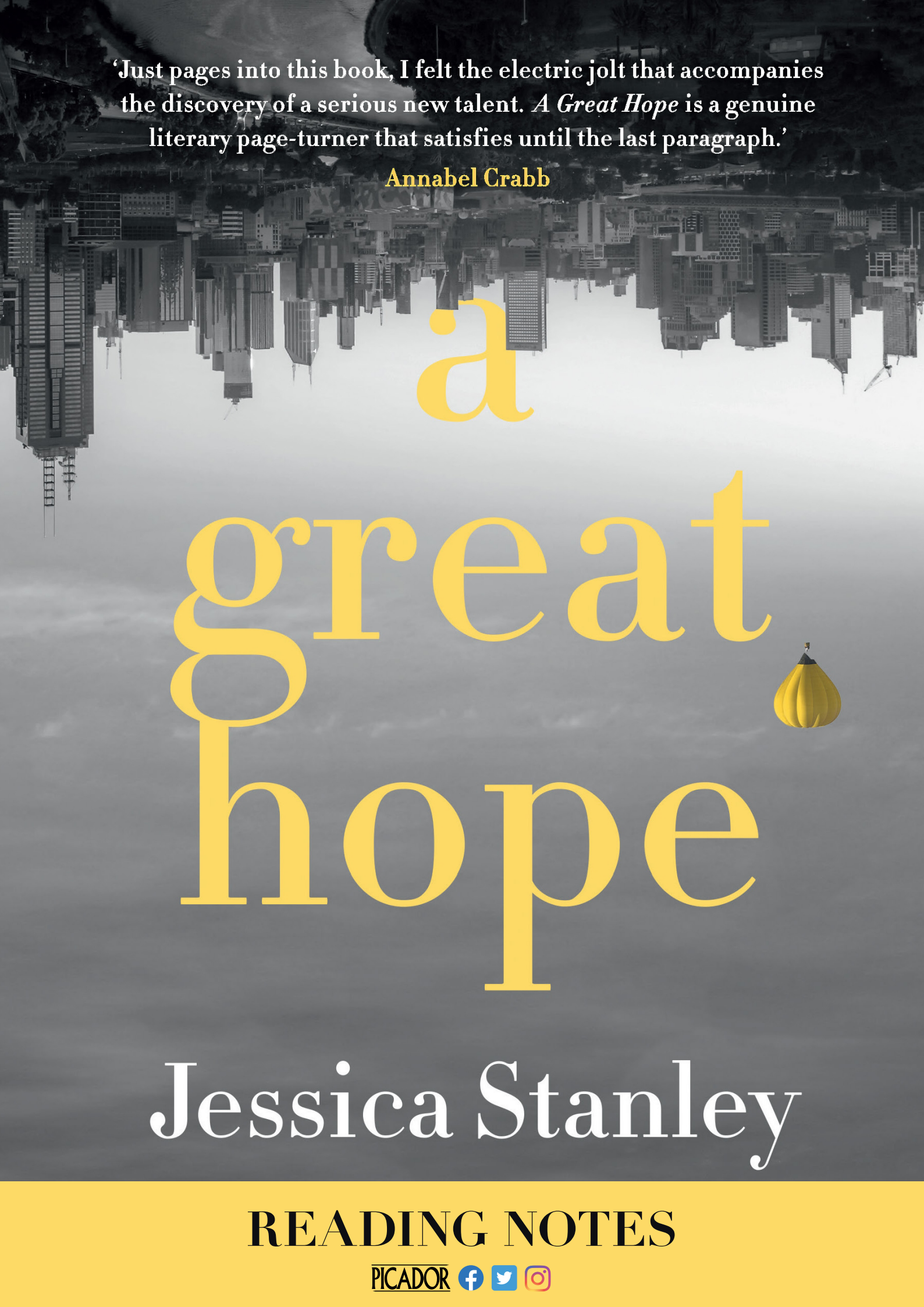


‘Just pages into this book, I felt the electric jolt that accompanies the discovery of a serious new talent. *A Great Hope* is a genuine literary page-turner that satisfies until the last paragraph.’

