

GOLDIE ALEXANDER'S "UNJUST DESSERTS"

Talking points for book clubs

"UnJust Desserts" is a murder/mystery that favours a 'gently, gently' approach of how swiftly life can barrel out of control.

Olivia Beauman is faced with the challenge of running her deli-catering foodstore *Not Just Desserts* with little business experience. To complicate matters, not only Olivia but the business itself is under threat by Real Estate developer Harry Oldritch. Though many people hate Harry, and with very good reason, it is his long suffering wife Queenie, and his mistress Bettina who die after old fashioned pesticide is placed into meals Olivia has prepared.

A multitude of characters, many of whom have settled in 'Grevillea' - the pseudonym for an amalgamation of villages on the Westernport side of the Mornington Peninsula - are seeking a 'sea change'. The major issue in this sensitive area is development. How much should be permitted? What should be stopped? There are always the divergent interests of locals who wish to keep their environment pristine and developers eyeing off a possible cash cow. Can you see any resolution to this conflict?

Every character in this novel carries emotional baggage. Olivia is frightened of any romantic commitment, particularly with a significantly younger man. After a drastic early marriage Eddie keeps himself emotionally 'safe' by having a number of lovers. Janette is still mourning the loss of her child. Carmela is desperately seeking a partner. Olivia's daughter Chloe is in the clutches of a destructive lover. Both Harry Oldritch's wife and mistress exist for him purely as a 'convenience'. Detective Richard Brumby's marriage is teetering on failure and Lexi, his 2IC, is the mistress of a man who never intends leaving his wife. How representative are these characters in your opinion of contemporary society?

The popularity of the murder/mystery genre lies in its well constructed plot. As a general rule, murder mysteries must have an obvious opening, a decent development, lots of 'red herrings' and a satisfactory resolution. No matter who the characters are or where the crime takes place, this shape is fundamental to the genre. It is this basic structure that allows so

many themes to be explored, themes that in this novel focus on contemporary issues.

“UnJust Desserts” also explores the plight of many single women, sometimes single parents, and many older women, who through no fault of their own find it hard to make ends meet. Though their lives are often very hard, often resourceful they use their domestic skills such as cooking, caring and gardening to make a living. Because readers are often curious about any food that appears in a story, Olivia’s recipes have been copied and inserted.

Here are some questions for you to consider:

Did Olivia really change as result of her relationship with Eddie? Or is she destined always to be wary of the relationship stakes? What odds do you give this relationship lasting?

Can you see any emotional resolutions for the other characters in this story? Or are they destined to continue on as before.

Can you imagine starting a business like *Not Just Desserts*? What would the challenges be for you? What about the rewards? What kind of preparation would you recommend before buying into any small business?

Do you like the idea of inserting recipes, or other facts, inside what is after all ‘only a story’? Did you think it either adds interest or holds up the plot? This isn’t a new idea in the United States - for example Nora Ephron’s famous novel “Heartburn” contains recipes, it is in Australia. Have you ever tested a recipe you found inside a novel?

Given you found yourself in the centre of an unsolved crime, how would you handle it? Can you imagine this ever happening to you? What would you do if it did?