

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

TITLE: Skylarking

AUTHOR: Kate Mildenhall

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SUBJECT: Fiction

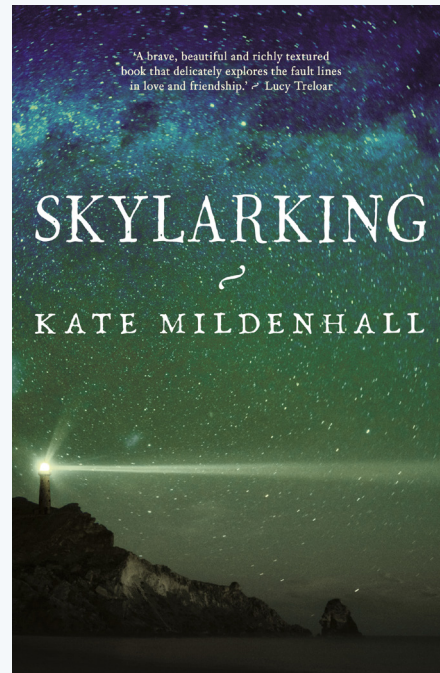
About the Book

In the first full chapter of *Skylarking*, two young girls stand on the edge of a cliff near the lighthouse their fathers tend. Kate yearns for freedom and independence; her older friend Harriet is more cautious. Kate imagines jumping off the cliff, taking Harriet with her, a fantasy that is at once deeply compelling and horrifying to her.

Just as they teeter on the edge of the precipice, so are the girls on the brink of becoming women. It is Harriet who is more ready to take the leap into womanhood. At the same time as she is quietly willing to take on the predetermined roles of wife and mother, the beautiful young woman she becomes is also subject to the forces of sexual desire – both her own and the desire she attracts, especially McPhail's.

Kate is more ambivalent about becoming a woman. She chafes against the restrictions that come with her gender, is confused by the changes in her body and those she observes in Harriet's, and is terrified when she witnesses childbirth. Like Harriet she too experiences desire, but is shamed by McPhail's rejection of her own, and irritated but intrigued by Albert's for her.

The novel follows the contradictions and complexities of the girls' deep friendship as they make the transition from girls to women. These almost-sisters are opposites who don't 'fully exist without the other' (9). But as Harriet continues to outpace



and outshine Kate in approaching womanhood, Kate fears being left out and left behind.

Towards the end of the novel, she becomes increasingly ambivalent towards Harriet, desperate to keep her close and to drive her away. She is equally ambivalent about McPhail and Albert. In all things, it seems, Kate wants 'one thing ... and its exact opposite at the same time' (22). And so we are left asking the question she asks herself: was there some small part of her that knew what she was doing in McPhail's hut? Or was she just 'skylarking'?

About the Author

Kate Mildenhall is a writer and education project officer, who currently works at the State Library of Victoria and is studying part-time at RMIT University in the Associate Degree of Professional Writing and Editing. As a teacher, she has worked in schools, at RMIT University and has volunteered with Teachers Across Borders, delivering professional development to Khmer teachers in Cambodia. *Skylarking* is her debut novel. She lives with her husband and two young daughters in Hurstbridge, Victoria.

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Praise for Skylarking

'[Mildenhall's] research of life on a remote cape in a young colony manifests in lovingly drawn descriptions of the natural landscape ... the novel's strength lies with following Kate's and Harriet's stumbles and skylarking from childhood to womanhood; and their close, sometimes stifling, friendship.'—Thuy On, Sydney Morning Herald

'Mildenhall is at her best when she is exploring the complex relationship between these two young women as their burgeoning sexuality begins to cause problems within their tiny community.'—Books+Publishing

'Kate Mildenhall's impressive debut novel takes an historical case and re-imagines it with such sensitivity and insight that we feel this must be how it truly happened.'—Emily Bitto

'It is hard to believe that Skylarking is Kate Mildenhall's debut novel, as her ability to create both character and atmosphere is impressive.'—Annie Condon, Readings Monthly

'Skylarking is a strikingly real and deeply moving meditation on adolescent friendship in all its complexities—a heart-wrenching work.' —Olga Lorenzo

'A brave, beautiful and richly textured book that delicately explores the fault lines in love and friendship.'—Lucy Treloar

Questions for discussion

1. Skylarking captures the transition from girlhood to womanhood at a time when female roles were more circumscribed than they are now, and open discussions about sex, desire and childbirth were rare. How do you think that transition into adulthood is different for girls today? Is it still as difficult as Kate found it?

2. In a video about the friendship between Kate and Harriet, Mildenhall says: 'All friendships are complex. But the friendships between teenage girls are particularly so.' Do you agree? What about the idea that the 'small moments that make up Kate and Harriet's friendship are universal'? Do you think female friendships have been similar through different eras? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itvoGoNDqL4>

3. Further to the two questions above, is Skylarking more generally about universal themes? Or is it more limited to the era in which it is set?

4. In the video, Mildenhall also talks about 'the tipping point when their love turned into something more complex, something darker'. When is that tipping point? What does their love turn into?

5. The girls' friendship is deeply affected by Harriet and McPhail's mutual attraction. Can female friendship survive intact when one of the friends falls in love?

6. Have you experienced a friendship as intense as Kate and Harriet's?

7. Is Kate and Harriet's desire for each other fleeting or ever-present? Is it displaced desire for McPhail or genuine attraction?

8. What do you think is going on at the end of the book when the 'black girl' puts her hands on Kate's chest and Kate feels that she can breathe again?

9. What do you think more generally about the way the Aboriginal people are depicted in the novel?

10. How important is place in Skylarking? What sense do you get of the country? How closely connected is Kate with the land?

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11. Where does Kate's feminist sensibility come from? Why does she have it and not Harriet? Is there any sign that Harriet rejects the conventions of femininity as Kate does?

12. Kate wonders how Harriet knows how to touch McPhail 'just so' (75). Is Harriet's behaviour instinctual and innate? Is it learned? Is it calculated? Is Harriet calculating?

13. Kate sees her mother as accepting the role that is handed to her when she marries a lighthouse keeper. Do you think her mother is as accepting as she seems? What insight do we get into the mother's inner life? What about Harriet's inner life? How much do we know what is going on in their thoughts?

14. Kate realises that a 'threat had arrived with my coming of age. It was to do with my body, my womanhood, the electricity that I sensed every now and then with a sideways glance from Albert, or when lying in a sandy nook with Harriet ... Were all these things the same? Did they threaten the good order of the cape, of me, of the world in the same way?' What do you think are the answers to Kate's ponderings? How important is order in Kate's world for her and for others? Think too about the hierarchy attached to the lighthouse and Kate's father.

15. Talk about some of the many symbols that are used in the novel (for example the lighthouse, maps, the stranded whale, Coral Island). How effective are they?

16. Watching McPhail watching Harriet as she sings, Kate likens the experience to reading a book, and wanting both to read on and to stop, 'for once I went on, I would know what happened, and all the possibilities and imaginings would be reduced to one ending' (120). Did you feel like this about reading *Skylarking*? Do you ever feel like this about life?

17. How does it affect your reading to know that this novel is based on a true story? How might you have imagined the story from the bare facts?