

READING GROUP GUIDE

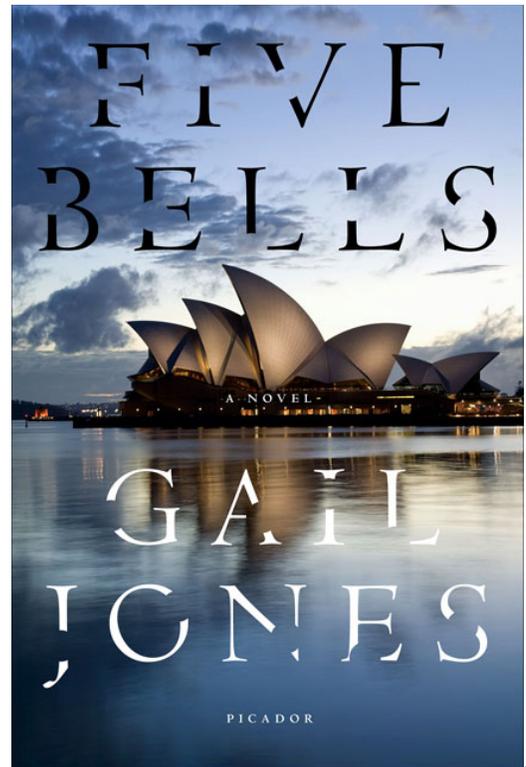
Five Bells

A Novel

by Gail Jones

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Five Bells* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Five Bells*.

About the Book

On a radiant day in Sydney, four adults converge on Circular Quay, site of the iconic Opera House and the Sydney Harbor Bridge. Crowds of tourists mix with the locals, enjoying the glorious surroundings and the play of light on water.

But just as the circular quay resonates with Australia's past, each of the four carries a complicated history from elsewhere. Each character is haunted by past secrets and guilt. Ellie is preoccupied by her sexual experiences as a girl, James by a tragedy for which he feels responsible, Catherine by the loss of her beloved brother in Dublin, and Pei Xing by her imprisonment during China's Cultural Revolution.

Told over the course of a single Saturday, *Five Bells* describes four lives that come to share not only a place and a time but also mysterious patterns and symbols. A fifth figure at the Quay, a barely glimpsed child, reminds us that some patterns are imprecise and do not resolve. By nightfall, when Sydney is drenched in a rainstorm, each life will have been transformed by the events of the day.

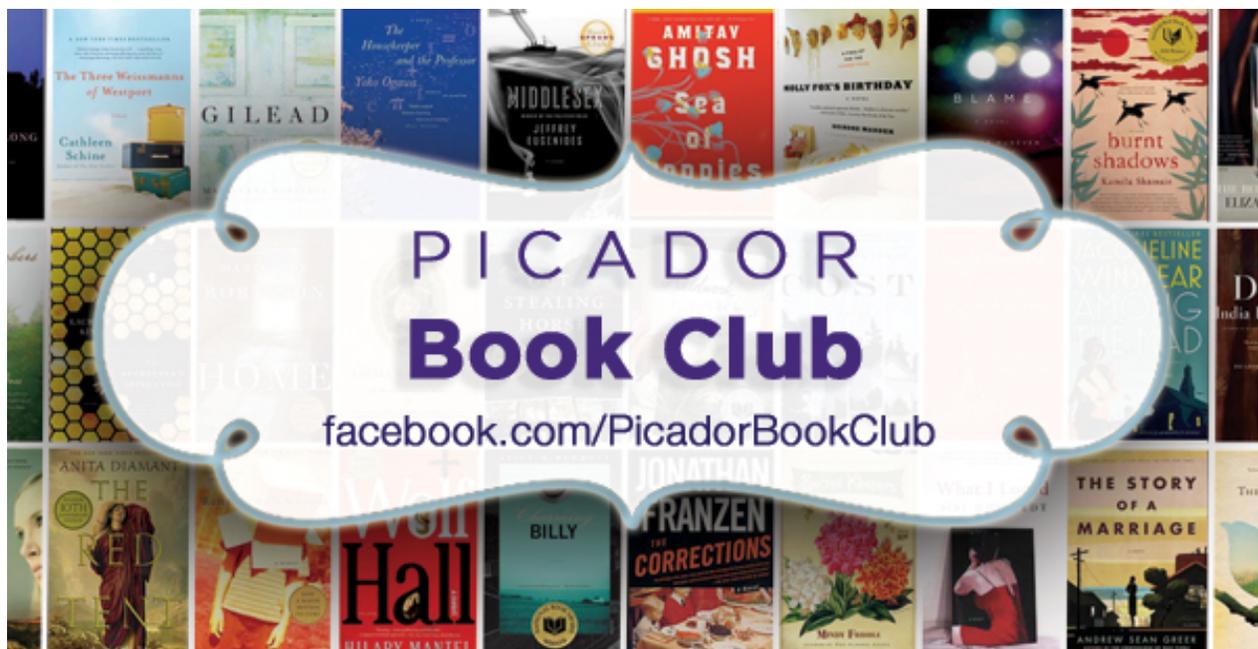
About the Author

Gail Jones is the author of the novels *Black Mirror*, *Sixty Lights*, *Dreams of Speaking*, and *Sorry*. She has been nominated for numerous international awards, including the Man Booker Prize, the Orange Prize, the Dublin IMPAC, and the Prix Femina Étranger. She is a professor of writing at the University of Western Sydney. She lives in Australia.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the Sydney Opera House appear to the characters? What is its particular meaning and significance to each of them?
2. Teachers and mentors play vital roles in the characters' lives. Discuss how Pei's father, Catherine's brother, and James and Ellie's teacher Miss Morrison influenced them.
3. Pei not only forgives her guard and abuser, but cultivates a devoted friendship with her. Would he be able to do the same?
4. Does the religious fervor of Catherine's mother have any influence upon her? Does she change the way her daughter views religion? How does she reconcile her mother's piety with her brother's atheism?
5. Why does James decide to go to medical school despite his deep aversion to gore? What does his reaction to the chicken reveal about his character?
6. Neither James nor Ellie ever forgot their young love. Do you think they would have made a good couple as adults, had tragedy had not intervened?
7. *Dr. Zhivago* helps Pei to remember her father. For what other reasons might the film resonate with her? How might the themes of the great Russian classics mirror those of *Five Bells*?
8. Why do you think Pei had made a routine of visiting with Doug Hua, Aristos, and Mary? How would you characterize her relationship with them, as opposed to that with her son? What does Pei mean to each of these people?
9. All the characters either observe or visit the Museum of Contemporary Art, but with mixed feelings. Why does Pei love it? Why does Catherine find it troubling? Why is James, an art lover who is smitten with Magritte, uninterested in the museum?

10. *Five Bells* is about four disparate people who happen to be at the same place at the same time. Did the book make you think differently about the people you pass by every day?
11. Pei and Catherine both take notice of the little girl with the man on the stairs. What do you make of Pei waving at Catherine, Catherine's kiss, and the bond between them?
12. The title of the novel is taken from the title of a famous Australian poem by Kenneth Slessor. Slessor wrote the poem to commemorate a friend who drowned in the Sydney harbor. How is James's life similarly eulogized in the novel?
13. Every one of the four characters has a heartbreaking death or funeral story. Which did you find most poignant?
14. What makes the "fifth bell", the little girl, so vital to the central message of the story?



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