

Bookshop of the Broken Hearted

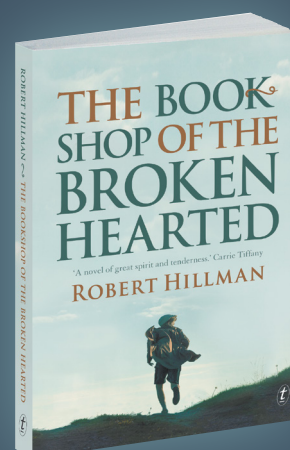


Robert Hillman

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Praise for Robert Hillman and *The Bookshop of the Broken Hearted*

'A novel of great spirit and tenderness.' Carrie Tiffany

'While this tale contains darkness and heartache, they are accompanied by truth and love, and ultimately, hope, and the human capacity to overcome...A sensitive, enthralling story, destined to become a favourite.' *Books + Publishing*

'Hillman's prose is a pleasure to read, elegantly alert to the paradox of strong feeling [and] full of poetry.' *Australian, on Joyful*

'Counting against all [the] business is Hillman's gift for compelling characters, the elegance of his prose and his genius with inventive, surprising dialogue.' *The Saturday Paper, on Joyful*

'While it may not be a novel's main purpose, certainly one of its pleasures can lie in how it witnesses the history of the form itself...Robert Hillman's *Joyful* is most immediately a nineteenth-century novel, a detailed work that portrays an entire, sealed world of complex and ultimately connected storylines.' *Australian Book Review, on Joyful*

About Robert Hillman

Robert Hillman has written a number of books including his 2004 memoir *The Boy in the Green Suit*, which won the National Biography Award, and *Joyful*, published by Text in 2014. He lives in Melbourne.

A Reader's Introduction to *The Bookshop of the Broken Hearted*

The question of how one can survive after loss, especially loss as huge and inexplicable as the

Holocaust, is at the heart of this tender and ruminative novel with its story of an unlikely love affair.

Tom is a practical man – 'see it, fix it' (69). He can also be naïve – about women and the world. But he has his own insight, and he is loving, especially of Peter, the boy he comes close to losing. His surname Hope tells us something of his nature. But most of all, perhaps, he is reliable.

Babel, Hannah's surname, also gives hints to her character. Multilingual, she is talkative to the point of 'babbling'. Intellectually and politically minded, she is also sometimes 'mad'. She has suffered enormous loss, most especially of her son Michael, killed at Auschwitz.

Tom wants to make everything better. Thinking about two murders, and 'a woman full of tender love turn[ing] away from a child because her own child was murdered,' he recoils. He wants to be the person who stops these terrible tragedies (252).

In contrast, Hannah is not sure that she wants to make everything better. Despite her love for Tom, Hannah finds it hard to give up her grief. She is worried that if she makes things better, by allowing herself to love Peter, for example, she will have betrayed Michael and allowed the SS to win.

As well as exploring how loss affects an individual, *The Bookshop of the Broken Hearted* looks at the nature of art and creation after tragedy. Books are at once intellectual stimulation, consolation and a symbol of thought and resistance.

The novel also takes as its subject Australia and what it is to be Australian. Hannah believes she knows and understands everything about both Tom and Australia, and then realises she has more to learn.

If how one can survive after loss is the central question of the novel, its central and simple truth is that – somehow – one can.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is your answer to the central question of this novel – how does one endure after terrible loss?
2. As Hannah reminds herself at the end of the novel, she has chosen to live. Where does this will to live come from?
3. Is Hannah's heart forever broken? Are the cracks only papered over by her love for Tom and eventually for Peter, or are they fully healed?
4. Tom has also suffered loss – of Trudy, and then Peter. Is it possible to compare his losses to Hannah's? Does he need healing in the same way she does?
5. What draws Tom and Hannah together? Why do their differences bring them together rather than drive them apart?
6. How much does Hannah want Tom to understand her and what she has experienced? Talk about her difficulty in telling him what has happened.
7. Is Tom a 'typical' Australian man? More than this, to what extent does he represent Australia itself?
8. What does this novel have to say about Australia and Australian-ness? Is there a contrast drawn between 'old' Europe and 'new' Australia?
9. Hannah herself draws a contrast between the people she knew in Europe and the Hometown people; the former cultured and political, the latter putting off reading until retirement. Yet, 'here, Adolf Hitler would have brayed in vain. Maybe.' (196). Is Hannah right, that the Australians at that place and that time would not have listened to Hitler? What about in this place, and in this time?
10. Talk about the shopping list that ends the novel. Is it a sign that happiness lies in the domestic? That the ordinary should be valued? That Tom's reliability is more of a virtue than other qualities?
11. What makes Tom such a good father? Is it his reliability? Or do you think his abandonment of Peter to the Jesus Camp means he is not such a good father?
12. Tom often thinks of Hannah as mad, the town thinks so too, and Hannah herself says she is. Is she? Is madness inevitable after what she has been through ('no wonder with Hitler and all that' (114) as the town's collective consciousness puts it)? Or is her response, in fact, sane? You might want to think about Hannah and Tom's brief discussion of *Great Expectations*. What is madness in this context?
13. Trudy too goes 'mad.' How does the book treat Trudy and her inability to be a good mother? How does the Jesus camp relate to the concentration camps of the Holocaust?
14. Discuss this quote from Nietzsche: 'If you look over the edge, you see nothing, nothing. But if you stare at nothing, it looks back at you' (91). Why has Hillman chosen to have Hannah repeat it to Tom?
15. Hannah 'knows that we cannot speak of things that are "meant to be." If her long journey from Europe to Hometown, to Tom Hope, to the bookshop of the broken hearted was meant to be, then *Mein Kampf* was meant to be, and the cleansing, the Säuberung of the students in Opernplatz was meant to be' (128). Do you agree with Hannah? Or are Hannah and Tom 'meant' to be together?
16. Why is Hannah open to loving Tom after she has buried two husbands, but resistant to loving Peter?
17. During the war, hiding out at the abandoned farm, Hannah decides that if the war were to end she would 'read no more books. She would avoid art of any sort. She would not cultivate her mind. Nothing in books was true. Art was not true. The truth was Michael burned up at Auschwitz.' What does she mean by art and books not being 'true'? And why doesn't she keep her resolution?
18. There has been a lot of debate about creating art about the Holocaust. Discuss the issues and ethics of this in relation to *The Bookshop of the Broken Hearted*.