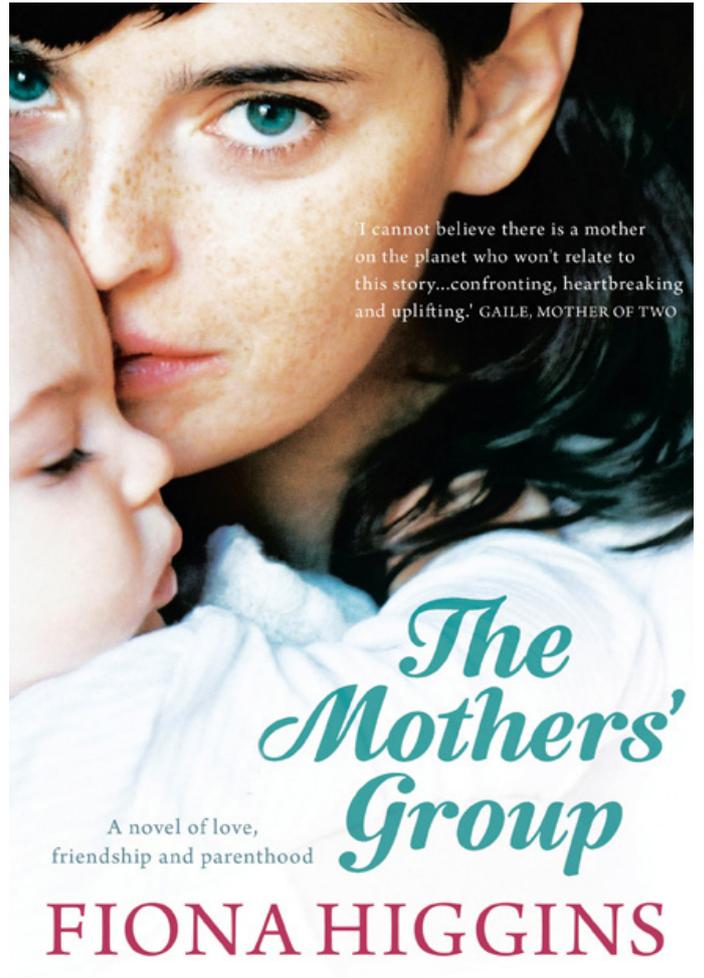


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

All those things no one ever tells you about motherhood. It's like secret mothers' business. Lots of my friends had babies before me, but not one of them ever told me it would be this hard...It's like a code of silence.

The Mothers' Group tells the story of six very different women who agree to regularly meet soon after the births of their babies. Set during the first crucial year of their babies' lives, *The Mothers' Group* tracks the women's individual journeys—and the group's collective one—as they navigate birth and motherhood as well as the shifting ground of their relationships with their partners. Each woman strives in her own way to become the mother she wants to be, and finds herself becoming increasingly reliant on the friendship and support of the members of the mothers' group. Until one day an unthinkable shocking event changes everything, testing their bonds and revealing closely held secrets that threaten to shatter their lives.

The Mothers' Group is an unflinching and compelling portrait of the modern family in all its complexity and intensity: love, sex and marriage and all the joys and tensions of raising children in an increasingly complicated world. Moving, provocative, tender and utterly gripping, *The Mothers' Group* will draw you in and never let you go.

About the author

Fiona Higgins lives in Sydney and is a mother to three children under five. She has a career in philanthropy and social investment, helping high net worth individuals and families make strategic giving decisions for the benefit of the community. She lived in Indonesia for a year in 1997 after completing her university studies and became an Indonesian translator, before moving to rural Australia and getting married in 2005. She has been involved in the non-profit sector for 15 years, and currently serves on a number of boards including the Caledonia Foundation and the Royal Agricultural Society Foundation of NSW.

Her first book, *Love in the Age of Drought*, is a memoir about falling in love with a farmer, leaving Sydney and moving to rural Queensland. *The Mothers' Group* is her first novel.

Author, Fiona Higgins, on writing *The Mothers' Group*

I wrote most of this book during a year of severe sleep-deprivation—I was in quite a dark place when I wrote it, and it just tumbled out of me. The characters practically wrote themselves after they just turned up and began to live inside my head.

As I grappled with this very difficult period, I found I wanted to write some unsanitised stories of motherhood, particularly early motherhood, as an alternative reference point for women who are bombarded with idealised images and stories of how they are supposed to feel about motherhood— i.e. an experience characterised by joy, boundless love, and a seamless and natural bonding process that unfolds organically between themselves and their babies, and also with their husbands and partners.

