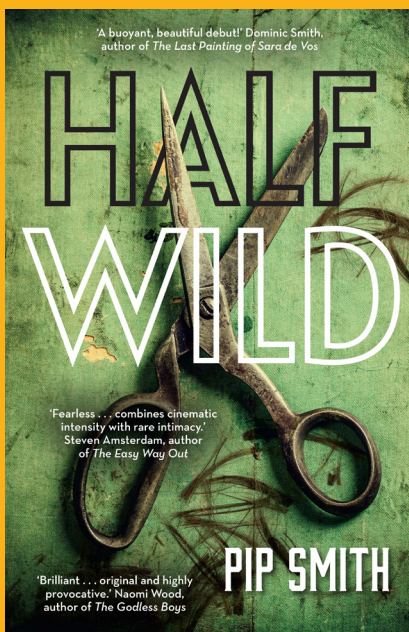




ALLEN & UNWIN'S

Book Group Guide

Conversation Starters



Contents

About the book	2
Conversation starters	2
Just for fun	3
A note from the author	3
About the author	4
Praise	4
Watch the book trailer	5
If you like this ...	5

Never talk about books on an empty stomach! *Half Wild* book discussions go nicely with a glass of wine, cheese and crackers. Or perhaps you'd like to channel Harry Crawford and have a glass of beer and a meat pie!

About the Book

Based on the true lives of Eugenia Falleni, *Half Wild* is Pip Smith's dazzling debut novel.

Sydney, 1938. After being hit by a car on Oxford Street, sixty-three-year-old Jean Ford lies in a coma in Sydney Hospital. Doctors talk across her body, nurses jab her in the arm with morphine, detectives arrive to take her fingerprints. She has £100 in her pocket, but no identification. Memories come back to her—a murder trial, a life in prison—but with each prick of the needle her memories begin to shift.

Wellington, 1885. Tally Ho doesn't need to go to school because she is going to be a fisherman or a cart driver or a butcher boy like Harry Crawford. Wellington is her town and she makes up the rules. Papà takes her fishing, Nonno teaches her how to jump fences on his horse Geronimo—life gallops on the way it should, until a brother, baby William, is born. 'Go and play with your sisters,' Papà says, but wearing dresses and sipping tea is not the life for Tally Ho. Taking the advice of her hero, Harry Crawford, she runs away.

Sydney, 1917. The burned body of a woman is discovered on the banks of the Lane Cove River. Was she a mad woman? A drunk who'd accidentally set herself on fire? Nobody knows, until—three years later—a tailor's apprentice tells police that his mother went missing that same weekend, and that his stepfather, Harry Crawford, is not who he seems to be. Who, then, is he?

Conversation Starters ...

- How does the author's writing style in the first part of the book, when Eugenia/Harry is a girl, contrast with the later sections? Do the shifts in perspective and tone affect your emotional response to Eugenia/Harry?
- What do you think the challenges and freedoms of writing a fictionalised account of real events and people might be?
- The author weaves primary source documents from the period, as well as imagined ones into the narrative. Do you think this a successful technique?
- The author invented her own newspaper article for the book. Can you pick the one that isn't real?
- How difficult do you think it would have been for a woman to identify and live as a man in the early twentieth century?

- Do you think Eugenia/Harry had any hope of receiving a fair trial for the murder of Annie Birkett?

Just for fun...

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

A note from the author

What was the inspiration behind your novel?

In 2005, Sydney's Justice & Police Museum hosted *City of Shadows*, an exhibition of early twentieth-century police photographs recovered from a flooded warehouse. Many of the accompanying files that would have given the photographs context had been lost, so they were mostly selected for their provocative compositions, the half-stories they told and the eerie, alter-Sydney they invoked.

Visiting the exhibition was like witnessing a séance. From the walls of the museum, forgotten ghosts of the city gazed through us. For many of the photographs' subjects, this would have been the only time in their lives they'd been photographed, and so—despite the trauma of their recent arrest—they'd made the most of it, dressing in their best clothes, possibly performing their role as criminal for a camera associated with the burgeoning popular art form of the movies. Even in the mugshots we did not see the deadpan expressions we have come to expect; instead we saw emotion—either performed, or caught when the subject was off guard.

