

A photograph of a cozy living room. In the background, a large bookshelf is filled with books. A patterned armchair is in the foreground. To the left, a table with a lamp and a small table with a lamp are visible. The room is warmly lit, and the overall atmosphere is inviting and intellectual.

LIZ BYRSKI

A Month of Sundays

Four women,
their most treasured books,
a lifetime of stories...

Reading Group Notes



Blurb

For over ten years, Ros, Adele, Judy and Simone have been in an online book club, but they have never met face to face. Until now...

Determined to enjoy her imminent retirement, Adele invites her fellow bibliophiles to help her house-sit in the Blue Mountains. It's a tantalising opportunity to spend a month walking in the fresh air, napping by the fire and, of course, reading and talking about books.

But these aren't just any books: each member has been asked to choose a book which will teach the others more about her. And with each woman facing a crossroads in her life, it turns out there's a lot for them to learn, not just about their fellow book-clubbers, but also about themselves.

A Month of Sundays reminds us of the joy, the comfort and the occasional challenge we can find in the pages of a book.

Author Biography

Liz Byrski is the author of ten novels and a number of non-fiction books. Her work has been published in the UK, France and Germany. She has worked as a journalist and a broadcaster with ABC Radio and has been an advisor to a minister in the Western Australian Government. Liz is an Associate Professor in the School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry at Curtin University, where she is also the Senior Fellow in the China Australia Writing Centre.

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Plot Summary

Ros, Adele, Judy and Simone are the only remaining members of their online book club. When an opportunity for a month-long Blue Mountains getaway presents itself, Adele impulsively invites the other members so that they can all finally meet face to face and get to know each other better. Adele also suggests each person recommend a book to be discussed each Sunday – not just any book, but ‘*a book that will tell us all something significant about you . . . more than just a suggested read, it is an invitation from each one of us to the others to get to know each other better*’ (43-44). The timing is auspicious as all four women are encountering major crossroads in their lives.

Ros (77), who lives in Sydney, is an accomplished cellist. A self-professed loner, introvert and ‘grumpy old bat’ (152), music has been Ros’ one constant love. Since the sudden death of her husband James, fifteen years ago, music and her much-beloved cocker spaniel Clooney have been her emotional crutches. When we first meet Ros she’s just returned from the doctor, and the news isn’t good.

In Adelaide, Adele (65) is on the verge of retirement. As the director of a travel bureau, Adele is confident, driven and scarily efficient. In every other aspect of her life, Adele is plagued by intense anxiety and self-doubt.

Judy (73) is the owner of a knitting store and workshop in Mandurah, WA. Despite the expansion of her business and the seeming control and order she maintains, on paper the business is in chaos. The shop is Judy’s whole life; she’s put her blood, sweat and tears into it, leaving no room for an inner life, let alone a personal life. Judy is a woman at the very end of her tether – trapped, drowning, she’s in desperate need of escape.

Simone (67) lives in Hobart and teaches yoga for seniors. Her son Adam has just given her the paperwork confirming the sale of her parents’ property in Queensland – at last Simone is free of the ball and chain. But the sale has also uncovered old memories, in particular the mystery around the departure of her neighbours and dearest friends, the Marshalls, over forty years ago. Fortunately, Simone has been able to track down a Geoff Marshall on Facebook. Could this be *her* Geoff Marshall from so long ago? He certainly looks like he could be an older version of her Geoff, and he just happens to live in the Blue Mountains.

The first day in the beautiful old house is, expectedly, a little awkward. Judy, having never been away from her shop in almost twenty years, is feeling anxious, and while she jumped at the opportunity to escape to the Blue Mountains, she finds herself panicking. Fortunately, once Judy confesses her escape plan at dinner that night the others are able to persuade her to stay for the weekend. And at least, as Judy consoles herself, she’ll be able to discuss *Tirra Lirra by the River* by Jessica Anderson, the book club pick for their first meeting in the mountains, after which they’ll draw lots to determine whose personal choice will be the next book discussed the following Sunday. As their first evening progresses over fish pie, wine and conversations on women, beauty and aging, the atmosphere has become much more



relaxed and comfortable. So much so that Simone is positive she'll be able to get them all on yoga mats by the end of their stay, even Ros.