While this may well be the experience of first-time motherhood for some women, I suspect that many women feel a lot more challenged by, and ambivalent about, motherhood than many of us let on. Not all the time, of course. And not necessarily at the expense of all the good feelings that come with motherhood—that delightful state of being totally enamoured with your baby. But enough to make me wonder why we shy away from looking more closely at the less-comfortable feelings we sometimes have about motherhood.

I wanted specifically to explore what happens to women in terms of their identities, their relationships with their spouses/partners and others around them, how they transition (or fail to transition) from what they were pre-children (i.e. active agents in the world, often with independent careers, intact bodies and sexual identities) to what they are post-children, when all of this can change radically.

I wanted to explore these themes in the context of a mothers' group, where a bunch of women are basically foisted on one another during a particularly overwhelming and transformative time of their lives, with nothing in common apart from their mutual motherhood. The mothers' group becomes the crucible for their individual and collective challenges.

Interestingly, all of the women in this book are not me, yet they reflect aspects of my mothering experience, and some of them could easily have been me, had the 'sliding doors' of life been different.

Reviews & Quotes

'... it has that capacity that good social novels should have of creating meaning and intensity from what on the surface may appear to be ordinary ... Higgins looks at the difficult moment of becoming parents with an unflinching but powerful humanity.' - *The Weekend Australian*

'Like its Allen & Unwin stablemate, *The Slap*, *The Mothers' Group* is a top-shelf novel about contemporary Australian life.' - *The Weekend Australian*

'... an enthralling read. Be prepared to burn the midnight oil, as it is impossible to put down.' - *Sunday Herald Sun*, 4 ½ stars

'... compelling and memorable ... There is so much to love in this first novel by local author Fiona Higgins.' - *Manly Daily*, 5 stars

'*The Mothers' Group* is an unflinching and compelling portrait of the modern family.' - *Dubbo Weekender*

'*The Mothers' Group* provides enough 'aha' moments of recognition to make even the most sleep-deprived mum smile. And I should know: I read it while juggling my three-month-old daughter.' - *Bookseller & Publisher*,

'... a gripping read, as you really connect with each character in the story. ... I read the first three-quarters of the book without putting it down.' - *Mindfood*, April Book of the Month

'This heartfelt debut novel explores how challenging and bewildering motherhood can be—from postnatal depression and incontinence to loss of sexual desire—and how much empathy, reassurance and wisdom can be found in the shared experience of a support group.' - *Better Homes & Gardens*

For discussion

- ☞ How does the shifting point of view shape your experience of *The Mothers' Group*? Which of the characters did you most identify with? Which of the characters most irked you?
- ☞ In his review for *The Weekend Australian*, Ed Wright says: 'I was surprised by the way my sympathies were shaped and reshaped as the story progressed towards its heartbreaking climax.' Did you experience this shaping and reshaping? How did the characters' points of view define your perceptions of the other characters?
- ☞ The women of *The Mothers' Group* are very different people who are thrown together to form a community. Discuss their relationships within the group. What is each character bringing to, and taking from, the group?
- ☞ How do their relationships with partners and family change after the birth of a child? How is their sense of self altered?
- ☞ The review in the *Sydney Morning Herald* says that Fiona Higgins does 'an excellent job of showing an accident can happen out of nowhere'. Do you agree? Did it come out of nowhere?
- ☞ The incident looks at the complexities of responsibility and blame. Discuss your reactions and your feelings to this event.
- ☞ If you were in this mothers' group, could you have supported Cara and Miranda after the tragic event?
- ☞ Made has a spiritual dimension that the other characters don't. What is her role in the novel? What does she reflect back to readers about the broadness of life, motherhood and happiness?
- ☞ What do you think *The Mothers' Group* says about contemporary Australian life and 'modern motherhood'?
- ☞ 'In the departure lounge, Cara looked out the vast window at the patchwork of runways beyond. Planes landing and taking off with routine monotony; thousands of bodies in motion, bound for foreign lands. This is life, she thought. Millions of arrivals and departures without end.' What do you think the future holds for Cara, and the other mothers?
- ☞ The final line of the novel reads: 'Not perfect, but whole.' What does this mean for the characters? What does this mean for you?

Suggested further reading

The Slap by Christos Tsiolkas

The Grief of Others by Leah Hager Cohen

Freeing Grace by Charity Norman

Good to a Fault by Marina Endicott