

# Australian Gospel

## Book Club Notes

### Book description

There is much about Lech Blaine's brilliant book that makes it feel more like fiction than fact. There are the unlikely events, like kidnappings and celebrity encounters, that really happened. There are the uncanny parallels between contrasting characters who are real people. There are the heartwarming stories of redemption and success that ring true because they are. There's even a resurrection, with a man coming back to life after death.

*Australian Gospel* is a reconstruction of a past that its author did not fully experience, but nonetheless as true as history can be. Blaine read letters, diaries, manifestos. Official files, transcripts and emails. He 'walked in the shoes of the main characters. [He] tried to see what they saw and feel what they felt (p. 3).

And so he came to four 'gospels' according to Michael and Mary; Tom and Lenore. Each had their own truth about the children who were respectively their biological and fostered kids. They each had their own ways of experiencing and interpreting the world. Their attitudes and beliefs were wildly varying.

Blaine goes back to the parents' own childhoods, finding abandonment, loss and trauma in all. So how did Michael and Mary end up being so different to Tom and Lenore? How did Tom and Lenore



create their loved and loving family when there was so much loss in their pasts? Love is never a cure-all in *Australian Gospel*, and it is not always a force for good. But in its best form, it is wonderful.

What do we get from our families, Blaine asks. What gets passed down? What are our inheritances? Blaine also asks us to question a broader 'Australian gospel' – stories Australians tell about ourselves and our identities.

---

**Lech Blaine** is the author of the memoir *Car Crash* and the Quarterly Essays *Top Blokes* and *Bad Cop*. He was the 2023 Charles Perkins Centre writer in residence. His writing has appeared in *Good Weekend*, *Griffith Review*, *The Guardian* and *The Monthly*. His most recent book is *Australian Gospel*.

Biography & Memoir  
Imprint: Black Inc  
ISBN: 9781760643973  
RRP: AU\$36.99  
PB (234 x 153mm)  
384pp

## Praise for *Australian Gospel*

---

*'The astonishing tale of a foster family held together by ferocious love and courage. What makes a real family? Whose rights should triumph in battles over a child? Which inheritances can we escape, and which will haunt us forever? All this is explored in an irreverently joyful family saga you'll never forget.'*

—Charlotte Wood

*'An extraordinary true story, beautifully told.'*

—Tim Minchin

*'Wild applause. Brave, funny and true.'*

—David Marr

*'This is the new benchmark for the quintessential Australian epic. I lost count of how many times I laughed and cried.'*

—Grace Tame

*'Fact is stranger than fiction but it never arrives fully formed. We need writers like Blaine to do that for us.'*

*Here he delivers a rollicking, insightful and moving account of the everyday heavens and hells we make for ourselves, and each other.'*

—Sarah Krasnostein

*'Despite the nightmare-inducing creepiness of the Shelleys, Blaine's writing maintains a light and sometimes comical tone. This emotionally charged book reads partly as a thriller and partly as a literary memoir, creating a strange yet compelling combination that makes it worthy of a TV series adaptation.'*

—Books+Publishing

*'This is one of the best books you will ever read. It will make you laugh. It will make you cry. But it will ultimately renew your faith in humankind, and show the difference that loving parents can make to the lives of children.'*

—Niki Savva

*'A sensational tale that is close to home for author Lech Blaine, and it is to his enormous credit that he tells it with compassion, intelligence and wit. Australian Gospel is a captivating work of narrative*

*nonfiction, at once a tremendously moving story of family life, and a profound meditation on family-making and the legacies of love, grief and trauma that get passed from one generation to the next.*

—Catriona Menzies-Pike, *The Guardian*

*'It is the two intertwined stories that makes Australian Gospel: A Family Saga such a propulsive, compelling tale.'*

—Luke Horton, *The Saturday Paper*

*'Buckle in, because Lech Blaine's story about his family will blow your mind ... Blaine is considered one of Australia's most talented writers and this story is a clear indication why ... By telling us his story, Blaine opens his arms and invites us in to an extraordinary tale of love and survival. Australian Gospel is a riveting and exceptional read.'*

—Chris Gordon,

Readings 'Nonfiction Book of the Month'

*'This story covers so many things: toxic masculinity, birth trauma, marginalisation, the broken foster care system, alcohol and drug abuse, mental health, disability, and the ways that poverty and isolation can force people into impossible circumstances. In parts, it's an indictment of the Australian gospel, and how good people are left behind in its wake. But, ultimately, this is a surprisingly heartwarming story about love: how a lack of it can irreversibly derail someone's life but how, in turn, a life can be saved by it.'*

—'November's Best New Books' ABC

*'Blaine's book details the damage wrought generationally by trauma and abuse. It captures the way fear reverberates; Shelley could terrify his children and others even when he wasn't in the same country. The book also shows a triumph of love. The bottomlessness of the Blaines' compassion and forbearance – not just sainted Lenore, but bolshie Tom and the siblings as well – made this flinty-hearted reader emotional.'*

—Michael Winkler, *Australian Book Review*

## Discussion Points

---

- Talking about the Blaines' fear of the Shelleys, Blaine writes, 'we were incapable of seeing their frailties or feeling their pain' (p. 213). What do you think has changed to allow him to see those frailties and feel that pain?
- Is Blaine even-handed in his treatment of the Blaines and the Shelleys? Should he be?
- Blaine explicitly draws parallels between the two sets of parents, especially their backgrounds of loss, and also draws contrasts, like the relative privilege of Michael and Mary and the complete absence of privilege for Tom and Lenore. Is it possible to say why they turned out so differently?
- Related to this, and thinking about the next generation, what allows some people to escape patterns of abuse?
- Tom and Lenore's love is obviously a big part of the answer to the question above, but Michael and Mary love their children too. If love isn't enough, what is?
- Blaine writes about Lenore seeing 'how the sausage of a happy family got made' (p. 39). Is there a sausage? A recipe?
- Lenore's compassion comes 'from some inner source' (p.71). Is it possible to know what that inner source is? What about Tom's compassion? Where does that come from?
- 'A police officer's definition of kidnapping was a mother's definition of a rescue mission.' (p. 203) Do you feel sympathy for Mary? Or Michael? Do you agree that the children should have been placed in foster care?
- Talk about how the threat of the Shelleys affects the Blaines. How would you react?
- 'Sport was the cheapest opiate available to ordinary people. Priests had been replaced by athletes and cathedrals by stadiums.' (p. 151) This is Blaine writing, but it sounds like it could be Michael. Is Blaine passing a value judgement here? Do you agree with him? Do you have a value judgment about it?
- Do Michael's opinions about Australia and Australians ever ring true?
- 'In Australia, there was a thin line between the winners and the losers; the good Samaritans and the criminals; the saints and the sinners.' (p. 14). What is that thin line? Do the Lenore and Tom sit entirely on one side of that line? What about Michael and Mary?
- What else is *Australian Gospel* saying about Australia?
- How does Blaine manage to imbue humour into this story? Is it OK to be humorous about these events? Does it detract from the emotional impact of the story or add to it?
- Why do you think Blaine ends the book with the story of JC?