On Saturday, Adele and Simone head into town. While Simone waits in a cafe for Adele to finish her shopping, she sends a message to the Geoff Marshall she's tracked down on Facebook.

The first Sunday arrives and they gather to discuss *Tirra Lirra by the River*. Judy starts off the discussion by telling them how she identified with the protagonist, Nora, and how she too left her home in England at a young age and has never been back. Nora's story raises similar questions for Judy. Having left England over fifty years ago Judy's memories of home are full holes and fragments, she wonders what kind of place it is now, and how it would look and feel to go back. Nora is trying to discover who she's been and who she is now, and it's at this moment that Judy realises they are the same questions she's trying to answer herself. Finding herself enjoying the company of these women, Judy decides to stay on.

A relaxing few days has passed when Ros discovers that her month-long supply of dog treats for Clooney is almost completely gone. The others confess that they've been secretly giving Clooney treats and feeding him at the dinner table, even after Ros had told them strictly not to. Ros, outraged and deeply upset, does not hold back. After they all ashamedly apologise they leave Ros to settle down. As she calms down Ros realises the root of her outburst: fear. As Ros reflects on her mental and emotional state she reveals that she has been diagnosed with Parkinson's.

On the second Sunday Judy goes for a walk on her own and finds herself wandering off the track as it begins to pour down with rain. Completely lost, drenched and unable to move, the sight of Adele is a godsend. Concerned for Judy, Adele and Simone have come in search of her.

After some rest Judy is ready to get book club underway. After all it's her book, *Sacred Country* by Rose Tremain, up for discussion. Judy tells them all of her instant connection with this book and how from page one it was a mirror of her own experience. For Judy it depicted a time, place and feeling completely authentic and personal. She says that her hometown is a part of her identity, but she's not been back since she married her husband Ted and left for Australia in 1970. Judy goes on to tell them about her time with Ted, her miscarriage, how she left him and found herself in Mandurah and started the knitting shop; and how she and Ted are still married, despite Ted being in a long-term relationship with her friend Donna, whom she is still good friends with. And that the success of the knitting shop has caused her to feel trapped and suffocated. Judy then shows them a photo of her life-long knitting project – the longing for her home has a physical manifestation – she has knitted her hometown on a massive scale.

At dinner that night Simone notices Ros' hands shaking, she admits to Ros that she's known since their first day that Ros has Parkinson's but hasn't said anything. Ros tells Simone



she's not ready to tell anyone as she's still trying to come to terms with it herself. She hasn't even told Leah – James' niece who they took in when she was fourteen, and who she thinks of as her own daughter.

The next morning Ros finds Judy tucked up in bed and looking seriously ill. At the local hospital the doctor confirms that Judy has pneumonia and will have to stay for a couple of days, to which Judy begrudgingly agrees. When Judy realises she's left her phone at home she confesses to the others that she has been calling her shop at least twice a day to check how things are going. This may just be the reprieve Judy needs to completely detach herself from work.

At dinner that evening Simone receives a message . . . from Geoff Marshall, confirming that he is indeed *her* Geoff. They soon meet at a local restaurant and Simone hears how Geoff and his twin brother Doug have been longing to get in touch. Simone asks the question she's been struggling with for the last forty years, 'Why did you do that? Why did you both abandon me?' (170). She goes on to reveal the scar on her face, caused by her father the night she had pushed him for answers about where the Marshalls had gone. In turn, Geoff reveals to Simone that he and Doug have a half-sister, Paula, who is also Simone's half-sister. Geoff tells Simone that Carlo, Simone's father, got Claire, Geoff's mother, pregnant while they were away. Claire sold their property and went back to England with the boys. Simone senses there is more to the story that Geoff is reluctant to tell her.

On the third Sunday Judy is back from the hospital, and Adele has offered to help her sort out the business.

