

BOOK CLUB KIT

"A gem of a novel."—GRAEME SIMSION, author of *The Rosie Project*

Emily Spurr

A  
MILLION  
THINGS

A  
Novel



## DEAR READERS,

First of all, thank you for choosing to read my book! The idea of a group of friends selecting my book to read and then having robust and enjoyable conversations about it makes me a little giddy (in the best possible way).

*A Million Things*, to me, is many things. It's a story about grief, isolation, mental illness, and living in an unstable household. It explores the shattering moment when a home becomes just a house and how you live through that. It's about connectedness and vulnerability as well as memories and grief and how we make sense of one using the other. It deals with quite dark subject matter, there's no escaping that, but I hope that in reading it, you find something more.

It was so important to me that this story be rounded. I didn't want this to be a story about a kid whose selfish mum abandoned her. Or for Lettie's story to be a titillating tale of a hoarder. I couldn't in good conscience let the pain and lives of the people in my book be character quirks or a lazy shorthand to make them interesting. I wanted, I *needed* this to be a fuller picture than that. Mental illness is a cruel and insidious thing; it hurts. It isolates not just the sufferer but also those who love them. I didn't want to sensationalize that; I just wanted to show it. Rae's mum was a good mum, she loved her child fiercely and she did the best she could, but it just wasn't enough. Because sometimes it isn't. And that's cruel and unfair, but that's also how it is sometimes. I wanted the tragedy of that to be seen, just as I wanted the complexity of her (and Rae's and Lettie's) situation to be seen, in a three-dimensional way. I hope I've gone some way to realizing that.

The other thing I wanted to depict in this book was a quiet idea of hope and, perhaps, even joy. Life can be a dark and scary place, but hope's a pretty tenacious weed; it can exist even in the deepest cracks of existence. Without being twee or oversimplistic, I wanted show that. The power of quiet joy. The joy that comes in small moments: sitting reading a book in the late afternoon; the whisper of breeze moving through leaves; laughing unexpectedly with another person; sitting quietly with someone you love and trust. In the darkest times of my life those small, tiny moments of joy kept me alive. I wanted to capture some of that feeling in *A Million Things* through Rae and Lettie and Splinter and their interactions and relationships with each other. The wonder of small, quiet joy is the hope that it brings. Because if you can experience that tiny sliver of light, even when things are dark and terrifying, then anything is possible. *Hope* is possible. *My* hope is that I managed, in some small way, to show that.

**EMILY SPURR**

# a conversation with **EMILY SPURR**



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## **How would you describe *A Million Things*?**

It's a hopeful novel, I think. It's about grief, resilience, vulnerability and the importance of connection and community. It deals with quite dark subject matter, there's no escaping that, but at its heart it's a hopeful novel.

## ***A Million Things* follows fifty-five days in the life of ten-year-old Rae, who has to look after herself and her dog when her mother disappears. What inspired this idea?**

The idea of the story came from my own life, though I'd like to emphasize that Rae's story is not my story. I am not Rae. But for a long period of my life, most of my twenties, in fact, I suffered from mental

illness and the associated depression and anxiety that went along with that. It was a dark and traumatic time for me and those who loved me. I still have nightmares about that time and I

wake from them panicked and feeling sick. It was after one of these dreams, as I stood in the shower washing the night out of my hair, that I considered what would have happened if I'd had a child in all that chaos and trauma. What would their life have been like? Could they have survived that? What sort of person would you need to be to survive that? And Rae was born, her voice speaking to her absent mum in my head.

**Rae's point of view is so real and authentic. Why did you decide to write a novel from the perspective of a young child?**

It was never anything else; it was always Rae's voice and Rae's story in my head. I think we underestimate kids a lot. And I say that as a parent who does that too. I remember being a kid; I have vivid memories of a rich emotional life. That inner life wasn't childish or undeveloped, though as a young person I lacked experiences to compare or measure against. Kids see and experience the same things adults do and they hear and see a lot more than perhaps adults realize. I know I did. Emotions don't grow and mature and suddenly become "adult," perhaps how we express them matures, but the experiences and the feelings themselves remain fundamentally the same. I'd suggest that how we think about them as a child and as an adult doesn't change that much, we just have this way of looking back on childhood as if it is separate, or a time before reason and deep thought; I think that distinction is manufactured and not entirely true. The *how* might be a little different, but the *what* is essentially the same. If you're experiencing unemployment or depression or a relationship breakdown the kids in your life are experiencing that too.

I often wonder why we do this, this unintentional diminishing of the experiences and emotional life of children. I have lots of theories but no answers. Perhaps it makes parenting easier as we all stumble around in the dark, doing the best we can in the moment. Perhaps thinking of kids in that way makes our choices and behavior less fraught to contemplate. Or perhaps, as an adult, making the mental change to accommodate someone's transition from baby to toddler to child is hard. There was a time when their thoughts, experiences and thought processes were clearly different to our own, but at some point, some undefined, hazy point, quite a bit earlier than it takes us to catch up with it, I think, their minds and lives became more like ours than not. They have less experience, and perhaps

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a greater capacity for play and joy (it certainly feels like that), but their interior and exterior lives are similar to ours. Very similar.

