

## ***My Candlelight Novel* by Joanne Horniman**

*My Candlelight Novel* uses the same setting and characters as Joanne Horniman's previous (award winning) novel *Secret Scribbled Notebooks*. In the earlier book the reader is introduced to the teenage Kate O'Farrell as her life story is interwoven through her diary-like musings in her notebooks and the descriptive chapters which tie the book together. In *My Candlelight Novel* we are told a separate family history through the eyes of Sophie O'Farrell – Kate's elder sister – a more mature young female.

*My Candlelight Novel* is the well constructed story of Sophie's first year of motherhood and her gradual realisation of how her early childhood memories fit her life history. Horniman's gentle style and vivid descriptions keep the reader interested as she weaves Sophie's recollections of her mother, the birth of her sister Kate and their abandonment at a run down boarding house in Lismore. The few main characters in *My Candlelight Novel* are deftly drawn. Samarkand is a haven for travellers, stray animals and a few memorable guests. The sisters have their own circles of friends but the relationship with each other and Lil as they reach young adulthood is of paramount importance in the book. Both sisters love reading and their explorations and discoveries and sharing of books and classic literature is a captivating aspect of the story.

The two sisters grow up at Samarkand; they are loved and well cared for. Sophie is old enough to realise that they have been left (again), but she is not old enough to question the legality of the arrangement. Lil takes in the two girls but when challenged she tells her son Alain "they are better off with me". The reader, like each sister, is asked to accept the situation as their story is told through Sophie's eyes however an explanation is implied through an image in a photo at the end of the book.

*My Candlelight Novel* and *Secret Scribbled Notebooks* are unique books but I was intrigued to reread parts of the first novel to compare the same vignettes retold differently through Sophie's memories. Joanne Horniman's strength as a writer is upheld as the books parallel almost the same time frame but the reader is compelled to connect with each sister in her own world within her own book. Sophie's voice is clearly that of a naive girl, almost finishing school, with a world of decisions before her. In *My Candlelight Novel*, Sophie's voice is of a woman coming to terms with her life as a young mother and her new understanding of her family history. Both books are enjoyable to read separately but rereading them together is also a treat.

**Rosalie Knox, Burgmann Anglican School, ACT**

*'This is a modern novel after all, and one after my own, curious, wayward heart'.*

While students may feel far removed from the experience of the protagonist Sophie, an early 20s single mother who we first meet pushing her daughter in stroller through the quiet streets of Lismore early one morning, her voice is strong through this novel and it is a worthy read. Having not read Horniman's previous book, *Secret Scribbled Notebooks*, meant I approached this novel fresh. However I feel I could have benefited from the link with the first story written from her younger sister's perspective – going away and reading this now might enhance my understanding of Sophie's story.

Reading this novel reminded me of some of Jeanette Winterson's work, another amazing writer students are often unexposed to. The language of Horniman's work is rich with vivid imagery and a great example of how to use language creatively for student's looking to push their composition skills in Stage 6 English. Central to this novel is Sophie's personal history – her relationship with her mother, her abandonment, her troubled childhood, her bond with sister Kate, her experiences of both lust and love, the birth of her child, going to university as a single mother and raising Hetty on her own. It is Sophie's acceptance of the past and the influence it has had on the woman she has become that links this novel well with journeys. With the HSC Area of Study changing to 'Belonging', most schools have more than likely moved 'Journeys' to the Preliminary course. It is in this course I feel students will get the most out of the novel, although a strong Year 10 class would also benefit from reading this. Sophie has a range of experiences, some students may relate to such as broken homes and single parents. Other experiences such as her description of her mother having sex with a man while she was 'asleep' in the backseat or her breasts leaking milk during a university lecture, they may find confronting or awkward reading. As always, teachers

know their classes and with the right class this book would be a valuable read. Sophie's love of literature in the novel and constant references to famous writers such as Oscar Wilde, Emily Bronte and Jane Austen may inspire students to explore these classic authors themselves.

