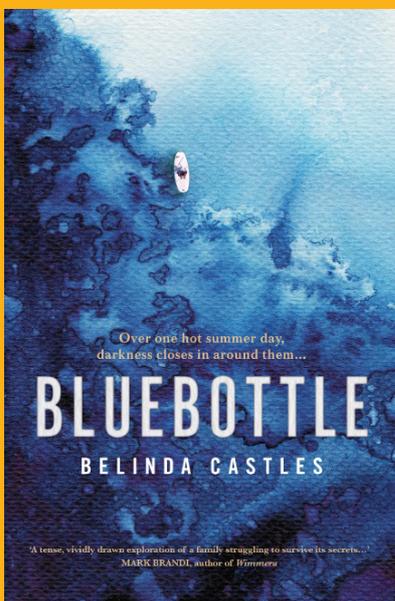




ALLEN & UNWIN'S

Book Group Guide

Conversation Starters



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Welcome to

Allen & Unwin's Book Group Guide

for *Bluebottle* by Belinda Castles

Book, food & drink pairings

Books should never be read, or discussed on an empty stomach! And while wine, cheese and crackers are always a sure thing, if you're looking for something a little different you might want to consider resurrecting some favourite snacks from your childhood. **Bluebottle** is very much about how what happens to us as children informs and influences the adults we become. Perhaps each member could channel their inner child bring a plate?

About the book

'As he tilted the blinds she saw her mother in her tennis whites, standing at the kitchen bench, staring out into the dark bushland that bordered their houses. That was what Tricia did these days, looked into the bush as though it would attack one of them.'

On a sweltering day in a cliff-top beach shack, Jack and Lou Bright grow suspicious about the behaviour of their charismatic, unpredictable father, Charlie. A girl they know has disappeared, and as the day unfolds, Jack's eruptions of panic, Lou's sultry rebellions and their little sister Phoebe's attention-seeking push the family towards revelation.

Twenty years later, the Bright children have remained close to the cliff edges, russet sand and moody ocean of their childhood. Behind the beautiful surfaces of their daily lives lies the difficult landscape of their past, always threatening to break through. And then, one night in late summer, they return to the house on the cliff...

Gripping and evocative, *Bluebottle* is a story of a family bound by an inescapable past, from the award-winning author of *The River Baptists* and *Hannah and Emil*.

'A tense, vividly drawn exploration of a family struggling to survive its secrets...' **Mark Brandi, author of *Wimmera***



About the author

Belinda Castles won the Australian/Vogel's literary award for ***The River Baptists*** in 2006 and was one of the Sydney Morning Herald's Best Young Novelists for 2008. Her next novel, ***Hannah & Emil***, won the Asher Literary Award for 2012-13. She has recently returned from teaching in the UK and is currently a lecturer in creative writing at the University of Sydney.

She lives with her husband and daughters on the Northern Beaches of Sydney.

A note from the author

How did the idea for your novel originate?

I began to write the novel when a few different things that were floating around in my head came together. A few years ago there was a fair bit of material circulating about ‘ordinary psychopaths’. I had read Jon Ronson’s *The Psychopath Test*, and was intrigued by the idea that a reasonable percentage of the population have psychopathic tendencies, that there are plenty of people about the place, doing well at work, loved by their families, who are manipulative, remorseless, who might have a kind of coldness running in their veins. Around this time I also saw on SBS’s Insight programme a discussion with an American neuroscientist who, scanning his own brain, found evidence of psychopathy, and that actually, this made sense to him. He talked about the way he liked to do extreme things with his kids, throwing them in dangerous waters, engaging them in risky games, about how he could be manipulative, lacking in empathy. In the end, I was interested less in ‘psychopaths among us’ than a picture I was forming of a particular kind of father, someone exciting, whose attention was worth having, but who you wondered about, who had a scary edge.

I’d also been thinking about the lost children in Australian history, the way a young person’s disappearance lays a dark shadow beneath the images of a sunny suburban culture. I felt too the way that the bush is everywhere in Sydney in the areas I’m familiar with, around the Northern Beaches and up towards the Hawkesbury, and how it is always exhilarating to be there, away from the streets, but how there is a sense of human threat, of secrets and violence, that the gaps between the streets are the sort of places where people are hidden and found.

Conversation starters

- The author set the novel in mainly in one place, the beach house and its surrounds, and the defining events take place in a short space of time. Do you think this adds to the intensity of the story?
- How much of a role do you think the beach house and the surrounding landscape plays in the novel? Are they characters in their own right?
- Why do you think the Bright family continues to live in the area?
- **Page 21:** Jack: ‘Charlie loved her (Lou) best, he showed them every day. They stepped around this fact of their lives as though they didn’t know. Even Phoebe never said it aloud.’ What do you think it would feel like to live in a family where this statement was a reality?
- What kind of person do you think Charlie is?
- Do you think Jack’s at times crippling anxiety is an effect of his father’s behaviour?
- **Page 91:** Jack: ‘He’s just having one of his days.’ Lou: ‘Well, okay fabulous. Why do we have to put up with it? Why does mum just sit there?’ Jack: ‘I sometimes wonder if he just, you know, needs a bit of help.’ From an outsider’s perspective, much of Charlie’s erratic behaviour has the hallmarks of manic depression or bipolar disorder. Do you think he had an undiagnosed mental illness?
- **Page 34:** Tricia: ‘Lou, come on. Don’t stir the pot. We’ll just tread carefully for a day or two and he’ll be back on form. Take an interest in his plans. That’ll do the



trick.’ How culpable do you think Tricia was in enabling Charlie’s behaviour? What part, if any do you think she played in events?

- ☞ Is she a good mother? Do you find her a sympathetic character?
- ☞ The ownership of the ‘M’ necklace is a crucial plot point in how the story develops. Despite Tricia explaining its provenance, over the years both Jack and Lou continue to doubt Charlie’s innocence. Do you think they were justified?
- ☞ The nature of Charlie’s disappearance/absence remains a mystery to the reader right until the end. When you were reading *Bluebottle* how did you think it would end? How did the actual ending compare to your prediction?
- ☞ What alternate endings would you consider as plausible given the build-up of tension?

Just for fun

- ☞ Pick out a passage that strikes you as particularly moving or interesting and read it to the group.
- ☞ If you could speak with any character from the novel, who would it be and why?
- ☞ What three questions would you ask them?
- ☞ Who would you cast in a movie adaptation of *Bluebottle*?

If you liked this book

May we suggest the following?

- ☞ *The River Baptists* by Belinda Castles
- ☞ *Sign* by Colin Dray
- ☞ *Wimmera* by Mark Brandi