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## Women's Fiction M-O

### **Memory Tree, The**

**Author: Tess Evans**

**Allen & Unwin RRP \$27.99**

**Review: Monique Mulligan**

*"I regard her, my poor aunt Sealie, as she remembers her youthful self and weeps. To be honest, I have more to weep about than she does, but I do pity her. How could I not?"*

The long-term and devastating impact of a mother's untimely death on a family is explored with acute perception and compassion in Tess Evans' *The Memory Tree*. The novel spans a 40-year period as Hal and his children, Zav and Sealie, try but fail to move forward from a tragedy that has bound them in ways they do not understand.

When Paulina dies mid-dance, she leaves 12-year-old Zav and 7-year-old Sealie with their loving but unstable father, Hal. The grieving family decides to plant a tree in her memory - a magnolia which, growing along with the children, offers a special place where secrets are whispered and feelings can be confessed.

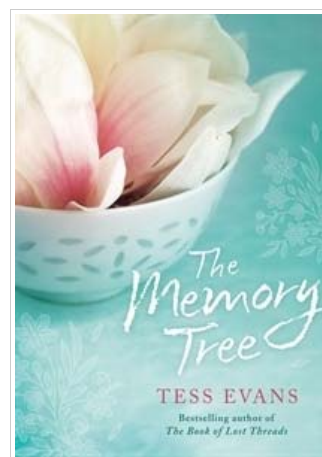
Tormented by confusing and contradictory voices, Hal seeks salvation; he thinks he has the answer when he meets Pastor Moses B. Washbourne, founder of the Church of the Divine Conflagration, but has no idea that his son is crying out for his attention. Zav sees conscription to Vietnam as his escape, even though it means leaving behind his young wife and baby daughter, while Sealie does her best to keep everything together, even though it means sacrificing her own dreams.

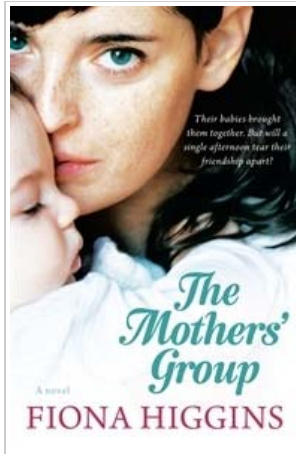
The story is narrated by a young family relative whose identity is not made known until late in the novel; it's a bittersweet twist. Through this narrative technique, insight is provided into each of the key characters' thoughts, which are at times frustrating, disturbing and heartbreaking. It also adds deep sensitivity to and removes judgment from the issue of mental illness and its impact.

The author's decision to span the novel over 40 years - and the section names - could spark a whole essay. I'll just say that is reminiscent of the 40-year biblical journey in the desert - each of the characters are lost in the wilderness, whatever that means for them. They are all wandering but in some way they will find their Promised Land. To say more would be to give away too much.

*The Memory Tree* has just the right amount of tension to keep things moving; it's poignant, emotive and insightful. Highly recommended.

Available from good bookstores and Allen & Unwin.





## Mothers' Group, The

Author: Fiona Higgins

Allen & Unwin RRP \$29.99

Review: Monique Mulligan

WHEN Bear was born, I didn't join a mothers' group. I remember it was encouraged, but the lack of car meant I couldn't commit to anything regular. Once, not longer after the birth, I met with a mum from my pre-birth class. I don't remember her name, but I do remember the shared camaraderie we felt when a lady in the cafe took out her purse, dropped a tampon and kicked it towards us. What the? I mean, we clearly had newborns in our arms, so it could hardly be ours. We (childishly) kicked it back and dissolved in floods of laughter over milkshakes.

When Monkey was born, I pushed a double stroller several kilometres away to a playgroup. I had just moved interstate and it was the first time I had really bonded with other mothers. I

do remember enjoying it for the most part, although the mother I became closest to shared my frustration that the only conversation seemed to be about tantrums, poos, vomiting and slack husbands. I moved interstate again when Monkey was nine months, found another playgroup and started again. There I met another like-minded friend, who is still my friend today, and although her son was older, the friendship and support we shared was priceless. So were the laughs!

My sons are teenagers now, so my first thoughts when I received a copy of *The Mothers' Group* was that it was bound to bring back a lot of memories: the first smile, the first word, the first solid food...the first tantrum... Yes, this book took me on that trip down memory lane. How I remember the time Bear vomited through his nose, Monkey's night terrors, Bear's reluctance to sleep through the night, Monkey's anger when he crawled backwards instead of forwards. And how I remember the confusion I felt at times, the helplessness when I simply didn't know what to do - because, as all "experienced" parents know, there are few absolutes when it comes to bringing up a little person.

*The Mothers' Group* piqued my interest when it crossed my desk, and held it to the end. It's a terrifically readable novel that engages the reader through the eyes of six very different women. The plot focuses on a mothers' group, beginning with the women tiptoeing towards friendship, despite their different experiences, backgrounds and parenting styles. Over the first year of their babies' lives, they support each other through the challenges of motherhood and shifting relationships with their partners. But these bonds are tested when tragedy strikes.

Author Fiona Higgins has delivered a compelling insight to the modern family with all its complications and the increasing lack of simplicity. Honest and perceptive, *The Mothers' Group* is the kind of book that will make the reader forget that dinner needs to be cooked. It's hard to put down because it's just so *real*. All of the characters are flawed, but trying hard to be the parents - and women - they want to be (or think they should be). All of them have insecurities and doubts, but each of them has something to offer the other women in the group, even if at first it doesn't appear to be the case. I almost felt part of the group, getting to know them and sharing their inner thoughts, feeling their pain, frustration and confusion.

For mothers of all ages, all experience - read this. I'm sure you will get something out of it, whether it's reassurance or remembrance. It's a book I will read again and I'm looking forward to reading more from Higgins.

Available from good bookstores and Allen & Unwin.

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