Debates constantly surface, suggesting we should be exposing students to more Australian authors—Horniman fits into this category as a contemporary, Australian female writer. Her novel reflects how Australian literature continues to grow, taking on new forms to convey experiences of everyday Australians. Novels like this challenge students' thinking about their own values and attitudes, and give them a better arsenal of ideas for their own creative writing.

**Emma Stevenson, Port Hacking High School, NSW**

Joanne Horniman is an accomplished Australian writer who has received praise for her novels for teenagers and young adults. Joanne Horniman's latest story, *My Candlelight Novel*, is told from the point of view of 21 year old single mother Sophie O'Farrell and explores the themes of family, relationships and identity.

Sophie O'Farrell is a self-confessed "reading girl" and her story follows on from her sister's story in *Secret Scribbled Notebooks*. Perhaps due to not having read Joanne Horniman's previous novel, Sophie's story failed to grab me from the very start. Maybe if I had read *Secret Scribbled Notebooks*, I may have found the companion story of Sophie and the parallels with Kate's story more engaging.

*My Candlelight Novel* would appeal to young female readers, especially those who are already acquainted with Sophie's sister in *Secret Scribbled Notebooks*.

**Lauren Sims, NSW**

Following on from *Secret Scribbled Notebooks* we are taken into the world of Sophie O'Farrell, her life, loves, quirks, emotions and experiences. The beauty of this book is that whilst nothing hugely remarkable and out-of-the-ordinary happens, the reader can see the absolute wonder of every day life, how minutiae can absolutely be more fascinating than fantasy, how there is beauty in the ordinary. How simply by the act of living, magic can exist and be created. Every action in this book is deliberate and meaningful.

Sophie and her world become amazingly real to the reader, so much so you feel like you are almost reading the diary of a well-loved friend. The reader can empathise with the emotions and mood of the main character as she travels the path of young single mother to university student. At the conclusion of the novel the reader really begs the question "what comes next?", and as a reader...you really do want to know!

Any reader can not fail to feel along with Sophie, to see how her complex character deals with life, whatever it brings. There are places to laugh aloud, and moments to wipe the tears away, but what most strikes the reader is the truly honest and realistic nature of the story.

Suitable for capable (mainly) female readers aged 13 and up . . . this story would promote healthy and fervent discussion about futures, possibilities and dreams . . .

**Francesca Ann Massey, Queechy High School, TAS**

*My Candlelight Novel* is a companion to Joanne Horniman's award-winning *Secret Scribbled Notebooks*, giving the reader sometimes detailed glimpses of events over about eighteen months in twenty-one year old Sophie's life: her passion for Marcus, Hetty's conception, Sophie's first year as a single mother and her blossoming love for Becky. Throughout these snapshots Sophie, as narrator, reminisces about, and develops a greater understanding of, her childhood, especially Lil who rescued, housed and nurtured both Sophie and her sister Kate and who was given great love in return; their late mother and their absent father. Some of these recollections are sweetly painful, viewed from Sophie's now-adult perspective but others are as naïve and raw as when they first happened. Samarkand, the dilapidated guesthouse, "magical and other-worldly . . . sits on a threshold, a margin, a place of change", and which provided shelter for the girls and other travellers, is an important character in the novel along with many other significant places. For Sophie, a sense of her geographic location is essential as she wanders through Lismore at times of both happiness and sadness. Sophie finally attends university to study literature and throughout the book there are references to and quotes from mainly eighteenth and nineteenth century classics,

which I found interesting. Many students may be led to explore some of these authors and writings as well as explore the topic of the first of Sophie's assignments: that *writing can be female in style*. *My Candlelight Novel* could also be examined from this point of view.

This novel appears aimed at the young female readership and is unlikely to meet the needs of those who want action in their reading. Rather it is a well-written and gentle exploration of young love, sex, self-realisation and –awareness, and motherhood, and as such may have a limited readership.