That's why I chose to write in the voice of Rae. In my mind, it was always Rae's story to tell.

**Rae soon befriends Lettie, an older neighbor of hers who has her own secrets and struggles, and they begin to rely on each other. What is the significance of their relationship in the novel?**

Their relationship is everything. Without meaning to, or wanting to, their connection becomes a salve against the burning cold of trauma and grief. What starts as mutual distrust develops into a wary cooperative, but what it becomes, ultimately, is love.

Rae and Lettie, at first glance, are opposites. One's ten, the other in her seventies. Rae is organized, neat, keeps to a routine. Lettie seems to live on her porch, from where she watches the neighborhood, and comes and goes with no regularity. But the more they begin to see each other the more they see the things that are similar. Both are often only seen via their surfaces: Lettie an older woman who lives alone and watches people to pass the time; Rae, a kid, no trouble, neat and tidy. Very rarely does anyone look deeper than the facade that is presented and that is the way both of them like it. At least that's what they tell themselves. Both have secrets, heavy secrets that weigh them down. They do not drop their guard for others. Ever. Until each other. Until circumstance and an unsought but growing affection forces them, little by little, to let the other in. To let themselves be vulnerable. To let themselves be loved again.

**Rae and Lettie are not related, but they become a makeshift family over time. What do you hope to say about the concept of family in *A Million Things*?**

Family is the people who help us feel safe. The feeling of belonging is a very powerful one and the opposite of that, loneliness, is a painful state for a human to experience. Family, if we're lucky, is a group of people we're born into. But family is also something we make, and sometimes it's something we stumble across.

**Rae comes from a broken home without her mother, while Lettie's home is overcrowded with the things she can't get rid of. What is the significance and meaning of *home* in this novel?**

That's a big question. I'm not sure that I was playing with the significance of home so much as the gut-dropping feeling of when your home is gone. Perhaps those are the same things. The experience of home is universal—we are social creatures; that's why loneliness burns us like dry ice. Home is an essential part of social connection, a building block of it. The loss of it strikes at something fundamental.

I think most adults will have experienced that moment when you go back to your childhood home, and it's not your home anymore. The feeling is like a slap to the chest. It leaves you adrift, a little bit lost. The safe place, the place you went at the end of the day, with all its imperfections, your *home* is gone. And now you must create your own. Or go without. It's a profound experience for a person, even more so when you experience it as a child.

What is home? Is it a place? Is it a feeling? Is it a person? When it's gone or when it's taken away, can you make a new one? Or is it always second best after that? Is the memory shadow of what was lost too great to move on from? These were some of the questions I pondered when writing *A Million Things*. I don't pretend to have answers to those questions; perhaps the answers differ from person to person, but I wanted to explore them.

### **What was your writing process like for *A Million Things*?**

I often hear how writers are “planers” or “pantsers.” That is, they're either writers who plan the whole book from go to whoa, or they just start writing and see where it takes them. I don't think I'm either of those things. I'm somewhere in the middle, perhaps. I had a fair idea of what I wanted to write, and I had the ending before I'd finished the book, but I didn't really know how I was going to get there or exactly what would happen. I suppose you could say I had a rough road map but was open to detours. And there were plenty of detours.

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***A Million Things* engages with real topics like neglect, abandonment, and mental illness. Why did you think it was important to touch on these themes in your book?**

Because these things are happening. There are kids and adults out there dealing with dark things beyond their control and they deserve our compassion and, more than that, our understanding. Storytelling is central to what it is to be human, I think. I believe narrative is how we enter into the mind of another. It's how we see through other eyes, how we develop empathy and emotional intelligence.

It was so important to me that this story be rounded. I didn't want this to be a story about a kid whose selfish mum abandoned her. Or for Lettie's story to be a titillating tale of a hoarder. I couldn't in good conscience let the pain and lives of the people in my book be character quirks or a lazy shorthand to make them interesting. I wanted, I *needed* this to be a fuller picture than

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**Without giving anything away, what was your favorite scene to write? What scene was the most challenging?**

Surprisingly, the most challenging was none of the scenes you'd expect. There were plenty I cried while writing and found emotionally taxing, but that wasn't "hard"—it was honest and exhausting in a good way. I think, perhaps, those feelings let me know those scenes were working. From a technical perspective, the most challenging scene was when Rae had a panic attack on Lettie's porch. I was running a lot to a playlist that included Josh Pyke at the time, and the rhythm of one of his songs ("House on the Hill") got stuck in my head—I wrote the scene to the rhythm of that song. It's a great song, but it's not right for the scene. One line—*The noises that the trains / Made sounded like people in my head*—triggered something for me as I was thinking about Rae's feelings. Something about it spoke to me of anxiety and panic, but then I couldn't get the rhythm of it out of my brain. That delightful little earwig caught all my words up in a cadence that was hard to unfasten. It took me multiple rewrites and I was still trying to fix it at final pages... I think I got there in the end, but it was a real process, untangling that.

