

# Electric

'A stunningly tender, brave  
debut from a deeply talented  
new Australian writer.'

CLARE BOWDITCH

# and

# Mad

# and

# Brave

'Captivating and perfectly  
paced . . . Pitts' writing is  
delightfully eerie, full of  
twists and revelations  
I never saw coming.'

JESSIE STEPHENS

**READING NOTES**

*'At fifteen, Christina was simply fantastic. Crazy? Sure. Insane – why not? But wonderful crazy, electric and mad and brave' (p. 77)*

## Blurb

Matt Lacey is in a mental health facility recovering from a breakdown.

In an attempt to work through a mess of conflicting thoughts and feelings, he writes, unwinding the story of his adolescence with the beautiful, impassive, fierce Christina.

As Matt delves into the more agonising moments of his past, he has to learn to look directly at the pain and love that have made him who he is now.

Brazenly wearing its heart on its sleeve, *Electric and Mad and Brave* is a heightened and technicolour story about the soaring joy and numbing nightmare of being young and hopelessly in love.

## About Tom Pitts

Tom Pitts is a Melbourne-based writer, teacher, sound designer and musician. *Electric and Mad and Brave* is his first novel.

## Plot Summary

A series of journal entries spanning from 2015 to 2018 chart the complex and intense relationship between Matt and Christina.

Matt, twenty-eight, is in a psychiatric facility after suffering a breakdown and attempting suicide. While here, he reflects on his childhood and adolescent relationship with Christina, the daughter of family friends.

After Christina's father Alek dies of cancer, Christina and her mother, Connie, are left alone on Wychwood Farm with occasional visits from Matt and his father. Visiting as a teenager, Matt and Christina become closer, running off to Davies' paddock where they dream of escaping their lives. With the passing weeks and months, Christina's behaviour becomes increasingly erratic. After an incident where she dares Matt to throw a rock through a house window, she is sent away to Kewfield Secondary, a boarding school. Without Christina, Matt loses focus and motivation at school, unable to concentrate on anything but her and the time they spent together. They rekindle their relationship at Christina's sixteenth birthday party, having sex for the first time. The unforeseen consequence of this is a pregnancy and soon after, an abortion. Christina decides to cut Matt out of her life, ignoring his letters and calls, knowing their relationship isn't healthy or sustainable. In a desperate attempt to remedy this, Matt shows up at Wychwood, only to inadvertently wreak havoc, resulting in Christina having a manic episode and killing herself by stepping in front of a train.

In the final few journal entries, with the help of his friend Alinta, Matt begins the journey of coming to terms with his past and his grief.



# Themes

## Bildungsroman / coming-of-age story

- Matt and Christina meet when Matt is eleven and Christina is twelve and the story charts their relationship through their adolescence with reflections by a twenty-eight-year-old Matt intertwined throughout. Why do you think Tom Pitts structured the novel in this way?

## The fragility of life

- The highs and lows of the characters' lives are particularly poignant in this story. From the euphoric to depressive states of Matt and Christina, to the vividness of the characters' lives being juxtaposed against reminders of death and decay.

*'I know it sounds absurd, but I'm convinced the incidents are connected; in my head Christina awakens and then Alek becomes ill.'* (p. 27)

Incidents include Alek's battle with cancer, Christina almost drowning, Matt attempting suicide by gassing himself in a car, the boy who jumps under a train, and Mr Harvey being mauled and attacked. Why are we given so many reminders of death?

## Corrupt love

- Throughout the story the relationship between Matt and Christina is mirrored against Connie and Peter, Christina's mother and Matt's father: *'They'd rolled in the same muck as we had. At sixteen; into their forties. Twin stories.'* (p. 218) What is the purpose of this parallel? What does it show?

## Violence

- Violence is present throughout the narrative, often appearing at key moments and shifting the course of Matt's life. Key scenes include the incident with the nail clippers (p. 145), Yoav's headphones (p. 220), the punch at the abortion rally (p. 264), and the abortion itself which is characterised through harsh clinical imagery in *'our child was sucked into a tube and turned into medical waste.'* (p. 226) What do these violent moments reveal about Matt's character?

# Key Characters

## Matthew

- Everything we see, that we learn, and that we are told, comes directly from the voice of Matt and through the lens of his perspective. How does this affect the truth or the reality of what we are witnessing?
- Matt positions himself in Christina's life as a kind of saviour or hero: *'I'd come to be a hero, to be required, needed . . . But what use is a hero without a disaster?'* (p. 244) How is Matt's sense of self altered by whether or not he fits this idealised version of himself? How does it impact his relationship with the other characters?
- Mental illness plays a huge part in both Matt's and Christina's lives. How does the way Matt views the past change as his understanding of his own mental illness grows?

*'Now that I'm aware – here and now, in this hospital room – it's easy to identify, to diagnose even: her slurring words, the speech; the certainty her ludicrous plan was infallible, that she was invincible, and somehow impervious to pain – sure, now it's clear.'* (pp. 76-77)

*'But of course, to me emotions were not chemical then but ethereal.'* (p. 98)

- What do Matt's dreams reveal about himself and the events he's previously described?

