



# THE BEARCAT

## READING NOTES

*'A remarkable debut'* Stephanie Bishop

GEORGIA ROSE PHILLIPS





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### About the book

*bearcat*: a large, tree-dwelling mammal; 1920s slang for a fiery girl or woman.

1987. Family is everything to Anne. *Our Messiah*. And Anne demands everything from The Family; their loyalty, their money, even their children. In return, she promises existential comfort to lost and weary women. Because Anne knows how hard it is to build a family – and how easy it is to lose one.

1921. A child is born on a sticky summer evening. *Our Anne*. Her mother, Florence, is trapped at home with an indifferent husband and a relentlessly demanding newborn, struggling to reconcile motherhood and her shifting sense of self.

For both women, the past is for escaping, and love is impossible to trust. All they can hope for is that their family will save them.

***The Bearcat* is a dark and nuanced exploration of longing, power and the inviolable grip of history.**

### About the author

Georgia Rose Phillips is an award-winning writer who publishes fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, literary criticism and academic scholarship. Her creative non-fiction novella *Holocene* was runner-up in the 2018 Scribe Nonfiction Prize for Young Writers, and her short story 'New Balance' was a fiction winner in the 2021 Ultimo Prize. In 2022, her short story 'Beyond the Marram Grass' was a shortlisted finalist in the American Association of Australasian Literary Studies (AAALS) Prize.

Georgia is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide and holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of New South Wales.



## Discussion questions

### **Writing and style**

1. The author notes at the beginning that this book is a work of fiction, not a non-fiction account or biography. Why do you think she makes this point? How does it impact your reading experience?
2. If you came to this novel knowing something about *The Family* and Anne Hamilton-Byrne, what elements of this story were surprising, or unsurprising? How did it make you think differently about what you know from the news or other sources?
3. In the novel, we hear from Florence in the first year of motherhood, Anne at various stages of her life, and from women who were once part of the cult. What do you think of the mix of voices and perspectives in this novel? How do these voices complement or contradict each other?
4. There are many gaps in the story – especially in Anne’s life, as the narrative jumps. Were there any moments you wished to know more about? Why do you think the author chose not to illustrate Anne’s whole life?
5. The title, *The Bearcat*, refers to 1920s slang – and is also Ralph’s nickname for young Anne. Do you think this nickname is accurate? How does this title shape your understanding of the story, and the author’s aims?

### **Domestic life and motherhood**

6. How would you describe Florence’s feelings about her marriage? Do you see her as trapped? How does she compare to Ida, or the women who join *The Family* in a few decades’ time?
7. What clues are there that Florence’s family is well off? How is she able to bring luxury to the house in Sale? How does this influence Anne’s upbringing and home life?
8. Did you see Florence’s anxiety about motherhood as typical of first-time mothers? (Or her belief that her baby would be special?) How much do you think is because of her own personality and unexpressed wishes?
9. Compare Florence’s reluctance to have further children with Anne’s desperation for more children with Lionel. Why do you think each character feels the way they do? How do they define themselves as women, and mothers?
10. Do you think of Anne as being truly maternal? Do you think she was a good wife to either Lionel or Bill?
11. Anne’s daughter Judith does not have a big presence in the book – in the end, she is said to have left Anne entirely. What do you think it would have been like growing up as Anne’s daughter, and Florence’s granddaughter?



## **Love and desire**

12. Florence and Ralph meet in England at the end of WWI and move to Australia to start their married life together. What did Florence see in Ralph to start with? Do you think they were ever a good match?
13. Florence has an ambivalent attitude towards sex – she often doesn't have the language to express how she feels, but she is very aware of the structures of gender and marital relations and what is expected. From our modern standpoint, how would you describe Florence's relationship to sex?
14. Florence and Ida's connection deepens over the first year of Anne's life. What did you think of this relationship, and how much of a role do you think Ida's childlessness plays? How much of Florence's feelings about Ida stem from her growing disconnection from Ralph, and how much is about what Ida herself offers?
15. What do you think is the source of Anne's hunger for love? What kind of love is Anne looking for, and why can't she find it?
16. How do Lionel and Bill compare as Anne's husbands? What does she need and receive from both men? Do you think Anne was truly happy with Lionel?

## **Agency, power and victimhood**

17. After reading both Anne and Florence's stories, do you feel there are any obvious antagonists? Who or what comes across as a villain?
18. Both Anne and Florence wrestle with power and powerlessness over the course of the novel. How do they deal with situations where they have, or lack, power and agency? Do you think they are consciously aware of it, or do they respond to it instinctively?
19. What do you think drives Anne's desire to change her name from Evelyn as an adolescent? Given her sometimes difficult home and school life, how do you think young Anne sees herself?
20. Do the women in Part I reflecting on their experience in the cult come across as victims? In what ways are they susceptible to The Family's teachings? How does the author present or complicate their victimhood?
21. Florence wants, or tries, to leave Ralph – and her baby – at multiple points in the story. Why doesn't it work? What kind of life do you think would make Florence happy?
22. The postlude shows Anne in the last years of her life, no longer in control. Does this portrayal change the way you see her character?



## History and origins

23. How are the two main characters shaped by history? Personal history, and their position in world history? Consider the role of war and the changing role of women in the culture across the 1900s.
24. Florence's sister is described as schizophrenic, and we learn that Florence herself also enters a mental institution. How do you think this history of mental illness influences Anne? Do you see any indication that her adult personality and choices reflect her family's history?
25. Is there a single defining moment that turns Anne into the 'monster' she is known as? What are the turning points in her life? What are the seeds in her early history that might point to her eventual trajectory?
26. From our early introduction to adult Anne through her former followers, she's described as presenting a mythology of the self. Compare what we learn secondhand about Anne in Part I with the reality of her upbringing as presented in this story.
27. How much do you think Anne believes her own mythology of reincarnation and Christhood? Why do you think this narrative suits her? Why do you think it attracts other people?