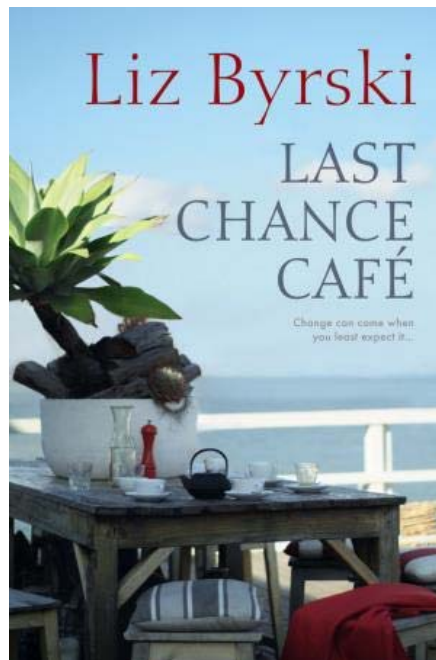


**PICADOR**  
**AUSTRALIA**

**NOTES FOR READING GROUPS**



**Liz Byrski**



**LAST CHANCE CAFÉ**

## Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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## THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'We never thought about getting old. You don't, do you? You just assume you'll always be young because that's how you feel inside, it's how we still feel.' (p 253)

We regard our lives very differently when we are in our later decades, to when we are in our early twenties. Each of the female central characters in this novel are facing turning points and also recalling the other major decisions they have made in their lives, with some regret. 'It seems to Margot that this need to understand the past is increasing with age, as though by understanding she might have one last chance to remake it.' (p 51) This is a novel about not so much 'finding' oneself, but about 'accepting' oneself, before it's too late.

In *Last Chance Café*, the experiences of women in a post-feminist society are deftly illustrated by the lives of Margot, her friend Dot, her sister Phyllida, her two daughters Lexie and Emma, and their new friend Vinka. It deals in an insightful and witty manner with the irony of a society, which despite the efforts of early liberationists, has become increasingly obsessed with looks and with eternal youth. Both Dot and Margot are alone, and where one recognises that she's foregone the comfort of having a family for the sake of her activism, the other feels that she has never achieved her goals in life. 'We're invisible because we're old women' (p 10). Dot had been a member of the famous Sydney 'Push' - a group of social activists involved in women's liberation and anti-Vietnam War protests in the sixties, and Margot had also become part of the activism, before her life became subsumed by marriage and parenting. Both saw their lives going in directions they'd never have imagined. Now reunited after a period of separation, they are confronting old age whilst observing the dilemmas of younger women such as Margot's daughters, and even younger ones such as Alyssa, the student activist who entices Dot into a new campaign. If this is an era which boasts of the opportunities available to 'superwomen', why does it promote cosmetic surgery, pole dancing, shopping as therapy, and children's beauty pageants as lifestyle choices?

**Feminism is a major subject here.** How effective was the Women's Liberation Movement? Has the 'power of the sisterhood' been depleted? Why are women like Margot so dissatisfied with their lives? How could Phyllida have devoted her life to Donald and never suspected his duplicity? And why have Margot's daughters, Lexie and Emma, despite having achieved managerial success, not found personal contentment or fulfilment? How can a strong manager like Emma be so lacking in confidence? How has Lexie managed to spend most of her life working for people who no longer require her services? How should Alyssa avoid making the same mistakes Dot made?

To respond to these questions, the novelist examines the lives and dilemmas of these women which intersect and become more closely entwined as the novel progresses:

- DOT, now 75, is looking back on her past involvement with the Push. She acknowledges that '... a lot of them were armchair or bar stool activists' (p 21) and that she really didn't effect any change until later when she used her journalism to influence public opinion. She has always devoted her life to such causes to the detriment of her personal life, and now finds herself alone, and yet still capable of being moved to action. 'It is, she supposes, the price she's paying for decades of immersing herself in work and various causes at the expense of relationships and friendships. The pigeons come home to roost as one gets older, Dot thinks, only this particular pigeon is starting to feel more like an albatross. Loneliness is something she has never had to face and now it seems to be thundering along behind her flapping its wings and threatening to roost here in her own house.' (p 18) When she is contacted by Patrick, a cultural studies lecturer who clearly admires her and invites her to speak to his students, she is surprised that she is still considered relevant. And when a young student named Alyssa speaks to her at the lecture, and invites her to front her campaign against the sexualisation of girls and women, she realises she has perhaps one last opportunity to make a difference. Her confidence is briefly shattered by a minor domestic accident which causes her to face her own mortality, but nevertheless, the rally

goes ahead and is a huge success. Then Patrick confronts her with a secret, so that she is finally forced to admit to a youthful decision which has impacted on her entire life.