## Christina

- In earlier journal entries, Matt paints Christina as magical, mythical and ethereal. A young Matt likened her to the trapped Persephone or to an effervescent wood nymph. This is contrasted against the cold reality of the terminology used by the mental health professionals regarding her behaviour in order to diagnose her:

*'I can't help envisaging Gloria's prognosis, or Colin's or Anita's; all the other ones – something domestic and unmagical probably, barely raising an eyebrow: anhedonia, dysphoria, a fall from the hypomanic [. . .] I'd never heard of anhedonia; and so the blankness draping over Christina that week struck me as something far more mystical; Persephone living half her life in the underworld.'* (pp. 97-98)

*'I swiped at branches and followed the sound of Christina giggling, the echoing laughter of a wood nymph.'* (p. 77)

In a moment of clarity Christina tells Matt: *'Look at you. Look at me. Can you not see how we're sick? We keep coming back – something keeps pulling us back. I didn't want you to come tonight, but I did – like I was addicted.'* (p. 293)

Given that everything we learn about Christina is through the lens of Matt, do we ever truly get an accurate picture of who she is as a character?

- Tom Pitts references Greek mythology as Matt likens Christina to a goddess-like figure. Does the biblical allusion in her name, which contains the word 'christ' bear significance to her character or to Matt's view of her?
- Christina is often physically wounded from various events throughout the story, Matt dreams of her *'unwinding her bandages to reveal her wound spouting like a fountain'* and her exclaiming *'It won't heal!'* (p. 128) What is the significance of these physical wounds and what do they reveal about Christina?

## Connie

- Connie is a tragic figure whose mental health continuously declines after the death of her husband. Like Matt, she often lives more in the past than in the present. How does Connie's guilt over Alek shape the rest of her life?
- How do the changes in Wychwood Farm itself reflect the changes in Connie?

## Setting

### South Yarra Clinic for Emotional Health and Wellbeing

- This location is tied to the present in which an adult Matt is reflecting back on the events of the past. How does this present and reflective Matt differ from the Matt of the past?
- What new insights does Matt uncover by looking back on past events with the aid of therapy and a psychologist?

### Wychwood Farm

- Wychwood is the home of Christina, Alek and Connie.
- Although Matt does visit Wychwood as an adult, the location is deeply tied to his past with Christina as this is where the majority of their interactions take place.
- How does the farm change over the years and in what ways is this reflective of the characters' emotional states?
- How does Matt's perception of Wychwood change over time?

*'Poring over stories resembling the vigour I associated with Wychwood, a life that seemed far more alive and vital than my own.'* (p. 140)

### Davies' paddock

- Davies' paddock is one of the most significant locations in the novel as it acts as both a secret refuge that Christina shares only with Matt, and it's later revealed as the site of her death. What do Matt's dreams about Davies' paddock suggest?

## Key Intertextual References

- *Bridge to Terabithia* (pp. 41, 65-72, 73-75, 101): The book *Bridge to Terabithia* is briefly mentioned and in many ways connects to the story of Matt and Christina. Similarly to *Bridge to Terabithia*, where Leslie introduces Jesse to a new imaginary world, Christina introduces Matt to her secret place where she imagines another life.

*'I found her standing out over the river, high on an ancient footbridge, waving her arms. It really was the oddest thing, the bridge, seeming to appear out of nowhere, apropos of nothing – and far taller than it needed to be too, rearing metres above the water.'* (p. 66)

At first Matt recounts that Christina drowned in the river, which mirrors the death of Leslie. However, it is later revealed that there is no river behind Wychwood. Why did Matt imagine that she died this way?

- *Bladerunner* (pp. 143-144): The film *Bladerunner*, in particular the concept of a 'Replicant', is mentioned several times throughout the novel. Why has Tom Pitts chosen to make this reference? What does it suggest?
- *Romeo and Juliet* (p. 245): How do the experiences of Matt and Christina parallel Shakespeare's play?

## Writing Style

- The story is told through the medium of Matt's journal entries. How does this affect how we perceive and experience the story?
- Matt is an unreliable narrator, as the narrative shifts and changes depending on Matt's age, mood and maturity. How does having an unreliable narrator alter our understanding of the story and characters?
- How much do you trust Matt as a vehicle of the truth?

*'Do people believe I'm healed when I'm not? Maybe I believe I'm ill when I'm not. Can they see something I can't? If someone else read this journal, I wonder, would it be clear to them, or would they still be unsure? Am I a fraud? I can't help but wonder.'* (p. 147)

*'Reading back, I've been harsh on Connie; those last entries in particular. I suppose they reveal my own headspace more than anything else. Nonetheless, I've been an unfair judge.'* (p. 96)

*'I need to stick to the facts, tell what actually happened. Otherwise what's the point? Otherwise I may as well be writing a fantasy?'* (p. 120)

## Significant Quotes

Discuss:

- The recurring lines:
  - *'Love her, won't you.'* (pp. 164, 209, 244, 245)
  - *'You are stronger than you know . . . Don't forget that.'* (pp. 3, 223, 226, 255, 261, 311)
  - *'Who the hell kisses someone else's kid?'* (pp. 60, 322, 326)
- *'Christina knows she can ask me to do anything at all and I'll do it. She knows she can say whatever she wants and I won't be upset or object. Centuries of academics expounding the brain as driver of thought and action – all proven wrong: Christina simply grips my heart and my limbs move in whatever manner she designs. In this way, I suppose I'm a prisoner. She's aware of this, and knows I don't mind.'* (p. 36)