My favorite scene to write was probably the road trip. When I started writing the book, Lettie was not in it. She kind of just stepped into the story and then she kept stepping in until unexpectedly (for me) they were going on a road trip. At which point I was like *Well, I guess you're kind of important, then*. It was delightful and I felt like I had nothing to do with it. Lettie just kicked her way in and took over, and I loved her all the more for it.

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***A Million Things* is an emotional and gut-wrenching story of resilience in the face of difficulty. What do you hope readers will take away from this story?**

Two things, I think. The first is compassion. I want people to finish this book with a deep feeling of compassion for the characters. Not just Rae and Lettie, but Rae's mum and grandmother and all the other characters in her life too. I tried hard to present them in a rounded way, as real people, with complex lives and experiences, and if people finish this book with a feeling of compassion toward others, especially those going through mental illness and its fallout, then I would be very happy with that.

The other thing I'd wish for readers to take away from this story is hope. Hope can exist even in the cracks of life. It doesn't always take the form we expect, or are taught to expect, but life is full of joy. Joy can be loud, but it's just as powerful when it's quiet, I think. Joy for me isn't the big things. Getting published, getting a good review, those are wonderful and giddy things, but the joy in my life comes in the smaller moments, the quiet moments: sitting reading a book in the late afternoon; the sound of a spotted dove in the tree above my head as I write this; the whisper of breeze moving through leaves; sitting quietly with someone I love and trust. In the darkest times in my life those small, tiny moments of joy kept me alive. I tried to capture some of that feeling in *A Million Things* through Rae and Lettie and Splinter and their interactions and relationships with each other. The wonder I find in small, quiet joy is the hope that it brings. Because if you can experience that joy, that tiny sliver of light, even when things are dark and terrifying, then anything is possible. *Hope* is possible.

That's what I hope readers take away from this story.



**Born in Tasmania, EMILY SPURR lives in Melbourne, Australia, with her partner, their twins, and a deaf, geriatric cat. Short-listed for the prestigious Victorian Premier's Unpublished Manuscript Prize, *A Million Things* is her first novel.**

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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you see the relationship between Splinter and Rae? Is he her protector? An extension of her? Her dependant (someone who needs her and keeps her going)? Or something else?
2. The character of Rae's mother, though central to the book, is never seen directly by the reader; we see her only through Rae's memories and thoughts. What sort of picture of Rae's mother do you, as the reader, form from this perspective?
3. Why do you think the author might have chosen to show you Rae's mother in this way?
4. The theme of home is strong in this novel. How do each of the characters—Rae, Lettie and Oscar—differ or coincide in their experiences of, and relationship to, home?
5. Consider what is unsaid in Rae's narration. Do you think there are insights to be gained into Rae's character and thoughts by what she does not say or address? If so, what do you think the reader can learn from the things Rae leaves unsaid?
6. Rae has a strong reaction to Lettie's relationship with her son, Chris. What parallels do you think Rae might be drawing between Lettie's relationship boundaries with Chris and Rae's relationship with her own mother?
7. What do you think about Rae's reaction when she first sees Lettie's cleaned house? What do you think is behind Rae's response?
8. Briar Rose/Sleeping Beauty and the overgrown garden are reoccurring motifs in the novel. How do you feel these ideas tie in with Rae's situation and the extended in-between, or transitional, space in which she finds herself?
9. *A Million Things* deals with deep loss, grief and mental illness. Do you believe these topics are presented in a realistic way? How did you react to these themes?
10. What was your interpretation of the overall tone of the book? Was it sad? Hopeful? Or something else?
11. What are your thoughts about Lettie's future? Do you feel the implication at the end of the novel is that things will be better for her? Or is it that that her life will go back to the way it was? Which one of these outcomes do you think is more likely, based on your reading of the book?

# A SELECTION OF AUSTRALIAN FICTION AUTHORS BINGO

**First to read three gets a book of their choice bought for them by the other members.**

Toni Jordan • Robbie Arnott • Kavita Bedford  
Krissy Kneen • Heather Rose • Tara June Winch  
Graeme Simsion • Jane Rawson • Peter Carey  
Carrie Tiffany • Jock Serong • Kate Grenville  
Chris Womersley • Melissa Lucashenko • Josephine Wilson

## SPOILER ALERT

# INTERNET SEARCH HISTORY

**Look through your internet search history and then think of a book it best represents.**

**For example, when writing *A Million Things*, here were some of the items in my internet search history:**

Child abandonment laws Victoria • Hoarding • Clinical definitions of hoarding  
Hoarding rating scale

Department of Health & Human Services resources and information  
and guidelines for hoarding intervention

Decomposing bodies • Smell of decomposition

Effects of temperature on body decomposition

Insect activity and body decomposition • Are redbacks opportunistic eaters?

Plants that flower in Melbourne over winter

Organisational structure of Department of Health & Human Services

How long does blood and bone smell when you put it on your garden?

Tenant notice to vacate Victoria • Dogs and amputation