- **MARGOT** pursued a different course, eschewing both finishing her degree and her writing when she became pregnant to Laurence and married him. She devoted her life to bringing up her two daughters and to her husband, but was devastated when she discovered that Laurence was homosexual and had fallen in love with a university student. She was then left to fend for them all as a single mother, and was determined to give her girls the freedom of choice which she felt denied. Thirty years later and on the brink of her seventies, she realises that she's always accepted the fact that she has been continually called upon to sort out other people's problems, and that it's now or never if she wishes to reclaim herself and her writing. 'She has gathered in the unravelling strands of other people's lives for so long that it's now taken for granted and she doesn't know how to stop it.' (p 50) She feels depleted by the fact that she never applied her activism to herself. 'If only she'd had the courage to make the political personal and change herself, then perhaps things might now be different.' (p 99) Margot also reveals how much she still loves Laurence (p 260) but has long since realised that she must control that feeling, and he has had to come to terms with how he used her as a form of self-protection. 'But of course what he hadn't realised then was that not even Margot could keep him safe from himself.' (p 41) Her decision to think about herself for a change is not assisted by the fact that Lexie has been made redundant after years of dedicated service to a medical practice; that Emma's obsession with her looks is becoming serious; that Laurence has been abandoned by Bernard and is facing a personal crisis; and that Phyllida's husband Donald suffers a fatal aneurism at their 50th wedding anniversary party and leaves a trail of mystery behind him which threatens to derail Phyllida's carefully managed life.

- **LEXIE** has kept the medical practice humming efficiently along for years, and, like her mother, has been the one everyone has turned to. But she's never had a satisfactory relationship, and when she finds herself without a job she realises that her current partner, Ross, has to go as well. 'The job was her; without it she is invisible.' (p 12) Lexie finds redundancy a shock: 'The ultimate planner has no plan, not for tomorrow, next week, next year. She can choose anything and the choice is terrifying.' (p 44) But her brave decision to go back to university becomes complicated when she and Patrick fall in love. Should she risk moving in with him, or will that threaten the independence she has only just begun to really enjoy?

- **EMMA** is super-organised and very glamorous but totally insecure. Her panic when she became a mother caused her to leave Grant to raise their daughter, Rosie and to embark on a path in life which has left her obsessed with shopping and cosmetic surgery, and deeply in debt. But her major problem is that she blames herself for all the things which have gone wrong for her, and doesn't know how to make things right.

- **PHYLLIDA** is on the surface a polished, elegant woman who has had a dream life. She's been an admired teacher, a devoted wife, and an efficient member of many charities. She's always been active and is left very well-off when her husband dies suddenly. But when she finds out about Donald's affair with May Wong and that he's been paying bribes to keep a potential medical malpractice case out of the public eye, she realises that all she's lived for has been a sham. And she finds herself asking, 'Who is the real Phyllida?'

- **VINKA** is an 80-year-old Polish refugee who came to Australia in 1951 with only a mother and sister. Her life is about to be derailed by the sale of the apartment complex she has lived in for many years, and by her possession of a secret which might alienate her from her beloved nephew Patrick if it is revealed. 'She has become what she has most feared but refused to face: a homeless old person, living on a pension, with only one relative, and she is very, very frightened.' (p 138) She is faced with a decision which will not only betray her sister's confidence but may endanger the one family relationship she has left.

This novel is about people in mid-to-late-life crisis trying to discover who they really are. Laurence has walked the Camino de Santiago de Compostela but is honest enough to have doubts about his own motives: 'A pilgrimage has depth and meaning, a significance

that attracts thoughtful questions, whereas saying you're going on an eight hundred kilometre walk to take your mind off the fact that your life is falling apart is an immediate conversation killer.' (p 35) Lexie runs away to Sydney in order to escape a failing relationship with Ross, and her loss of a job; Emma also escapes to Sydney (to avoid sitting with Phyllida as she conducts a vigil by the dying Donald's bedside), and to try some new cosmetic procedures. Dot has tried to find herself in India. Margot alone realises that going away won't help anything, but she does enter a form of retreat in deciding to devote herself to writing a novel that has been her lifelong ambition..