Annabel Crabb



a great hope

Jessica Stanley

READING NOTES

PICADOR   



BLURB

John Clare was a titan in Australian politics. The head of a powerful union, he'd long been tipped as a future Prime Minister. Supporting him in his push for power were his elegant wife Grace, his troubled children Sophie and Toby, and Tessa, the mistress he thought would stay secret.

But now John has fallen, brutally, to his death. A terrible accident – or was it?

In the wake of losing John, his inner circle mourn and rage, remembering and trying to forget the many ways he'd loved and disappointed them. An adoring and unreliable father; a grateful and selfish husband; a besotted and absent lover; an authoritative and compassionate leader; a failed politician in an era when party politics failed a nation. As those around him reassess everything they knew of and felt for John, a new idea of what love and power really mean begins to emerge – as does the true cause of his death.

Gripping, propulsive and ambitious, *A Great Hope* untangles the mystery of John's fall through the eyes of those who knew him best – or thought they did. Deftly displaying the clash of the political and the personal, this is a novel for our times, from a brilliant and forceful new Australian writer.

Praise for A Great Hope:

'Just pages into this book, I felt the electric jolt that accompanies the discovery of a serious new talent. *A Great Hope* is a genuine literary page-turner that satisfies until the last paragraph.'

Annabel Crabb

'*A Great Hope* is written in an addictive prose that keeps the reader firmly in its grip.'

Books+Publishing

ABOUT JESSICA STANLEY

Jessica Stanley was born in regional Victoria and grew up in Canberra and Melbourne. She worked in journalism and politics before moving to London in 2011. *A Great Hope* is her first novel.

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A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO *A GREAT HOPE*

Please note this introduction contains spoilers


The novel switches between the different perspectives of those left behind after John Clare's death, his wife Grace, his children Sophie and Toby, his neighbour Girl and his mistress Tessa. The timeline of the book also goes between before and after John's death.

We learn about Grace's teenage years and how the loss of her mother and absence of her father leaves her in the care of her aunt. In her years at university, she inherits her aunt's house, makes and loses friends and falls in love with John. She starts a career in law before having children and become a full-time mum. As the children grow up and John's career progresses, she feels left behind. Once Sophie and Toby are grown, she feels the need to find herself again. She throws herself into her pottery classes and is captivated by her teacher, Anton. In the wake of John's death she experiences several traumatic events (graffiti in the hall and her head injury) and revelations, both about herself and those around her.

Sophie, John's eldest child, struggles to find her place in the world. She starts a blog commenting on politics and culture, which leads to a journalistic career with *The Age*. As things fall apart with her relationships, her online profile becomes egotistical and lands her in trouble. Her writing opportunities dry up and she goes into a deep depression. After receiving online abuse, she vows to quit the internet/social media and retreats to her student job at a second-hand bookshop. She becomes obsessed with finding out how/why John died, convinced it wasn't suicide or an accident. She eventually discovers the truth while at Greeves Street, seeing Girl hide evidence from Grace.

We follow Toby as he starts university. He struggles to find where he fits in until he meets Astrid. Over the uni break, when everyone else has gone home, Toby starts a romantic relationship with Astrid. Their relationship ruptures when their peers return. As a result, he is evicted from his student housing and decides to drop out of uni and move in with John's ex-girlfriend/Grace's ex-house mate Helen. He also starts work at the hospice Helen runs. Concerned about how Grace and Sophie will react, he keeps his actions a secret from his remaining family members.

Tessa starts working at the Australian Council of Trade Unions in the lead up to the 2007 election campaign. She falls for John and they have an on-again off-again affair. She questions her relationship with John every time they are together – thinking her feelings are stronger than his or that she made the whole thing up. As a result, she tends to push everyone else in her life away and ends up isolating herself.




After their breakup Tessa leaves her job at ACTU to work as a corporate consultant in Sydney. Work becomes her whole life and identity. She eventually moves back to Melbourne but doesn't get back together with John until he is running in the 2010 election. After John's death she starts to question if she is morally doing the right thing in her consultant job. She is also trying to discover the truth behind John's death.