**Maureen Mann, TAS**

Joanne Horniman's novel was an interesting read for me. I found it quite difficult to get into at first, I'm not sure why ... slow perhaps? But I learnt to enjoy, even appreciate the characters, Lil, Kate, Hetty, of course, Sophie and Becky Sharp.

As a 'single' parent myself, I found it refreshing to read about a young lady who 'enjoyed' her child.

Emerging friendships is a theme, as well as self-discovery. Her friendship with Becky seems to take a lesbian twist, and for this reason, I would recommend it to an upper Senior reader.

A good read.

**Linda Marx, Mountain District Christian School, VIC**

Awash with raw emotion, a passion for reading and literature and adoration of baby daughter, Hetty, *My Candlelight Novel* charts Sophie's journey into motherhood and beyond that, her life's journey on the long road of self-knowledge, enfolding the reader in a soul-searching novel of mother love and family, friendship, defencelessness, loss and regret, identity and belonging.

Opening the secret corners of Sophie's life 'of indolent voluptuousness interspersed with necessary drudgery', the mysteries of heart and home are revealed as this evocative tale unfolds, beautifully written in haunting and lyrical almost sensual prose. This is a companion novel to *Secret Scribbled Notebooks*, but can be read as a stand-alone title; Sophie, Kate, Hetty and Lil Ventura, the familiar characters and the almost mythical, magical guest house, Samarkand, and Lismore, the backdrop. Indeed the swirling waters of the river, especially in flood, bringing and taking away, are symbolic of the washing clean of vestiges of Sophie's 'old' life, the riverbank also the scene of her sexual encounters, misguided as they were, yet seemingly making her feel beautiful and wanted as an adolescent.

As a twenty-one year old restless single mother, looking for meaning in life through 'all the secret and unknowable things', Sophie returns to university, announcing she is 'sick of being spinsterish and bookish and alone'. Musician Marcus Innocenti, Hetty's father, is conspicuous by his absence from their lives. Herself an 'orphan', 'an abandoned reading girl', left with sister Kate in Lil's care many years before by Michael O'Farrell, after their mother had left, she now 'abandons' Hetty at the campus crèche. As such, Sophie's highly-charged emotional life rollercoaster is brilliantly captured, from the melancholy of dull despair, a young woman who does not care how she looks, untidy and unkempt, to the ecstatic, immersed in her reading, at one with the heroines, besotted with Hetty. Through self-talk, detailed significant episodes and observations, and recollections from the past, this poignant story explores the complexity of relationships, sexuality, our basic need for love, for roots, for self-awareness and understanding, acceptance, joy and contentment. Interesting, too, Sophie's response to newcomer, Maggie Tulliver, to Lawson, Phoebe and Becky Sharp, and the relationships which develop, Sophie confessing that she is 'not a genius at friendship'.

As a Teacher Librarian, I was particularly drawn to the book, Joanne Horniman cleverly crafting Sophie's love for all things literary, 'lost in a happiness of books', as an extra dimension within the story, reflecting much of human life and echoing my self same passion. Couched in the Classics, Sophie's exploration of female writers and 'feminine style', her references to the inspirational Jack Kerouac and her long term affair with the life and works of Oscar Wilde amongst others, Sophie's devotion to books and reading and her appreciation and interpretation of writers past and present holds this very original, different novel apart with its richness of writing and impressive level of intellectual enquiry. Worthy of inclusion in the secondary school library for individual recreational borrowing, *My Candlelight Novel* will appeal to a select mature upper secondary readership. In this book, as in previous novels *Mahalia* and *Little Wing*, and in the sister title, *Secret Scribbled Notebooks*, Horniman's hard-hitting and honest, yet compassionate and moving portrayal of both

the tender and the dark, of family dynamics, teenage pregnancy and single parenting demands attention and respect through closer study. The surprise twists as the novel reaches its denouement promise an engaging read, going full circle, the mysteries of the past now solved it seems, as Sophie yearns for the promise of 'happy ever after, love me forever'.

**Alison Cassell, QLD**