The sexualisation of childhood and its effect on women's lives is also a theme. 'It's about smothering childhood and corrupting innocence, in the service of consumerism.' (p 355) When Rosie attends the bunny party (p 293), Emma is horrified by the children's dress and behaviour, and finally realises how sinister and destructive her own image-obsessed behaviour has become. The campaign which Dot and Alyssa spearhead is eventually assisted by Lexie and Margot, and has particular relevance given Emma's problems, and the fact that her daughter Rosie is growing up in this climate. By condoning the dressing of children in provocative clothing, enhanced by makeup, and sometimes even cosmetic procedures, society is potentially endangering the emotional health of a whole generation of women.

It's a novel about the nature of family, and how they can be both enormously supportive emotionally, and hotbeds of intrigue, insularity and conflict as well. Phyllida hints that she and Margot had been raised to regard the family unit as supreme and to avoid allowing others to interfere: 'Their parents hadn't trusted it either, all that getting involved with other people. Family was what was important and you never knew what might happen when you opened yourself up like this to others.' (p 226) But love is never far from jealousy, resentment, and grievances, and sibling rivalry is never far from the surface either in this novel. 'Lexie is not here and this is Emma's chance to make the decisions and organise everyone.' (p 34) Not only are her daughters in competition with each other, but Margot and her sister Phyllida have always sparred as well. However when they all share Christmas dinner at Phyllida's house, along with Laurence, Vinka, Patrick, Emma's ex-husband Grant, their daughter Rosie and Grant's sister Wendy, a family network seems to have become enriched and strengthened by opening up to others.

Betrayal is another theme, here. Laurence's grief over losing Bernard is exacerbated by his fear that his betrayal of Margot and his daughters has all come to no positive outcome. Phyllida discovers that Donald had a mistress for fifteen years and that he's lied to both of them. Vinka worries that she is betraying her dead sister Beate's trust in revealing her secret to Patrick. Emma feels guilty because she believes she betrayed or failed her daughter and her husband. Lexie finds it difficult to leave Ross even though she knows he's been unfaithful to her.

Responsibility is a major thread in this novel. Each character comes to grips with the need to take responsibility for their own actions. Margot has realised that her efforts with Emma have failed and that she must leave her to sort herself out, and eventually Phyllida realises that as well. Both Phyllida and May Wong acknowledge that Donald lied to them, and that they can make amends for his shocking lack of responsibility, by visiting the grave of the nameless street kid for whose death while in surgery Donald seems to have been responsible. They also make a commitment to track down the deceased boy's family. Laurence has to accept that with Bernard gone, he will be taking responsibility for himself in old age. And Dot faces the uncomfortable truth that in giving the responsibility of her own child to others, she may have almost left it too late for that child to get to know his real mother.

Ultimately, the novel is also about confronting the fact that we die as we live - alone. 'And I let all those other pressures about how women should look and behave exploit my anxiety and take up my time, when I could have been just me, warts and all, getting on with my own life.' (p 225) For now in their twilight years, each of these characters must face facts. They've arrived, not exactly at the 'last chance café', but at a point where they have the chance to mend old grievances, to do what they had hoped to do earlier in their lives, and to live the rest of their lives without regrets.

## WRITING STYLE

1. Although told in third person, each of the chapters tells the story from a range of individual perspectives. Discuss the effectiveness of this strategy.
2. The flashbacks strategically fill in gaps as they are raised in the narrative. Discuss.
3. There is a metafictional sense to this narrative. Margot begins writing her novel in the midst of a period of major upheaval for all of them. But when pressed, she refuses to admit that she might be drawing on her family's lives, although clearly novelists often do just that. So when she reflects on the scene before her, it is tempting to see that this novel may be the novel she is actually writing: 'This simple scene is a map of intersecting stories, of old loves and old deceptions, of new loves and new beginnings, of broken hearts and broken promises, of new discoveries and passionate inner journeys. She can make something of this, she thinks, and in the same moment that her skin prickles with the birth of an idea, a stab of guilt brings her back into the moment.' (p 259) Should writers draw on their family's lives for material? Is it inevitable that they do?
4. Dialogue is used to great effect in this novel, as a means of characterisation. For example, read the conversation between Dot and Patrick (pp 16-21). What does it tell you about each character?
5. Choose a passage in the novel to discuss from the point of view of writing style rather than theme.