I left the exhibition with the accompanying book, and later poured over the photographs for traces of suburbs I thought I knew. One picture in particular captured my attention: a mugshot of a man in a cheap suit and tie, his short hair combed into a sideways part. What struck me most was the melancholy that haunted the man's eyes. He seemed to be performing his normalcy, not his criminality, and only just managing to hold himself together.

I flipped to the back of the book to read a brief footnote:

Eugenie Falleni, 1920, Central cells. When hotel cleaner 'Harry Leon Crawford' was arrested and charged with the murder of his wife three years earlier, he was revealed to be in fact Eugenie Falleni—a woman and mother who had been passing as a male since 1899 ...



Turning back to the portrait of the sad man, his face—or my perception of his face—morphed into that of a woman's. But in the moment that he, the sad man, morphed into she, the 'cross-dressing murderer', I have to admit that the thrill I felt was associated with my own jolt in perception, like the moment Escher's black birds turn into white birds, flying in the opposite direction.

The portrait was of an indeterminate person: an unstable man and a reluctant woman at the same time. One look at Falleni's harrowed expression, however, and the thrill quickly turned into a chill.

What would it have been like, to cause these jolts in perception? What would it be like to live your life oscillating between the different roles others expected to see?

Read more: <http://www.pipsmith.net/further-reading/>

About the Author

Pip is a writer of songs, poems and stories. Her first poetry collection, *Too Close for Comfort* (SUP), won the Helen Ann Bell Award in 2013. She ran the monthly writing event Penguin Plays Rough, for which she published and edited the multimedia anthology, *The Penguin Plays Rough Book of Short Stories*. She was a Faber Academy Writing a Novel scholarship recipient, has been a co-director of the National Young Writers' Festival, and holds a doctorate in creative arts from Western Sydney University. She is one quarter of garage-punk band Imperial Broads and works in a bookshop.

Praise

Brilliant ... original and highly provocative.' **Naomi Wood**, author of *The Godless Boys*

'Smith's writing is lucid and lovely: it's fearless—resonant with the verve of another century and steadily surprising.' **Steven Amsterdam**, author of *The Easy Way Out*

'A richly imagined and voiced novel that floats across time, and through the shifting sands of identity. A buoyant, beautiful debut!' **Dominic Smith**, author of *The Last Painting of Sarah De Vos*

'Pip Smith has always been an agent of change. With her powerful debut novel, *Half Wild*, she will surely change the way we read, write, think and talk about Australian fiction.' **Sam Twyford-Moore**, host of The Rereaders podcast and former director of the Emerging Writers' Festival

'*Half Wild* is a triumph of novelistic paradox—a quixotic portrayal of a subject whose life is a lesson in "becoming". At the hybrid heart of this work is an impassioned address to the Nietzschean enigma: "how one becomes what one is". This debut signifies the taming of an immense and soaring imagination in the figure of Pip Smith, who—with cool command of form—is here both the falcon and the falconer.' **Luke Carman**, author of *An Elegant Young Man*



'Pip Smith is a writer full to the brim with brio and vim. Her fiction leaves nothing behind: every sentence wrings language for its emotional and aesthetic possibilities. *Half Wild* is a remarkable work of empathy: Smith has committed herself entirely to the imaginative act, plonking us right down into the shoes, skin and mind of a person who shed these same things time and again. We live in an era where the reinvention of self is common, and even encouraged; *Half Wild* reveals to us in dynamic prose that these concerns are timeless and universal, that one of history's most exceptional chameleons could have been you, me or anyone we know.' **Sam Cooney**, editor of *The Lifted Brow*

Watch the book trailer



If you liked this book ...

May we suggest the following?

- *Bright and Distant Shores*, by Dominic Smith
- *The Danish Girl*, by David Ebershoff
- *Orlando*, by Virginia Woolf
- *Eugenia*, by Mark Tedeschi
- *Eugenia: A Man*, by Suzanne Falkiner