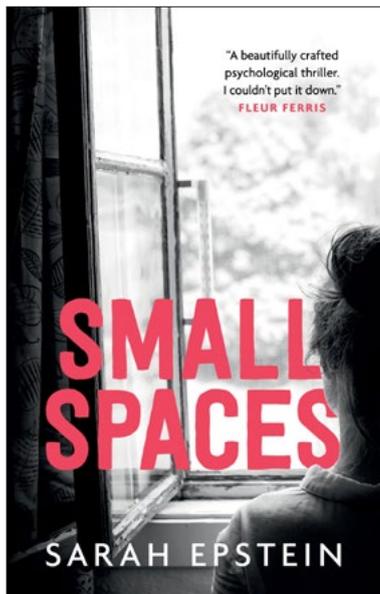


SMALL SPACES

SARAH EPSTEIN

DISCUSSION GUIDE



FOR READERS AGED 14+
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“WE DON’T PICK AND CHOOSE WHAT TO BE AFRAID OF. OUR FEARS PICK US.”

Tash Carmody has been traumatised since childhood, when she witnessed her gruesome imaginary friend Sparrow lure young Mallory Fisher away from a carnival. At the time nobody believed Tash, and she has since come to accept that Sparrow wasn't real. Now fifteen and mute, Mallory's never spoken about the week she went missing. As disturbing memories resurface, Tash starts to see Sparrow again. And she realises Mallory is the key to unlocking the truth about a dark secret connecting them. Does Sparrow exist after all? Or is Tash more dangerous to others than she thinks?

“A beautifully crafted psychological thriller. I couldn't put it down.”
FLEUR FERRIS

“This gripping debut messes with your head and makes you doubt your own senses. Sarah Epstein smashes it out of the park.”
ELLIE MARNEY

“A deliciously creepy YA thriller that reeled me in, made my heart race and kept me guessing to the very end.”
RACHAEL CRAW

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The title of this book, *Small Spaces*, could have more than one meaning. Discuss the literal and metaphorical interpretations of the title.
2. Tash knows her mum wouldn't approve of her spending time with Ally, however Tash secretly communicates with Ally and agrees to spend the weekend at her house. What are Tash's motivations for this?
3. Tash experiences crippling claustrophobia when locked in the laundry of the Fishers' house. Where did this phobia originate? How does it affect her everyday life? What thoughts and memories surface in Tash's mind when she is feeling claustrophobic?
4. After the incident of losing Tim in the food court, Tash lists things she knows she should do, such as organising a session with her psychiatrist, talking to her parents, leaving the Fisher family out of her "mess". However, Tash attempts to get Mallory to talk about her disappearance instead. Why do you think Tash doesn't do what is healthy for her mental state?
5. What do you think of the way Dr Ballantine deals with young Tash? Do you think during treatment with Tash, Dr Ballantine has an open mind? Or do you think she made up her mind about what happened to Tash early in the treatment?
6. Tash struggles with the question "Is withholding a secret the same thing as lying?" (p 231). What do you think about this?
7. Discuss how friendship dynamics are explored in *Small Spaces*, for instance Tash's deteriorating relationship with Sadie; her burgeoning friendship with Mallory, influenced by Tash's feeling of guilt and protectiveness; Tash's rivalry with Rachael; and Tash and Morgan's romance.
8. Discuss Sparrow's torment of Tash. How does he compound her paranoia? What are his motivations?
9. Given the fact that Tash struggles with paranoia and believing her own memory, do you think she is a reliable narrator? Do you believe your memory is always accurate and trustworthy?
10. Tash is told by a number of people close to her that Sparrow is not real and he was not involved in Mallory's disappearance. Once Sparrow is revealed to be a real person, how do you think Tash feels about those who led her into believing Sparrow was imaginary?
11. The author presents several red herrings, a device used to lead readers to a false conclusion. Which characters are presented this way? What theories did you have while reading the book?
12. "I realise now it's what we all have in common, regardless of our circumstances. We all share the fundamental need to be heard, to know we matter." (p 378) How does this fundamental need affect Tash and her friends throughout the novel? Discuss how they change when they feel they aren't being "heard".

Q&A WITH SARAH EPSTEIN

Small Spaces is a definite page-turner. What was your inspiration for the story?

When I came up with the idea for *Small Spaces*, I was going through a very drawn-out submission process for my previous manuscript, which was collecting a lot of “not high concept enough” type of rejections. It became clear that my new manuscript needed a strong hook to draw readers in, and I’d been thinking about the subject of imaginary friends for a long time. When my kids were little and attending playgroup and kindergarten, I’d hear stories from mothers about how they’d overheard their child’s one-sided conversations in the bath, or how their child’s invisible friend had to have a place set at the dinner table. I’d always think, where do these imaginary friends come from? Are they tied to emotional issues, loneliness or just boredom? Are they coping mechanisms, a cry for attention, or even, as some suggest, a spiritual presence that a child’s mind is open enough to see? This helped me craft the hook I hoped would intrigue readers: What happens if a creepy imaginary friend from childhood comes back?