Girl, John's neighbour, becomes obsessed with the idea of a perfect life and does everything she can to get it. She idolises Grace and covets her lifestyle at 99 Greeves Street. She confronts John as he is about to run away with Tessa for good. In a fit of rage, she pushes John off the roof. After John's death she checks on Grace frequently, hoping to become indispensable. One day she finds Grace has overdosed on pain medication and split her head open. When Girl's mum is promoted to a new position in Wodonga, Girl asks Grace if she can move in with her.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS


1. What is the significance of the book's title: *A Great Hope*? What does it mean in the greater context of the story, personally and politically?
2. Discuss each character's response to John's death – Grace, Toby, Sophie, Girl and Tessa. What does his death mean to them and how is it still affecting their lives a year later? How does each character grieve, rage, mourn and cope, and why can none of them move on?
3. In Chapter 36, Grace remembers a comment from John's ACTU colleague, Liz Eccles: *'It must be impossible to hold your own in a marriage with someone like that.'* She replies, *'He's not like that at home.'* (page 363) Each character sees a different side of John, but no one sees the whole. Why do you think that is? What does this say about John's character? Do you think you relate to John? Why or why not? Similarly, how do you think other characters in the book are seen differently in different settings and by different people?
4. *'Oh, Toby, she thought as she sobbed, I held your hand so tight because I loved you. Oh, Sophie, I kept you at a distance because I thought you didn't love me.'* (page 325) How did Grace and John's parenting affect the adults Sophie and Toby became? Similarly, how did Grace and John's own upbringing affect the way they parented? What does this say about nature versus nurture?
5. *"Dad told me something else once. He said, like with relationships, that I didn't have to rush to settle down."* *"Really?"* *Sophie remembered the sea wall, the roar of the roller-coaster on the wind. "Because he basically told me I was lucky to have Sam and I didn't deserve him, pretty*




much – that he was too good for me.” Toby looked sceptical. “I’m serious, I can’t remember the words, but I remember the feeling. He made me feel like I did have to rush to settle down.”

(pages 302–303) John offers relationship advice to both Sophie and Toby, but they receive the direct opposite advice. Why do you think that is and how do you think it affects their relationships? What does this say about John?

6. On page 284 Toby says, *‘I never thought about our parents like this ... I thought how they were with us was how they were all the time.’* How else is this gap in the parent–child relationship shown throughout the novel?
7. *‘I could be in government now. I’ve fucked it up, I’ve really fucked it up. I didn’t realise it would be my last chance.’* (John, page 90) How does *A Great Hope* explore last chances? How do John and other characters react to last chances or missed opportunities?
8. *‘... like a child, she thought at first, but “Across the threshold,” he said, carrying her into the house, and she’d suddenly become a bride.’* (Tessa, page 216) Discuss Tessa and John’s relationship. Throughout their relationship, their views of their status change. Besides the age gap, what else affects how Tessa and John see their relationship?
9. *‘Being widowed by someone the world knows didn’t love you. It’s a very, very lonely place to be.’* (Grace, page 340) How and why do you think Grace is governed by affluence, perfection and societal expectations? How does this relate to her relationship with herself and with John?
10. *‘Would the feelings [for Anton] have run their course or would love have blossomed in its own time? She’d never know.’* (page 318) What do you think Anton represented to Grace? Do you believe Grace loved Anton? Why or why not?
11. *‘When Sophie looked in the mirror, her own reflection wavered and disappeared. But Sam was so unchanging, so solid ... Sam’s boundaries never faded in and out. He never dissolved into the atmosphere like a gas. When his arms were around her they kept her together, but only in the shape of his embrace ... She didn’t want to be the negative of someone else anymore.’* (pages 387–388) Discuss Sophie and her relationship with Sam. Why do you think Sophie felt this way? What does this say about Sophie’s character? How else has Sophie used other people to define her and why do you think she does this?
12. *‘Even the loneliness of the flat was appealing; after [Matthew’s] split he obviously got to start again. Sophie wanted to be with him, of course, but she also wanted vaguely to be him. To be alone like this to do whatever she wanted.’* (page 107) Why do you think Sophie is so drawn to Matthew Straughan?

