

Something More (Girlfriend Fiction 11) by Mo Johnson

In this book from the popular *Girlfriend* series, things appear to be crowding in on Isla McBay. After a year in Australia, Isla is still homesick for her life in Glasgow – best friend, Fiona, ex-boyfriend, Brian and even tough old Gran McGonnigle and her quirky observations. Nearly seventeen, she also fights constantly with sister, Terry, just eleven months younger and who has to be the first to try everything. Terry appears the stronger one, Isla nervous about the driving lessons her father forces on her, pool phobic and caught between mixed messages from classmates, the always rude Jack Ferris and ‘dreamboat’, Sam Doyle.

But there is ‘something more’, of far greater impact, when Terry confides to Isla that she may be pregnant.

Now under pressure, the story then moves to one of choices and consequences for Terry and Sean (the young father). Isla also battles with the truth about Jack’s father. Exposing him as The Fraud becomes her conscience-driven ‘something more’. Indeed, for both girls, ‘once you know something, you can’t unknow it’. Simply written and easy-to-read, light but not lightweight, *Something More* is both enjoyable and thought provoking, each chapter beginning with Gran McGonnigle’s home-spun wisdom to offer comfort. ‘Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed till it’s faced’, no doubt pertinent advice for the floundering Isla. That Mo Johnson herself is also Scottish and has made the transition to life here in Australia gives her a perfect ‘feel’ for the background of this story, the observations Isla makes about Australia and the empathetic portrayal of Isla’s unhappiness and homesickness, as documented through Jacks’ candid, soul-bearing, secret photo study of her. “Terry had blazed and dazzled in Australia while I had slowly shrivelled”, Isla reveals.

A novel of moving on and new beginnings, Johnson tackles the ‘big issues’ with honesty and insight as she sensitively explores the themes of growing up, identity and belonging, sibling rivalry and family relationships, friendship and romance, personal strength and resilience, responsibility and truth, against the backdrop of teen pregnancy. Isla learns valuable lessons in facing reality and embracing change through the example and courage of her parents, of Terry and of Jack, who tells her ‘you can be Australian and still be who you are’. The twist as the novel concludes also hints optimistically towards the future for Terry, with the opportunity for an engaging sequel.

Based on stories, ideas and real life experiences suggested by adolescent readers, *Girlfriend* titles are relevant and realistic. As such, *Something More* is recommended for inclusion in the secondary school library collection, sure to appeal to readers aged 13-16.

Alison Cassell, QLD

Isla is a 15 year old who has moved to Australia from Scotland with her parents and older sister Terry. Leaving Scotland and her supportive friends hurt Isla and she struggles with the break from Fiona, her closest friend. There’s only a certain amount that someone can express in an e-mail.

The sisters argue quite often in the family home and their dad in particular, is frustrated with their relationship. The girls, with certain topics in their verbal armoury, know just how to keep their dad out of their sisterly debates.

The new home desperately needed a clean out due to the mess left by the previous owners. Isla’s dad, in his rush to be ruthless in his clean up, gathers waste old toys that belonged to the family. An issue rises about a large fluffy toy mouse given to Terry by a boyfriend left behind in Scotland. Isla knew how much Terry loved this keepsake and saw an opportunity to have a dig. It was thrown into a box with all other clean up items and it was off to the Salvos. The pain of this action becomes more apparent later in the novel.

Isla’s father is a private eye for an insurance company and his role involves photographing potential injury related fraud situations. One of his case investigations clashes with the family of a boy that is desperately trying to win Isla’s affections. The intertwining of this sub plot with the story of Isla and Terry is effectively developed by the author.

At College, Isla is required to complete a photography assignment with her topic related to ‘People’. In her class is Sam, a freewheeling and apparently carefree young man who has a genuine feel for wonderful photographic settings and subjects. Isla appears interested in Sam but the reciprocation of feelings becomes an issue. Unable to be his partner with the assignment, Isla joins Jack Ferris in this major academic task. Feelings grow between the two of them and Isla’s interest in Sam wanes.

