

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

Book description

Why has no one heard of Edna Cranmer?

When a young writer is hired to put together the life of an unknown artist from Geelong, of all places, she thinks it will be just another quick commission paid for by a rich, grieving family obsessed with their own past.

But Edna Cranmer was not a privileged housewife with a paintbrush. Edna's work spans decades. Her soaring images of red dirt, close interiors and distant jungles have the potential to change the way the nation views itself.

Edna could have been an official war artist. Did she choose to hide herself away? Or were there people who didn't want her to be famous? As the biographer is pulled into Edna's life, she is confronted with the fact that how she tells Edna's past will affect her own future.

This elegant and engrossing novel explores how we value and celebrate art and artists' lives. *The Biographer's Lover* reminds us that all memory is an act of curation.

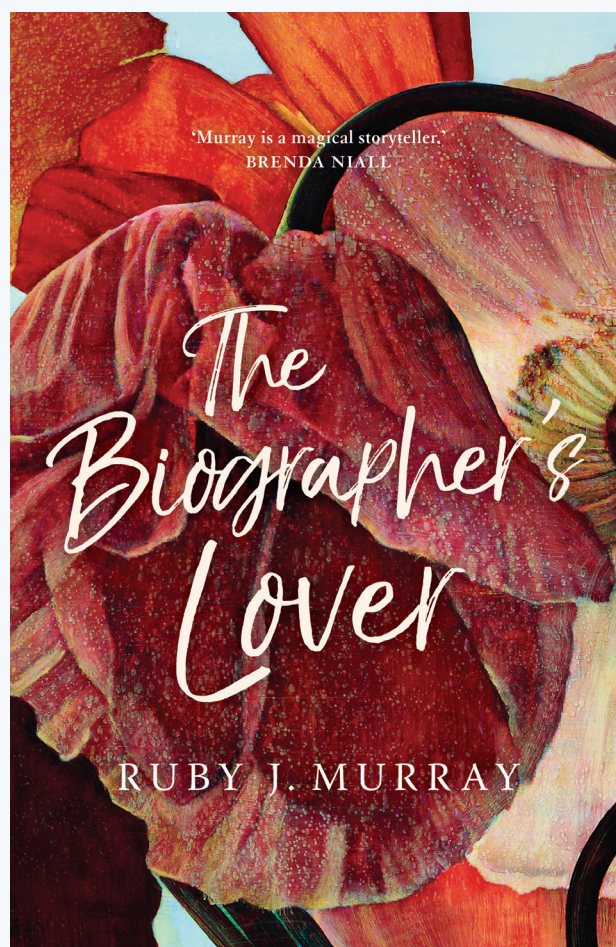
Praise

'A delight to read. Ruby J. Murray enters the mind of an ambitious young biographer to assemble a moving portrait of a mysterious Australian painter.' — CARRIE TIFFANY

'An accomplished and memorable novel about the gaps left in our inherited history, and the imperfect storytellers we entrust to fill them. Beautifully constructed.' — ABIGAIL ULMAN

About the author

Ruby J. Murray is a writer and journalist whose work has appeared in many publications, including the *Saturday Paper*, *Time Out*, *The Age*, *Meanjin*, *Dumbo Feather* and *Griffith Review*. She was selected as a SMH Best Young Novelist for her debut novel, *Running Dogs*, which was also shortlisted in the 2013 NSW Premier's Literary Awards.



TITLE: The Biographer's Lover

AUTHOR: Ruby J. Murray

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SUBJECT: Literary Fiction

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Questions for discussion

1. The structure of the book moves back and forth from the biography, in third person, to the biographer, in first person. Why do you think the author used this technique?
2. Edna's works are described vividly by the author all throughout the book so that we can imagine them in our mind's eye. Did your image of the paintings of the house at number 27 change when the significance of the address became clear? How?
3. When we are first introduced to Percy through the eyes of the biographer, we are presented with her memory of him in high school, where he rescues her from a sexual assault. What do you think of this idea of Percy as the hero? Does he live up to the hero status as the story unfolds?
4. On page 27, the biographer refers to the studio Max built Edna as: 'Her prison, or her sanctuary, depending on your point of view.' Why might it be both?
5. At the end of the book, the biographer takes us to the launch of the Australia Remembers campaign in 1994 (a real-life event), and Paul Keating's words, 'It has often been said that the best means of ensuring peace is to acknowledge history as it was. A country can never really be sure of its future until it is aware of its past.' How do these words resonate with the story we've just read? What has the biographer learned about history — both her own, the Cranmer family's, and Australia's?
6. Discuss Percy's desire to have the biographer tell his story, rather than his mother's. What does this say about the place of women's stories in our society and the Australian media's focus on sport above art? Do you think Percy had an ulterior motive?
7. Do you think the public has a right to know about the personal lives of public figures? If so, why, and when?
8. Thinking about biographies that you have read, what were the elements of the subject's life that were most interesting? Do you think the gender of the biographer affects the story? (i.e. how might a woman write the life of a woman differently to the way a man might do so?)
9. From the poem at the outset, and throughout the book, we are presented with representations of Geelong. Discuss how Geelong is described in the book, and what it tells us about the biographer, and perhaps even the author.
10. Paternity plays a big part in the stories of both Edna and her biographer. The biographer refers to her son, Immy, occasionally throughout the book, but Immy's heritage is not revealed until the end. Were you surprised by the way the story unfolded? A secret is hinted at throughout the book: what were you expecting it to be? And was the Cranmer family secret a surprise?
11. Is Victoria likeable? Could she and the biographer have been friends? What does their relationship say about each woman and their intentions?
12. On page 172 the biographer writes, 'The reburial would mark the beginning of the carnival of commemoration — it would give Australia a heart, they said. Crumbling memorials would be rebuilt; planes sent screaming overhead; Australian flags printed by the shipload in China.' Whenever we document history, we are re-writing it. How is war, and the remembrance of it, presented in the book? How has the Anzac myth changed over time? And how has our national memory of Australians at war been constructed?
13. Are there Australian artists, writers, or public figures you think should be re-written or rediscovered? If so, who, and why?