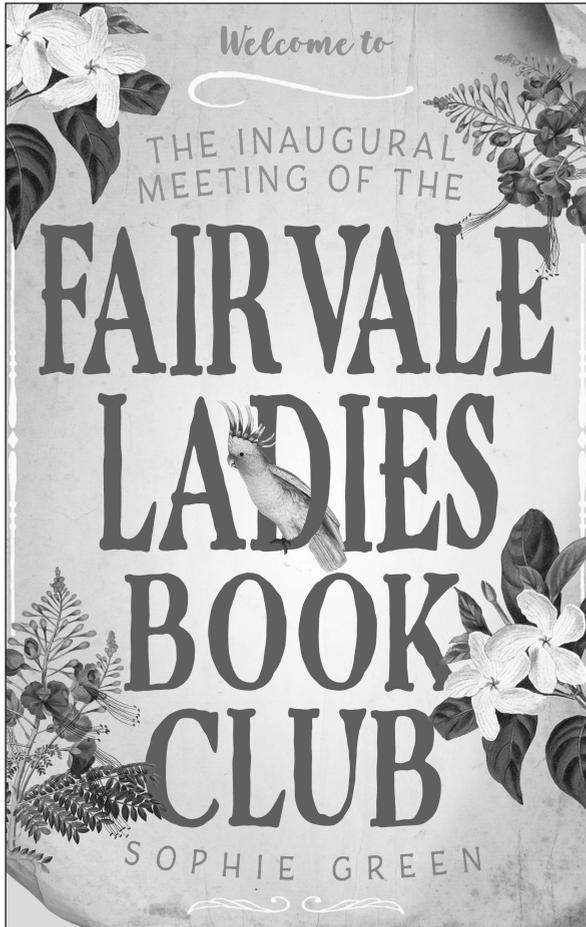


We are taking you back in time to the 1970s

#ThrowbackThursday

Books bring them together but friendship will transform all of their lives. Five very different women come together in the Northern Territory of the 1970s in this heartwarming story by an exceptional new Australian author.



Available from 8 August 2017

If you loved *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* and *The Thorn Birds* you will devour this story of five different women united by one need: to overcome the vast distances of Australia's Top End with friendship, tears, laughter, books and love.

It's 1978 in Australia's vast Northern Territory. Cyclone Tracy is a recent memory. Life is hard and people are isolated. But they find ways to connect.

Sybil is the matriarch of Fairvale Station, run by her husband, Joe. Their eldest son, Lachie, has left the Territory and their second son, Ben, must take his brother's place.

With her oldest friend, Rita, working for the Royal Flying Doctor Service in Alice Springs, and Ben's English wife, Kate, finding it difficult to adjust to life at Fairvale, Sybil devises a way to give them companionship and purpose: they all love to read, and she forms a book club.

Mother-of-three Sallyanne from the dusty town of Katherine is invited to join them, and completing the group is Della, who left Texas looking for adventure and work on the land.

Books bring them together – but friendship will transform all of their lives. You will love meeting the women of the Fairvale Ladies Book Club.

1978

- 13 February** A bomb explodes outside the Hilton Hotel in Sydney, Australia, killing three people
- 5 March** 'Wuthering Heights' by Kate Bush becomes a number 1 single in the UK
- 18 April** The US Senate votes to give control over the Panama Canal to Panama
- 30 April** The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan is proclaimed
- 15 May** Former Australian prime minister Sir Robert Menzies dies
- 15 June** King Hussein of Jordan marries American Lisa Halaby, who becomes Queen Noor
- 16 June** The movie *Grease*, starring John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John, is released
- 25 July** Louise Brown, the world's first IVF baby, is born in the UK
- 16 October** Pope John Paul II becomes the 264th pope
- 27 October** The Nobel Peace Prize is awarded jointly to Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin

CHAPTER ONE

The morning sky was its usual muted dry-season blue as Sybil paused to gaze out of the kitchen window. Before she'd moved to the Northern Territory she'd thought it would be a land of perpetual brilliance: blood-red dirt, sapphire skies and emerald trees, and a luminous, pendulous sun reigning over the land. All of that was true – just not at the same time.

