

The Tulip Tree



Suzanne McCourt

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ABOUT SUZANNE MCCOURT

Suzanne McCourt's debut novel, *The Lost Child*, was published by Text in 2014 and was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award. Her novella *The Last Taboo* shared first prize in the *Griffith Review* Novella Project in 2016. Suzanne lives in Melbourne.

A READER'S INTRODUCTION

Like their homeland of Poland, Suzanne McCourt's characters are buffeted by the wars that ravage Europe and central Asia throughout the first half of the 20th century. And yet, among the suffering they see and experience during extraordinary times, and despite their losses and despair, those characters continue with ordinary life. They pat their dogs and worry for their children. They sow seeds and cook meals. They swim and cycle. They work, love and hope.

While the story starts with brothers Adam and Henryk, much of the narrative centres on Adam and his second wife Elzbieta, a mirror image of his first wife. Suzanne McCourt delves deep into her characters as individuals; at the same time she is interested in their relationships with one another, the other members of their family, and their friends. She also ponders questions of memory and the echoes of history.

It is impossible to write about war, and perhaps especially the concentration camps of World War II, without confronting questions of human purpose, good and evil, hope and faith, fate and chance, and loyalty and betrayal. But McCourt asks these questions in the context of everyday life too. There are secrets and betrayals at a personal level. There are decisions about choices that go beyond the solely political. Although, of course the personal and political cannot always be separated.

The book ends in the Snowy Mountains in Australia, with Stefan thinking of a Polish explorer who named a mountain for a Polish general, reading a letter from his father, pondering bridges, and remembering his escape from an oppressive regime.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. At the very beginning of *The Tulip Tree*, Henryk enjoys the hunt, while Adam shies away from it. Does this set up a difference between their characters that lasts throughout the book, or do they change?
2. Kasia sees Adam as 'a good man. The better brother.' Is he? Why do Kasia and Elzbieta both fall for Henryk either before or after marrying Adam?
3. Adam reflects: 'Women had a bigger, better view of life, one focused on creating and giving, while men seemed driven to raise armies and fight.' Henryk remembers the first time he realised that 'women were an altogether different species from men'. Does the book support the brothers' views of men and women being fundamentally different in these ways? Do the brothers keep thinking this way?
4. Is Elzbieta similar to Kasia in more than her looks? Do either Adi and Henryk come to see her as her own person?
5. Neimann often says: 'Don't worry, the worst never happens.' Where does his optimism come from? Is it misplaced? If so, is it better to have misplaced optimism than realism or pessimism?
6. Adam disappears after he 'suddenly felt the pain of every creature on earth, every human, every animal, all the pain and hurt that we do to each other; it was unbearable'. Ela asks if it is the war, and he replies that it is 'more than that.' What is it?



7. 'When do people stop being human?' Reizele asks Henryk. What do you think?
8. What does the book tell us about survival? Neimann asks Henryk: 'Does hate keep you going? Or hope?' What do you think? How do people keep going through tragedy? Urszula says that survival is in Polish women's blood and that they 'refuse to die'. Can people really survive simply by willing it?
9. Discuss the betrayals in the book. Are some more understandable or justifiable than others? Can the characters be redeemed by the good they do? What would you have done in the characters' shoes?
10. How are the characters affected by the secrets they hold? Should they have kept them or shared them?
11. Henryk says of Stefan having escaped: 'Isn't that what we do when we're young? Choose a path? Follow it?' How much control do we have over the path we choose? Is it easier when we are younger?
12. What do the endings McCourt creates for the characters tell us? Henryk's decline? Elzbieta's painting? Adam's retirement? Stefan's *'coo-ee'*?
13. Adam wonders what it 'might have been like to live out his life from childhood to old age in an unchanging world...Who would he be?' What does the novel say about how the world we live in affects us?
14. What does historical fiction in general teach us about the present day? What about this historical novel in particular?
15. Discuss some of the symbols in the book: the tulip tree itself, for example, or bridges.
16. In the Snowy Mountains, Stefan thinks of being on land 'where black men have lived for thousands of years, now dispossessed of their land as his countrymen were dispossessed of theirs'. Can the dispossessions be compared?