Book club has become an established ritual. Everyone eases into their places as Simone begins the discussion on her book, *Truth and Beauty* by Ann Patchett. The book examines the real-life relationship between the author and the acclaimed poet Lucy Grealy. This leads Simone to tell the others about her friendship with a woman called Colleen, which abruptly ended after eight years. Simone and Colleen had a very close relationship but it was never sexual. *Truth and Beauty*, for Simone, was the only depiction she'd come across that mirrored the intensity of friendship which she'd felt with Colleen. Simone reveals that she is asexual, and that her son Adam was a result of artificial insemination. She then goes on to tell them about her meeting with Geoff, the scar on her face, and the existence of Paula.

The following Thursday Adele and Judy sit down to discuss business management plans and the future of the knitting shop. Judy's heart just isn't in it anymore – she's determined to sell. Meanwhile, Simone has driven Ros into Sydney for her clinic appointment – one she's been avoiding since her diagnosis. Ros is finally ready to come to grips with what her Parkinson's means and what lies ahead for her. Armed with more information Ros feels more in control. She calls Donald, the leader of her quartet, and tells him about her diagnosis. Donald is devastated, and while an awful experience for Ros it is a significant marker of her acceptance.



It's the morning of their fourth Sunday and as Simone and Adele are practicing yoga they are soon joined by Judy and Ros. Judy tells them that she called Ted last night, and told him she wanted a divorce. Ros tells the group about her Parkinson's.

After midday they head to the local winter craft market and Adele pops into the pharmacy. There's a long queue and the man in front of her is getting excessively restless. Soon an altercation with the pharmacy assistant breaks out. In that moment, Adele's own fear is overwhelmed by her rage and she confronts the man. Despite his attempts to intimidate her, Adele stands her ground. Triumphant, she is overcome with relief and incredulity. Ros, Simone and Judy, who witnessed the whole scene, rush to Adele. They all commend her for intervening and decide a trip to the pub is in order, where they can also have their discussion on Adele's book *Unless* by Carol Shields.

Over drinks Adele begins the discussion by first talking about her father and her need to live up to his expectations and to fill the role of the son he had always wanted. Adele tells them that there is something about *Unless* that she can't quite grasp, something she keeps missing. It's a story of a woman, Reta, who feels powerless in every aspect of her life, who comes to realise that she has lived her life doing what's expected of her – being the good woman, wife, mother. She's never done anything to change this despite the everyday frustrations and anger it causes. Ros steps in and says that there is a correlation between the themes of the book and Adele's actions today: Adele has lived her life exactly as Reta – playing the dutiful good woman, mother, daughter, but today she took control of the situation as her true self compelled her to.

After more rounds of drinks and singing karaoke to 'I Am Woman', Adele reaches a sense of clarity about the culturally imposed perceptions and limitations she's placed on her life. How has she not been aware of this? This is what she's been missing, in the book and in her own life. It's time for Adele to acknowledge and cultivate her authentic self.

After the celebrations of the previous night, they all wake the next morning worse for wear.

Simone is finally having dinner with both Geoff and Doug, who has flown in from Melbourne. Geoff, apprehensively, reveals the horrible truth of Carlo and Claire's relationship – it wasn't a relationship at all. It was rape, and part of Carlo's long reign of terror and abuse in an attempt to get control of the Marshall property. Simone is devastated – her entire perception of her good hardworking father is irreparably shattered.

The final Sunday has come, and so too the final book of their retreat. *An Equal Music* by Vikram Seth, chosen by Ros, is a story of music and musicians, and of love. Ros begins by telling them that she had started reading the book when she was living in London but James died before she'd finished it. For a long time she didn't want to go back to it but when she eventually did, she loved it. One of the reasons Ros chose it for their book club was for the easy segue that it provided – it would allow her to finally talk openly about her Parkinson's, which draws parallels with the protagonist, a skilled violinist, who is slowly going deaf.



Ros had hoped that in discussing the book she would find a solution to her desperation but, alas, she hasn't. She is losing bits of herself every day. Struggling to breathe, and with the weight of her reality bearing down on her, Ros blacks out.

