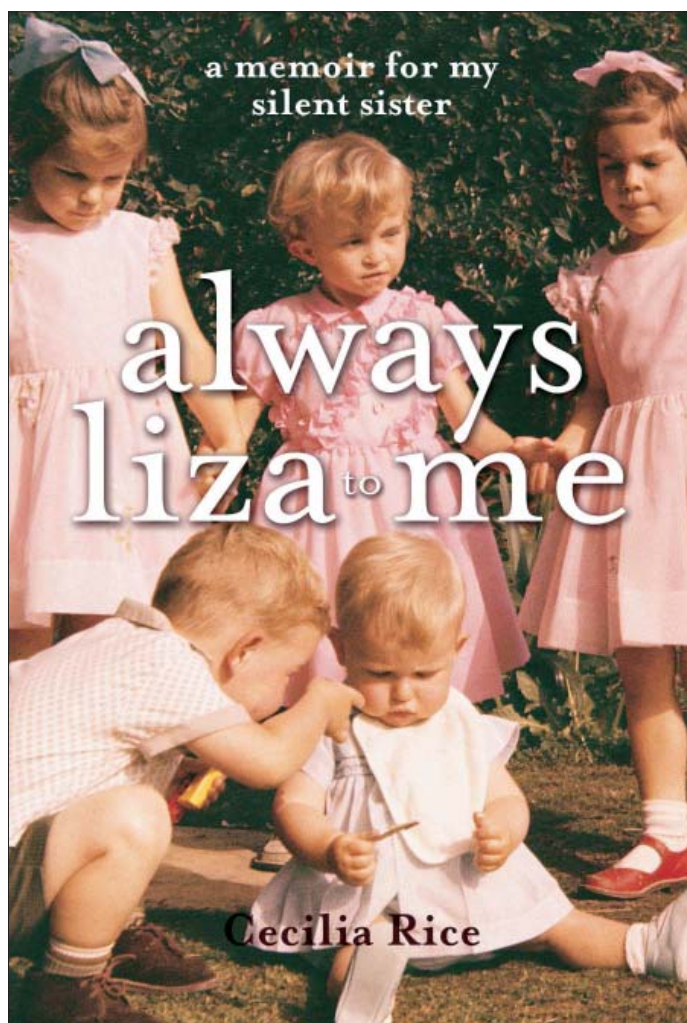


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the Book:

Liza is different. She can't talk. She can't walk properly. She's funny-looking and when she upsets people, which she almost always does, trying to bite or scratch them, we have to tell them it's not her fault; that she doesn't understand. Sometimes I don't understand either.

This is the story of the Rice family, and of Liza, their severely mentally-retarded eldest daughter. It's a story about what it was like growing up in a large, rowdy household forever in the thrall of this unknowable, unreachable child. When she was small Cecilia always believed Liza would not survive to adulthood, that she would never be her 'problem'. But she did survive.

With warmth, wisdom and humour, Cecilia reveals how her family came to think of 'the Liza problem' as theirs and how, through the passing of time and a mysterious process of acceptance and forgiveness, their fears and resentment turned into fierce loyalty and abiding love.

This is more than a memoir about the difficulties, challenges and rare rewards that come with caring for a disabled child. Eloquently told, *Always Liza to Me* is an uplifting chronicle of how even the most mixed-up of families can teach us great lessons and inspire great love.

About the Author:

Cecilia Rice grew up in a large family in the 1960s. At university she studied law and drama, majoring in film. Cecilia has practised as a solicitor in the private and public sectors and now works in broadcasting regulation and media policy. She has been an active member of a writing group and a book club. Along with other family members, she is on the Unit Management Committee of the Twain ward representing her disabled sister. Cecilia lives in Sydney with her husband and two sons.

Cecelia Rice on writing *Always Liza to Me*:

The book *Always Liza to Me* is a memoir about growing up in a large family in the 1960s with a severely intellectually disabled eldest sister - the impact she had on each of us, the struggle to be a 'normal' family, her problem behaviours, the difficult decision by our parents to send her to an institution, my need to distance myself from her as a young adult, her late diagnosis with a rare syndrome and our journey to acceptance and belonging.

My aim was to shine a light on a person who would be otherwise unknown and who is very different, but has in a strange way been a great influence. We don't always see the personal things in people's backgrounds, the things that shape us but lie beneath the surface. I hope that by telling our family's story I might reach other siblings in a similar situation and also allow people to identify with those who are - or who are close to someone who is - disabled. I believe that if we can empathize with people we are less inclined to abuse or mistreat them. If we know the stories of people who are of a different colour, race, religion, culture or level of disability we can treat them with some affection.

The book took quite a few years to write. I started over 10 years ago, while juggling a young family with my professional work as a lawyer and policy officer. I was prompted to write it because I was coming to terms with the fact that at that same stage of life, my parents had felt no option but to send a small child into permanent care. Probably for the first time I could also see some humour in our situation; as with any family there were many tricky but funny moments. Memories of childhood tumbled out but the more recent past was quite difficult to portray.

Because the book is about real people I tried to take great care to represent them fairly. I've also been aware that the central character, my sister Liza, cannot tell her story for herself. Initially I did not involve my siblings; I did not want to intrude on them by writing their stories but I also did not want to negotiate my own memories. After it was accepted for publication I re-worked the manuscript to take in their perspectives which was at times painful and cathartic for all of us. I asked each of my brothers and sisters for their accounts. I was surprised and moved by how differently Liza affected each of her siblings and I tried to capture that in the story, which made the writing process more complex. I am grateful to my family for their generous contributions and support.

Since the book has been released I've heard from all sorts of people who have related to the story in unexpected ways. I hope that it will appeal to people on different levels, not just those who have been close to someone with an illness, or a disability.

Discussion Questions:

- 📖 How relevant is Liza's diagnosis to the story of her condition and the choices made by her parents?
- 📖 How is 'truth' explored in the story and how is it affected by the experiences of each individual - can the different perspectives of Liza's parents and siblings be reconciled?
- 📖 Discuss the exploration of the ethics of termination vs. keeping a profoundly disabled child - does the narrator change her view on this? What are the options? Are there options that should be available to others that you might choose for yourself?
- 📖 The parents have to make a choice between their well children and Liza - how is that choice made and what if any is its continuing impact on them? On their children?
- 📖 The story deals with institutions - what are the changes in society's attitudes to institutions and can institutions ever be good? Should profoundly disabled children be kept with their families? If so what should be arranged for when parents pass?
- 📖 How does Liza emerge - is she neutral or a sympathetic character, are her rights respected, is she a victim? Has this story stepped over the line in terms of Liza's dignity? Given that she cannot tell her own story should her sister have told it for her?
- 📖 The story deals with memory - what are the contradictions in the memories of the characters and how does this affect their realities?
- 📖 In the story many of Liza's family members distance themselves from her for a long period, how do you feel

about this, do you think she is aware of it? Would you do the same? Would you be comfortable with a family member taking 'time out'?

☞ The characters have varying degrees of optimism - do you think this is innate or is it learned from their experience?

☞ Who is responsible for the profoundly disabled? Discuss whether this story changes your perspective on people with disabilities and their families.

Recommended Reading:

☞ The Kite Runner Khaled Hosseini

☞ Middlesex Jeffrey Eugenides

☞ Angela's Ashes Frank McCourt

☞ Riding the Bus with My Sister Rachel Simon

