

Six Minutes by Petronella McGovern

Summary

One Thursday morning, Lexie Parker dashes to the shop for biscuits, leaving Bella in the safe care of the other mums in the playgroup.

Six minutes later, Bella is gone.

Police and media descend on the tiny village of Merrigang outside Canberra. Locals unite to search the dense bushland. But as the investigation continues, relationships start to fracture, online hate messages target Lexie, and the community is engulfed by fear.

Is Bella's disappearance connected to the angry protests at Parliament House? What secrets are the parents hiding? And why does a local teacher keep a photo of Bella in his lounge-room?

What happened in those six minutes and where is Bella?

A note from the author

When my son was three years old, we lost him in Questacon, Canberra's science museum, which is five storeys high and full of strange contraptions. It has an earthquake room, a roller coaster, a gravity drop – exciting nooks and crannies for a toddler but places where he could hide or hurt himself. After a frantic search, we found him safely, but it brought into stark focus those fears of losing a child. At the time, I was part of a wonderful playgroup who met once a week – a group of twelve mums and their toddlers. I was interested in what happens when something terrible occurs in a 'safe place': how individuals react and the impact on the group dynamic. I wanted to explore how relationships cope – or don't cope – in extremely stressful circumstances.

The story is set with the history of the Canberra bushfires which had a devastating effect on the community, particularly the outlying suburbs where we were living. In Six Minutes, the fictional village of Merrigang rallies together after Bella's disappearance, much like the Canberra community did after the bushfires. The advantage of living on the edge of the bush comes with the underlying threats of the wild. I am intrigued by the differences in how people behave in real life and online. One aspect of the book is an online hate campaign against the parents with comments that would never be said face-to-face. In the case of a missing child, social media can spread the news quickly but at the same time, individuals have the opportunity to form judgements, make comments and come up with their own theories.

Discussion questions

1. Lexie and Marty move to Merrigang for a new life in a new location. Do they need to address their past issues to have a chance at starting over successfully?
2. How has Lexie and Marty's marriage coped with their issues over the past few years?

3. With whom do you sympathise the most?
4. The court of public opinion condemns Marty as 'playing God' with his patients' lives. Even though he is cleared, some continue to have their doubts. Can Marty ever really re-affirm his innocence after such an accusation?
5. In their professions, Marty and Brendan both have a legal obligation to report concerns about child abuse. At what point would you report on a stranger's child? Where is the line between legitimate concern and unfairly judging another family's situation?
6. Tara assumes that Lexie has the perfect life, and that Lexie 'should pop out another baby and then she'd see that life wasn't so easy'. Why is Tara so quick to judge others?
7. Some people believe they have a right to voice their opinion online, regardless of whether it's insensitive or abusive. What do you think about Tara's behaviour online and in the TV interview?
8. In contrast to Tara, Lexie refuses to go online. Would online research, friends and forums have helped Lexie deal better with her difficult past?
9. Guilt drives so much of Lexie's behaviour. Are mothers made to feel guilt and shame about choices they make for their children and even for things which are out of their control?
10. Marty says that parenting has turned into a 'competitive sport to raise the best-ever child. Perfect kids who come of an assembly line with no human flaws or quirks'. Do you think this is true? If so, how is it impacting on our family life and our children?
11. Even before Bella disappears, Lexie is afraid for her daughter. Afterwards, Tara is terrified for her own children. How does that sense of fear impact on their relationships and actions?
12. A small community (in the country or the suburbs) has both advantages and disadvantages. Does the crisis bring out the best in the Merrigang community?
13. After she arrives in Canberra, Lexie calls the playgroup a 'lifesaver' as she and Bella start to make friends with the other families. Are the baby and toddler years isolating for stay-at-home mums and dads? How can society work better to prevent this isolation?
14. What did you think of the ending? Were any of your guesses correct about what had happened in those six minutes when Bella disappeared?
15. What does the future hold for Lexie and Marty? Do you think they will stay married, and remain friends with the playgroup mothers?
16. What do you think will happen to the characters in the following years? What would you like to see happen in a sequel?