The palette of the place changed with the seasons. The light of the dry season was pallid at dawn and dusk, and during the wet the sky was often so heavy with cloud that it was hard to say what sort of blue it was. When it rained – and rained and rained – the trees turned so bright and the earth, even the rocks, became so alive with new growth that it was like living in a greenhouse; but during the dry season the colours of the trees seemed subdued, almost as if the persistent foliage felt like it didn't have permission to be any more vibrant. The wet season was the star up here: it had the power to turn the Katherine River into a swollen force, waterfalls cascading down the sides of the gorges; it made the air leaden with moisture and turned people into molasses. And it could kill. Everyone knew of someone who had died trying to cross a river during a wet, or a child who had wandered off to a waterhole or creek they thought they knew well, only to discover

that the usual friendly trickle was now a roiling torrent in which lurked traps for small feet: tangled branches, rotting animal carcasses, strong currents. It was too easy for the wet to claim an unwary child – or adult. That’s what had shocked Sybil the most when she’d arrived here. She’d grown up in Sydney, with all its traffic and bustle and urgency, but she’d never known anyone to die because of the weather. Yet in her first year here on Fairvale Station, she knew two. It had been an unwelcome lesson: the Territory would always be the boss. Humans could try to bend the land and the seasons to their will, but they would fail. They would fail forever. All they could do was surrender completely and make the best of what was there.

And the best was plentiful. It was impossible not to fall in love with the place. So many colours and contradictions; so many secrets and surprises. She had been here for twenty-six years, since she was twenty-five, and she knew enough to realise that she would never know the Territory completely, even though it felt like the Territory knew her. It knew her weaknesses, that was for sure; it also brought out her strengths. Of all the relationships in her life, this was the one that seemed to contain the most challenges and rewards. Not that she’d tell her husband that.

As if on cue, Joe walked into her field of vision. She smiled as she saw him lift his battered Akubra and scratch his head. He did that a lot, usually when he was trying to work out how to say something stern to a worker without actually sounding stern. He was a gentle man, in so many ways. She was lucky to be married to him; lucky that he had taken her away from a life that was pressing in on her. She hadn’t loved him then but she loved him now. And it was time to call him in to breakfast.

She waved vigorously through the window, hoping to catch his eye; his lifted finger was the sign that she had. She saw him turn towards the cattle yards and cup his hands to his mouth, no doubt calling to their son Ben, who had also started the day early. Everyone on Fairvale was up with the sun, if not before, and they

worked long after the moon rose. Sometimes Sybil wondered whether she'd have chosen this life if she'd known that it was relentless: seven days a week, so many hours a day. There seemed to be very little time even to read a book, because they were all so tired they'd fall into bed at night. Except they did end up making time for the things that mattered, and if Sybil thought she was missing out on being a lady of leisure she was also aware that life wasn't made for sitting around and doing nothing. Human bodies were built to work, and the hard, long toil of each day made the snatched hours of relaxation all the more precious.

Sybil watched as her husband and son pushed open the gate to enter the garden. Despite the fact that they lived in the middle of hundreds of thousands of hectares with apparently no need for fences, where the land threw up its own natural barriers, the gate kept out the working dogs and any stray cattle that might trample through the green-lawned garden that Sybil had defied nature and good sense to create. That garden still carried the signs of the lush growth of the wet season just past. Before too long, though, the dry would start to bite and she'd need to draw on the bore water to keep the garden at its best.

She'd fashioned it – perhaps ridiculously – as if it was a garden belonging to a quaint English cottage instead of a large, squat outback home. Fairvale's big house had a large verandah that wrapped around three of its sides, but it was no more genteel than that. The garden was Sybil's attempt at bringing something refined into her immediate world. She had fashioned long garden beds to border the lawn. A bird bath sat in the middle of the grass; instead of swallows dipping their beaks into it, however, the local cockatoos used it as a swimming pool, raucously announcing their activities every time. It often sounded like they were laughing at her – laughing at her delusions of order and grace – and they probably were. She'd started this garden as a new bride, trying to bring something of her old, organised life into her new. If she'd waited five years, it wouldn't have mattered so much. By that

point in her marriage she had realised that she would never be able to control anything much around here, apart from herself.

After the beds had been dug she had, at great expense, ordered poinciana saplings and a jacaranda tree from a supplier in Darwin. African trees, she'd thought, might have a chance of surviving here. She had installed some camellias, hoping they would reach a fair height even if this wasn't their natural habitat. They had survived, although they weren't always happy about it.

Maidenhair ferns hugged the ground; she'd planted them hoping they would keep the beds together, and moist, to encourage the other plants to grow. The ferns loved the wet season and hated the dry; some years Sybil thought she'd lose them all, yet they'd endured. She supposed that plants that had been growing on earth for millions of years could outlast the tough seasons.