When she regains consciousness the others are all by her side. In a united front they all decide that they must make plans for the future that will allow each of them to support one another. However, before they're able to do this, there are transitional things they each need to do. For Simone, it's going to London to see Claire and meet Paula and to be with Geoff and Doug; Adele needs to see and talk to her daughter Jenna who lives in Canada, and show her the woman she is now, her authentic self; Judy needs to go back to her hometown in Suffolk, find the people and places from her past and reconnect; and Ros must get serious about her Parkinson's and create a self-management plan for her future, but she also needs to resolve fifteen years' worth of grief.

Six weeks later Ros, Simone, Adele and Judy are in London. Judy's knitted town is potentially going to be acquired by the Suffolk arts centre; Simone has met with Claire and Paula and they connected instantly; and a self-confident Adele is on her way to Quebec to see her daughter. The four friends are seated at a café happily chatting and watching a video of a playful Clooney. In this atmosphere of pure warmth, laughter and friendship Ros gets up from her seat and crosses the street to Euston Road, with violets in hand, to the spot where James died. Ros sits on the low wall nearby and concentrates on why she's here. And so, Ros begins her farewell to James, speaking directly to him as she has done so often for the last fifteen years, at peace with the reality that there will be no reply.

Writing Style

The story is told by a third person omniscient narrator, which provides the multiple perspectives of the four characters, and also allows the reader into their inner thoughts. And in the group's discussion of *Tirra Lirra by the River* they talk about the author's use of reflection as a narrative tool (106), foreshadowing Byrski's own use of the narrative device, which further allows us to understand the characters.

1. Could this story have been told in another way, another narrative style to the same effect? Would, for example, the same effects be achieved in an epistolary novel?
2. How else could the story be structured? How different would the story be if told from one perspective, for example from only Ros' point of view?

Characters

3. Which character did you identify with the most? Why? Which character do you think is most likeable?



4. While all four women form a close friendship as a group, we can see that Ros and Simone have their own unique relationship, as do Judy and Adele. Particularly in the case of Ros and Simone who are perhaps the most perceptibly different in personality, why and how do you think these pairings occurred?
5. Although told from multiple perspectives, do you think there's a main character? If so, who, and why?
6. '*I think he'll be fine*, she says, talking silently to James as she frequently does. *It's a relief, I hate the idea of having to organise a new tenant again, but he seems easy and Leah wouldn't have sent me a dud.*' (6). What do you think the purpose and significance of Ros' conversations with James are to our understanding of Ros as a character, and also to the narrative itself?
7. A lot can be said of a novel's setting playing as significant a role as a character within the story. How true do you think this is of the Blue Mountains in the story? Does it play a significant role? Could the story have taken place in any environment to the same effect?
8. 'So much seems to have shifted since then. *I've changed*, she thinks. *Just being here with these three women has changed me.*' (201). What do you think are the main contributing factors that have allowed these women to come away from this experience so changed?
9. Judy's personal book choice was *Sacred Country*; Simone's, *Truth and Beauty*; Adele's, *Unless* and Ros', *An Equal Music*. What did each of the personal choices tell you about each character?

Themes

Feminism & Family

'Ros suggests that they are all part of some sort of transitional generation of women who were aware of the rise of feminism in the late sixties and early seventies but let it pass them by.' (278-279)

10. There is an undercurrent of feminist sentiment throughout the novel. For instance, when discussing *Tirra Lirra by the River* the group considers the trend in literary prizes being awarded to male authors over female. And their final act as a group is to create a support network for each other – a '*sisterhood*' (329). Simone also suggests, they



(could this be specifically directed at the four women, or a collective ‘they’ of all women?) share an underlying problem, which is that they have all conformed to roles dictated to them by some institutionalised authority – ‘. . . we all have the same problem . . . We’re nice. We’re all nice women. We are *too* nice. We’ve spent our lives doing what’s expected of us.’ (304-305). To what extent would you agree with Simone’s statement that this is a problem they all share? Do you think this is an underlying factor of all their struggles? What do you believe the issues, shared or individually, are?