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13. *‘[Toby’s] eyes filled with tears. “Sorry.” “Hey, hey. There’s no need to say sorry. Keep your eye on that, do you promise? If you’re about to say sorry, make sure it’s really your fault.”’* (page 129) Discuss this quote in relation to Toby’s character. Why do you think Toby apologised his whole life, but we don’t see him say sorry to Astrid? What is the significance of this?
 14. *‘At last, at least the whole world knew that she and John had been together.’* (Tessa, page 224) *‘I was thinking about them on the front page, that’s all. I think about the newspaper all the time. More than I think about the funeral. More than I think about Dad. I couldn’t believe that picture.’* (Toby, page 283) Tessa and Toby, understandably, have different reactions to the newspaper headline announcing the affair between Tessa and John. Why do you think they react the way they do? The novel is punctuated with other news articles, blog posts and tweets, some factual and some fictional. What do these add to the story and your understanding of characters, events and plot developments?
 15. Geraldine Green is mostly called Girl throughout the novel. What is the significance of this? How does her name reflect her character?
 16. The story revolves around 99 Greeves Street. What does the house symbolise? How does the evolution of the house – from a crumbling lilac share house to a grand Victorian terrace with a modern third-floor studio extension – reflect and impact the characters’ lives?
 17. How does the backdrop of Australian politics inform the novel? How does the turmoil in the Rudd and Gillard governments mirror John’s rise and fall?
 18. *“By the way, Sophie?” Tessa called after her. “A man having sex with you when you don’t want sex with him? There’s a name for that.” Sophie cocked her head. “Being a slut?”* (page 381) Using Sophie and Tessa’s conversation about sexual assault as a springboard, discuss the ways in which society has changed since when the novel was set, in 2011.
 19. Discuss how Grace, Sophie, Tessa and Astrid – and even Julia Gillard – are each exploring feminism in their own way. What does this say about the many facets of feminism?
 20. Do you think Melbourne could also be considered a character in the book? Why or why not?
 21. *A Great Hope* uses repetition as a storytelling device. For example, Grace is drawn to Auntie Manna as Girl is drawn to Grace as Toby is drawn to Helen. What does this repetition or ‘history repeating itself’ represent? In what other ways does repetition create meaning in the book?

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22. After Sophie leaves her writing career, she starts working at The Unique Crime, a second-hand bookshop. Is it ironic that Sophie works in a second-hand crime bookstore, and why? How does her obsession with Hercule Poirot and Sherlock Holmes shape the novel?
 23. *A Great Hope* is a non-linear narrative, each character is exploring their past retrospectively. Discuss how effective this structure is. How does this non-linear storytelling mimic memory? What does this add to the story?
 24. The story is told in third person through multiple points of view. Each character has differing points of view on situations and the people around them. Some are even suspects in John's murder. Why do you think the author chose to tell John's story through multiple perspectives? How did this affect the way you viewed each character and their potential motive? Did you pick the murderer? How did your perspective change throughout the novel?
 25. *'Besides, if you want me, awful flawed me, there must be something wrong with you ...'* (page 124) The main characters are all extremely flawed, but this is what makes them so relatable. Discuss the negative traits of each character. Did you relate to any of these characters and their unique traits? Why or why not? Which character did you like the best? Whose perspective did you gravitate to the most?
 26. Throughout the book, John, Grace, Sophie and even Sam, have all been unfaithful to their partners, and Tessa is in a relationship with a married man. Each of these characters have very different personalities and values; what commentary does this provide about infidelity as a theme and the common trope of 'the other woman'?
 27. Discuss the ending. Why do you think Sophie responded to Girl's confession the way she did? Why didn't Sophie go to the authorities? What does this say about Sophie's evolution as a character?