The lawn had been the hardest part. It was a risk, when the wet season was likely to turn it into mush, but Joe had gone to Darwin one day and returned with enough lawn to cover the patch of dirt that was left after the beds had been planted. Sometimes he'd laugh at her, slowly shaking his head, as he watched her curse the weather and offer up the occasional prayer that her lawn would be saved.

'Why are you laughing?' she'd said once, irritated that he could be so amused while she was so annoyed.

'Because that lawn is the only thing that can make you believe in God.' He'd laughed more heartily then and she'd wanted to stomp away from him – because he was right. Instead she'd pressed her lips together, turned away and started pruning a camellia.

The garden had been many things to Sybil over the years: a source of pride and frustration; a refuge when she needed a few minutes to herself; a place for her children to learn to take care of nature; and a spot where she and Joe could sometimes sit quietly as the sun set on a dry-season day, listening to those cockatoos, still laughing at her.

Mainly, though, the garden was her work of art – the only one she had. Out here on Fairvale, two hours from the nearest town and a long way from the culture and sophistication of her childhood, Sybil needed something to gaze upon. Something that wasn't stampeding cattle and mangy dogs, coals in a fire or a creek bed full of animal skeletons.

As the two men approached the flyscreen door, she could hear them talking about one of the workers. It was as she'd suspected: Joe needed to pull the man back into line and he didn't have the heart to do it.

'If you don't, I will,' she could hear Ben saying. 'And I won't be half as nice as you.'

'Now, now,' came Joe's deep, measured tones; he sounded just as he had when Ben had misbehaved as a boy and Joe had tried to discipline him. *Now, now, Ben*, he'd say. *You don't really want to do that, do you?* Amazingly, this tactic had often been effective. As it no doubt would be with the worker.

'Hello, love,' Joe said as he opened the door, removing his hat and hanging it on the hook by the door. Sybil liked the way he always greeted her as if he hadn't seen her just half an hour ago, wrapped in her towel as she exited the shower, her hair wet, her face unadorned. He always made it sound as though seeing her was an occasion.

'Smells good, Mum,' Ben said as he pulled out a chair and sat. 'There's nothing cooking yet, Ben,' she said.

'I know.' He winked. 'Get a wriggle on.'

'You can go and eat with the others in the dining room if you don't like it,' Sybil said. The residents of Fairvale – the community of stockmen, workers, and their wives and children if they had then – usually ate together, with all the food cooked by Ruby, who had been with them for years. Sybil always liked to make breakfast for her family in their home, however. The days could become so frenetic for Joe – so many people wanting to talk to him, to ask him things, to have him do things for them – that

providing him with a quiet start, with a meal where he could eat in peace, was, she felt, important.

Joe tapped his son on the shoulder. 'Be kind to your mother,' he said. 'We're lucky to have our breakfast made for us.'

'Yeah, yeah.' Ben grinned at his mother, taking off his own dusty Akubra and putting it on the table. Sybil knew that grin: it was Ben's good-luck charm, his means of getting out of trouble. He'd been using it on her since before he could talk and she always fell for it, even though she tried not to let him see that.

'Do you reckon the rain's finished?' Sybil said, turning her head briefly towards the kitchen window.

'Could be a bit more.' Joe squinted at the sky. 'Sometimes we get fooled. It's been a good wet, though, so we shouldn't be greedy. The bores are full. We'll last through the dry.'

'Where's Katie?' Ben said to his mother.

'She's your wife, Ben,' Sybil replied. 'How should I know?' Her son was twenty-three years of age – old enough not to be lazy. Although she had a motherly impulse to want to take care of everything, he was a grown-up.

'Because you've been in the house together.' He tried his grin again.

'And I've been in here,' Sybil said.

'All right,' Ben said, sounding weary and getting to his feet. 'I'll get her.'

'Thank you,' Sybil said, turning to a loaf of bread next to the stove, picking up the knife so she could start to hack out the many slices she'd need just for this one meal.

'Ka-aaate!' Ben called as he walked through to the rest of the house, and Sybil turned to Joe and raised an eyebrow. Only he could understand the paradox of loving Ben and being exasperated by him at the same time.

Joe smiled. 'Cup of tea, love?' he said and Sybil nodded.

'Thank you,' she said as she started to slice.

Another day on Fairvale was beginning.



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