How did you come up with the character Tash?

I thought a lot about what the family dynamics might be like in a situation where a young child is visited by an imaginary friend, resulting in erratic and disturbing behaviour. Would the adults in her life intervene or just wait it out? And what would happen if the imaginary friend reappeared years later, throwing the now-teenager and her family into turmoil again? I realised at the core of such a story would be a character who is desperate to win the trust of others when she isn’t even sure she trusts herself. From this, Tash emerged and started telling me her story.

As well as a riveting storyline, what do you think your readers will get out of what Tash is dealing with and her battles questioning her sanity?

There’s a well-known expression, “Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about”, and that’s not only true for Tash and a number of other characters in this story, but for many readers as well. I think Tash’s self-belief issues are relatable, as are her fears and hopes about the future, and not fitting into “the norm”. To me, Tash embodies our basic desire to be heard and believed by those we trust most, as well as our sometimes fragile ability to believe in ourselves.

You are passionate about the thriller genre. Why did you decide to write for the YA audience?

Back in high school I wrote a creepy short story with a teenage protagonist, and my English teacher gave me full marks for it with a comment about wanting to read more because she was dying to know what happened next. The thrill of writing a dark page-turner stayed with me, and decades later when I wanted to try writing my first novel-length story, I used this as my starting point. I found my sixteen-year-old voice came through very naturally and I could easily tap into those same emotions, frustrations and challenges I felt as a teen. As I started reading YA more widely, I found the taut plots, character arcs and themes of self-discovery so appealing, and very suited to the types of stories I wanted to tell.

As a graphic designer with your own business, can you discuss the influence your design experience has on your writing?

I’ve always approached a manuscript the same way I approach a design job, with a client brief of sorts. I create a list of what I need the end result to achieve. Writing is similar to design work in that it’s a highly competitive field and your work needs to be attention-grabbing enough to stand out in a sea of equally worthy creations. Working as a designer taught me to always meet deadlines and only submit my most polished work, as well as how to handle critique and maintain professionalism even when your work is getting torn to shreds. With design, it’s really obvious when something isn’t quite working – it takes a lot of tweaking to get things right, and this is the same method I apply to my writing. A trick I learned from a creative director early in my design career was to go away from something that’s not quite working and come back to it with fresh eyes. This is something I always apply to early drafts of my manuscripts – it makes it so much easier to identify the thing that needs fixing.

What are your top five favourite reads of all time?

I tend to have favourite authors rather than favourite books, so if I had to pick five that I wish I could rediscover all over again, I’d say Melina Marchetta, Patrick Ness, Liane Moriarty, Gillian Flynn and JK Rowling for the Harry Potter series (I’ve yet to read her Robert Galbraith books, but I’m very interested).

What book couldn't you put down this year?

The Ampersand Prize-winning YA novel *In the Dark Spaces* by Cally Black. I casually sat down to read a chapter or two and ended up devouring half the novel in one sitting, then finished it the following day. It's a gripping read. Also, Mark Brandi's *Wimmera* was compelling and had me reading into the wee hours of the morning.

Who has been your greatest influence as an author, and why?

I have different influences depending on which genre I'm writing, so for *Small Spaces* my greatest influences were Rebecca James, Gillian Flynn and Liane Moriarty. I love all of Rebecca's YA thrillers and when I read *Sweet Damage* and *Beautiful Malice* I was inspired to write something mysterious and suspenseful. I find the darkness of Gillian Flynn's twisty plots and flawed characters mesmerising, and the nonlinear narrative of *Dark Places* encouraged me to look at an alternative storytelling structure for *Small Spaces*. And Liane Moriarty's ability to craft compelling mysteries that hold readers' interest and keep them guessing to the end is a skill I find endlessly inspiring.

It took you five years of children's naptimes to complete your very first manuscript. What advice would you give to other people juggling parenthood (and running a business) about writing a book?

You need to allocate regular times to write and then protect this time fiercely. I started writing during my kids' naptimes because I knew it was the only time in my day I wouldn't be interrupted. I learned to make the most of small blocks of time because it's all you get until they grow older. Once my kids started school, I could split my day into two work sessions – school hours for my design business, and after my kids' bedtime for writing. Having a regular writing routine is the difference between “dabbling” and actually getting a manuscript completed. And, of course, connecting with other writers on social media, especially those in a similar situation, is enormously helpful and inspiring. It helps to know you share the same aspirations (and sleep deprivation) with other writers.

Now that you have your first publishing deal, what's next?

I'm currently working on two more standalone YA thrillers, and have plans to revise a contemporary YA manuscript I've already written. I've also started drafting some picture book manuscripts and an illustrated chapter book because I'm interested in merging my skills as a writer and illustrator. I find I'm never short of ideas, just the time to execute them.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Epstein spent her childhood drawing, daydreaming and cobbling together books at the kitchen table. A writer, illustrator and designer, she grew up in suburban Sydney and now lives in Melbourne with her husband and two sons. She is passionate about YA, especially the thriller genre, which is her favourite to read. *Small Spaces* is her first novel.