11. They also discuss the omnipresent issue regarding women: aging and appearance. While Simone is an immaculate dresser, ‘casually fashionable like an advert for Country Road’ (67), Adele has contemplated cosmetic surgery and has only just stopped dyeing her hair. For Adele, ‘Every woman she knows seems to think that the most important thing is to stay young and hide any signs of age’ (73). Do you think this is still an issue that pervades society? Has there been a change over time? What makes Simone so comfortable with aging, and Adele so fearful?
12. Interestingly, in their individual family units there are no prominent male figures. Yes, all the women are single, but this theme is also evident within the parent-child relationships – Ros’ de-facto daughter is James’ niece Leah; Adele’s daughter Jenna was the result of a fling; Simone’s son Adam, was conceived via artificial insemination, and while Judy has no children her relationship with Ted and Donna is less than conventional. What are your thoughts on this similarity? Do you think this was deliberate? And if so, what do you think the purpose is?
13. What do you think of the waiter’s remark, “Enjoy your meal, girls,” he says with a big grin. “All on a diet, are we?” (273), to which Ros responds, “Just sod off, you fatuous, sexist twit”? Was it an overreaction and an example of political correctness gone mad? Or was Ros’ response warranted?

Identity & Vulnerability

‘It was my music and my belief in *myself* as a musician that has got me through the years since James died, and now that’s been taken from me. What’s left? What am I now?’ – Ros, (327)

‘I don’t know what I want, who I want to be, nor even who I am since I retired.’
– Adele, (257)

14. All four women converge at moments in their lives when they’re experiencing some sort of identity crisis. What is the crisis for each woman?



15. 'It's not so long ago that she would have done that without thinking twice, but today she'd come face to face with the fear of her own vulnerability.' (Ros, 280). Inextricably tied to their questions of identity is a sense of vulnerability. How significant a factor do you think vulnerability plays in all their lives? What *are* their vulnerabilities?
16. When Judy confesses to Ros that she feels detached from the news of Maddie's death, Ros hits upon an interesting concept of 'emotional conservation', that is, 'conserving motional energy. Saving it for ourselves and for people whom we're really close to.' (242). What do you think of this concept? Is it universal? Is it a healthy coping mechanism?

Reading, Storytelling & Therapy

17. 'There were six original members, and it had grown slowly to sixteen – sixteen women in locations around the country . . . Now it has shrunk to just four.' (8). Why do you think these four seemingly very different women have continued with the book club?
18. Have you read any of the characters' personal book choices? If so, which character's response aligned most closely with your own?
19. Over their book club discussions, they've all reflected on various aspects of the reading experience. Two interesting ideas that emerge come from Adele, 'I also wonder if one just becomes a slightly more sophisticated reader with age', (107) and Judy 'I do believe it's true that we all bring something of ourselves to what we read . . . I wonder what personal baggage you might be bringing to this very lovely book.' (187). Do you agree with Adele's suggestion that age makes for a more sophisticated reader? And in response to Judy's observation of the reading experience, do you think it's possible to read a book objectively, without bringing your own baggage?
20. Of the book clubs you've personally experienced, what elements have worked and what elements have not? Discuss.
21. In their discussion of *Unless* they examine an author's ability to direct the reader and present things in the way they want, to include and exclude details as they see fit, in order to create a specific response. Are there any storylines or unresolved issues you would have liked to see addressed in the story that weren't?

Each character initially refers to their stay in the Blue Mountains, as a holiday, an escape, a caper, but ultimately it becomes a retreat for mind, body and soul – they've 'all changed in some way . . . faced up to something significant' (330). Amongst this group of women they've mended parts of themselves by telling their stories. Judy says, 'Perhaps I've wanted to tell my story for a long time. That's how it feels. And you've set this up in a way that lets me do that.' (139)



22. Each character is willing, unexpectedly, to delve into their memories and tell their stories to this group of near-strangers. Once the floodgates had opened it was impossible to stop. How was this atmosphere cultivated? What made it possible for these women to speak so openly?
23. In the closing scene of the story there is a stranger who helps Ros at the site of James' death; the woman tells Ros of the infamous accident fifteen years ago where a man died getting off the bus at this very spot. What do you think the significance of this final scene is? What does it add to the story?
24. The criteria for each member's personal choice is a book that tells the others something significant about them, it's an invitation to get to know them better – and so in this spirit, what would your choice be? And, of course, why?