Little does Isla know that Sam has been carefully developing a stunning thematic photographic study of her. At home Terry and Isla cross swords once again but it is due to Terry's distress about her favourite soft toy, the mouse that was taken away to the Salvos. The plot develops and it is uncovered that Terry believes that she has become pregnant at 16 to Sean, the brother of a rather egotistical teen girl at school with Isla. Tensions soar as Chinese whispers pass around the secondary school's social networks.

The significance of the stuffed toy mouse then enters the plot. Also, Jack Ferris gradually becomes more affectionate to Isla and he helps with the pregnancy situation by being supportive to Isla. The meeting place at 'Our Hill' becomes very important.

Finally, both sets of parents are informed of their children's predicament and plans are put into place in order to tackle the situation.

Back at Isla and Terry's home after the emotional parent meeting, Terry and Isla's father adds *something more*. Talk about history repeating itself!

Trevor Dangerfield, Elisabeth Murdoch College, Vic

Something More is a book which clearly signposts its target audience. The cover shows a pretty young woman, a light, 'summery' colour scheme, and is one of the *Girlfriend Fiction* range. It has a straightforward appeal for that audience, with a reading age of probably around 12 years. I enjoyed it, and the addition of Gran McGonigle's wise sayings at the start of each chapter probably broadens the age range that this book would appeal to—many women do like to discover pithy sayings to attach weight to.

Isla, along with her family, is a Scottish migrant to Australia, and settling in to her new country is not a totally smooth transition. Tensions between Isla and the other girls at school, one in particular, are handled realistically, and the challenges of growing up are introduced naturally as part of the narrative flow. Learning to drive is a theme which will resonate with the book's young audience, along with the theme of relationships with parents and siblings.

The setting is the ordinary world of home, the family, school. There is also the complication, the love story, the boy who is the wrong boy, problems of body image, and the mix up of the photographs. The real complication though belongs not to the protagonist, but to her sister; and the reaction of Isla's parents is everything a young girl could hope for.

As a teacher I appreciated the detailed way the author realised Isla's art project, and the art work of her classmates. It seemed quite tangible, and work that I would like to see! It also connected with the lives of the teenagers in meaningful ways.

Helen Wilde, SA

Isla McBay (somehow the name evokes images of 'Summer Bay'!) emigrates with her family to the east coast of Australia. Along with the clichéd love story Isla has to grow up quickly when her sister comes to her with a problem that makes all of her own petty distractions seem irrelevant.

I have to admit, I could not see a lot of value in this text in the classroom. The plot is weak and the issues that could redeem the story – Terry's pregnancy and the cultural shift – are not dealt with in a way that invites serious discussion. Isla's love story is the focus of the novel, and I found her self-absorption rather annoying. If anything, the novel could be suggested a light reading in a secular lower-secondary school, although it has limited appeal in that it definitely falls under the genre of 'chick-lit.' It may be a library addition to encourage reluctant girl readers. The cover is attractive and, as part of the 'Girlfriend Fiction' series, may appeal to girls who love TV shows such as 'Home and Away.'

From a Christian school perspective, the redeeming feature of this novel is Isla's care and concern for her sister Terry, as well as the reaction of their parents. It is encouraging to see a rational parental response to teen pregnancy rather than the 'teens at odds with parents' model.' That part, at least, may engender some valuable discussion.

Rosemary Monger, Swan Christian College, WA

I really liked Mo Johnson's *Something More*. It is a really relevant story that could have easily been taken from any number of real life situations.

Isla McBay leaves Scotland as a teenager, along with her sister and parents, for sunny Australia. She has to leave friends behind and develop new friendships. Isla has a crush on Sam, a boy at school and is unaware of the quality of friendship she has in Jack, an annoying, yet true friend.

Isla is dealing with relocation, displacement, major cultural and social adjustments and to top it all off, her little sister gets pregnant. Isla and her sister argue like many sisters, but Isla really comes through for Terry when she is most needed. Despite their trepidation at telling their parents about the pregnancy, they are surprisingly understanding.

I think that *Something More* is a good read for any teenager who is relocating, or struggling with friendships, or facing a major issue like pregnancy. It's a light read, quite interesting but really gets across the idea that things will be ok, that family is really important.

I liked the book and recommend it for any teenager. It's quite wholesome.

Linda Searby, Mountain District Christian School, Vic