

'Complex and compelling in all the right ways'

JANE HARPER

THREE BOYS GONE

Would you try to save them?

MARK SMITH

READING NOTES

About *Three Boys Gone*

'First rule of rescue: don't create another casualty.'

Grace Disher is about to face every teacher's worst nightmare.

Three of her students are going to die.

On a high school camping trip, three boys slip away for an ocean swim. By the time Grace catches up, the perilous surf conditions are overwhelming the teenagers. If she goes in, she will die trying to save them.

Should she have given her life?

The question haunts Grace as investigations begin and her decision not to attempt a rescue comes under scrutiny. Hounded by conflicted staff, grieving parents and relentless media – all dissecting her actions, all looking for someone to blame – Grace's safety is compromised and she must be careful who she trusts.

And she's not the only one with a secret.

***Three Boys Gone* is a heart-in-mouth psychological thriller by award-winning author Mark Smith – a twisty, unflinching and pacey page-turner about an impossible choice and how tragedy tests and defines us.**

About the author

Mark Smith has written four young adult novels including the highly acclaimed Winter Trilogy. The first book in the series, *The Road to Winter*, was a finalist for multiple awards and has become a popular teaching text in schools throughout Australia. The sequel, *Wilder Country*, won the 2018 Australian Indie Book Award for Young Adults.

Beyond his novels, Mark is an award-winning writer of short fiction, with his work featured in prominent publications both in Australia and overseas. He has also co-curated two short story anthologies: *Minds Went Walking: Paul Kelly's Songs Reimagined* and *Into Your Arms: Nick Cave's Songs Reimagined*.

Discussion questions

Note: contains spoilers

1. Throughout *Three Boys Gone*, we see how people are often not who they first appear to be. What were your first impressions of Grace, Gerard and Tom? Do you agree with student Tim Simpson's assessment of their characters (see Chapter 9)?
2. Gerard reveals later in the novel that the groups were separated because Tim Simpson sprained his ankle, and was walking slowly. Grace is suspicious of this, and implies he was faking to allow his friends to run ahead. Do you think this is likely? Why would the boys plan something like this?
3. Do you think the statements Grace gave the next day were reliable? How might trauma and shock impact Grace's memory of the events?
4. The story is interspersed with excerpts from various news outlets as details from the accident are released. How did these additions impact your reading experience? Did the naming of different news outlets influence your opinion on their reporting? How did the traditional media coverage differ from what was being shared on social media?
5. Grace is targeted by the media, and blamed for the accident. Do you think the media were biased for the purpose of getting clicks and views? Can you think of any examples from real life of innocent people becoming scapegoats for an accident?
6. The book shows Grace being followed and hounded by journalists, on the road and at her home. How do you think this impacts Grace? How do you think the media should balance the responsibility to report on a story with the mental health of those involved?
7. People often behave differently on social media than they would in real life, due to anonymity. How did strangers react to Grace in person vs online? Was one scarier for Grace than the other? Consider the security guard at school, and the Uber driver.
8. Why do you think Grace found it so difficult to stay off social media and avoid reading the news, even when she knew it would only upset her? Do you think this is similar to doomscrolling (spending time online reading negative news about the world even when it makes you feel bad)?
9. Why did the media and public target Grace rather than the other two teachers, or even Principal Sheridan? How much do you think was based on her behaviour, and how much was to do with her age and gender?
10. Grace is not a parent, as many people point out. However, she is close with her father, although they live far apart, and she was very close with her mother until her death. How do Grace's familial relationships influence her actions around the accident? How would things be different if Grace was a parent?
11. St Finbar's is a Catholic boy's school. How does religion influence the school's response to the accident? Does it help or hinder the investigation process? Does it improve the support that the teachers or families receive?

12. What did you think of Grace and Louise's relationship? Do you think they were right to keep their relationship a secret? Do you think they will last past the bounds of the book?
13. What do you make of the parents in the book? Are their responses to the tragedy understandable, or do they verge into unreasonable territory? Compare the reactions of Rick Bolton, Felicity Edwards and Bruno and Maria Lombardi.
14. The novel is split between the south coast of Victoria, and the suburbs of Melbourne. What is the distinction between these two settings? How does the journey from the coast back to Melbourne after the tragedy impact the characters?
15. Many of the characters, including Grace, Harry and Jim, express personal connections to the area where the accident happens. How do you think these connections will change after the events of the novel? Do you think Grace will ever return to Juliet Beach?
16. Were you suspicious of Tom in the beginning of the novel? Can you remember any moments which hinted towards his obsessive behaviour?
17. How does Tom's behaviour and the general public abuse overlap in this story? At what point do they overlap so that Tom is the more immediate danger?
18. Tom brings Grace back to the scene of the accident, attempting to kill her. How is his decision to go back to Juliet significant for Tom, and for the reader? Had Grace drowned, do you think anyone would suspect Tom?
19. Grace dreams of drowning several times throughout the novel. How are these dreams significant? What do they reveal about Grace's emotional state or sense of self?
20. Who was ultimately responsible for giving Grace support and keeping her safe? Was it the police, the school, or even Louise? What could have been done better?
21. *Three Boys Gone* highlights the beauty and danger of bushwalking and outdoor education. Do you think outdoor education is important for young people? What is an acceptable level of risk to expose teenagers to on an outdoor trip?
22. The novel is told predominantly from Grace's perspective. How might the story have changed if it was from Gerard's point of view? What about Louise's, or Tom's?
23. Jacob Bolton's body is never found, and his parents speculate about the possibility of his survival. We later see Grace survive the same waters. Do you think it's possible that Jake lived? Why or why not?
24. The novel is set over only five days, as we see Grace dealing with the immediate aftermath of the accident. Why do you think the author kept the scope of the story so immediate? How does it build the atmosphere of the story? Would you have liked to see what happens after?
25. The coroner finds the boys' deaths an accident, and says that no one is to blame. What do you think the future holds for Grace, Louise and Gerard? Why do you think they don't attend the coroner's inquest? Do you see this as a hopeful ending?