## THE AUTHOR

Liz Byrski is the author of a number of non-fiction books and has worked as a freelance journalist, a broadcaster with ABC Radio and an advisor to a minister in the Western Australian Government. She is the author of five other bestselling novels: *Gang of Four*; *Food, Sex & Money*; *Belly Dancing for Beginners*; *Trip of a Lifetime* and *Bad Behaviour*. Liz has a PhD from Curtin University where she teaches professional and creative writing. For more information visit: <http://www.lizbyrski.com.au>.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. '...I'm so over myself you wouldn't believe it and I couldn't even get away from me at the top of some Indian mountain. I stayed a full year so you can't say I didn't try.' (pp 6-7) Dot's attempt to 'find herself' in India proved fruitless. Are such activities really driven by a desire to escape reality rather than to embrace one's inner spirit? Do you believe that one can ever discover a new self? Discuss.
2. 'Coming back here... it's a culture shock... the consumerism... and everything seems to be about appearance...' (p 7) Is Australian society as shallow as Dot suggests?
3. '...no one seems to care about sisterhood anymore.' She leans forward, grasping Margot's hand in her own. 'Remember the women's movement, working together! Remember marching for childcare centres, and equal pay, and breast cancer testing? It's not the same now. It's all about the individual and bugger everyone else. Pole dancing as liberation, what a travesty!' (p 8) 'So much for free love and promiscuity in the sixties - it was still the men calling the tune and disappearing out the back door if the women got pregnant.' (p 56) Was feminism such a disappointment in terms of relationships? Is feminism dead? Or is this novel indicating that the fight needs to be taken up again with a vengeance?
4. 'Motherhood totally freaked her out' (p 9). Emma is a career woman who found that mothering didn't suit her. How easy is it for a woman to make this decision today, even with a supportive partner or ex-partner?
5. 'How important we thought we were, back then,' she remembers saying, 'so entirely up ourselves. We thought we were shaping a new world.' (p 20) Unfortunately, protest movements don't always result in long term change. For example, one of the great ironies for women of the liberation era is that they see women today blithely accepting the conditions they fought for, and also returning to the same stereotypes they fought so hard to reject. Discuss.
6. 'Margot has always struggled with the idea of uncertainty. When they were younger Laurence often talked about its creative advantages, but Margot craved certainty, preferring to live with its illusion.' (p 50) Is 'certainty' a possible or impossible concept?
7. 'Transformation! It is always the bag, the one she has always wanted, always needed, the bag to end all bags.' (p 68) Is fashion a form of escapism; a way in which women contrive to avoid the reality of life? Does it serve women or are we too willing to accept the dictates of a market dominated by men?
8. 'An image of Barbie dangles in Emma's consciousness like an irritating ornament on a driving mirror, and once again she is back in the playground with all the hurt, the confusion and the shame; most of all the shame.' (p 187) What Emma has done to her face seems such a horror story, and yet it's what many women and teenage girls are doing regularly. Discuss.
9. The question of growing older and the need for aged care is raised by Vinka's visit to the nursing home (p 168) and by Laurence talking to Dot about elder care (pp 251-2). Is our society too prone to consign people to aged care, when they are still perfectly capable of looking after themselves?
10. 'We were intellectual anarchists and that's a very attractive thing to be when you're young. It means you don't have to be responsible for anything.' (p 83) Discuss this statement with reference to similar such movements today.
11. Is the sexualisation of childhood a real problem in our society? (Note recent reports that Australia is to begin hosting child beauty pageants like those which became a scandal after the mysterious death of six year old US beauty Queen Jon Benet Ramsey in 1996. A group called Collective Shout has called on federal Minister Peter Garrett to intervene



[<<http://collectiveshout.org/2011/04/petition-launched-to-stop-us-child-beauty-pageants-in-australia/>> Accessed 16/05/2011]. Discuss.

12. 'It is easier for her now to remember the seedier side of the sexual life of the Push, the arrogance, the intellectual bullying and the frustration of so much talk and so little action.' (p 80) Activism often results in widespread positive change, but it can also mask the failure of the activists themselves to apply their politics to their own behaviour. Discuss.

13. 'Life is always full of risks but we don't even think about them, and at our age every day is a bonus. So - we must make the most we can of it, even if it increases the risk.' (p 257) Is risk-taking a dangerous way to live your life, or a healthy one?

14. 'Perhaps, she thinks now, she is not so different after all. Perhaps the world is full of women dancing as fast as they can to simply keep their heads above water and a smile on their faces, attempting to mask the chaos within.' (p 264) Are women generally living in a state of inner crisis today, in your opinion?

15. Consider these quotes: 'There are times when I've felt haunted by it and, yes, occasionally I regret it. But they're the regrets of age, part of getting old and living in the last chance café, looking back and seeing how I could have done it differently.' (p 195) and 'I kept thinking about how easily we are separated from the past, and how extraordinary it feels when we bump into it.' (p 326) Is this novel about regret or hope? Is the past 'another country', or is it possible to go back and right some of its mistakes?

## LAST CHANCE CAFÉ

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