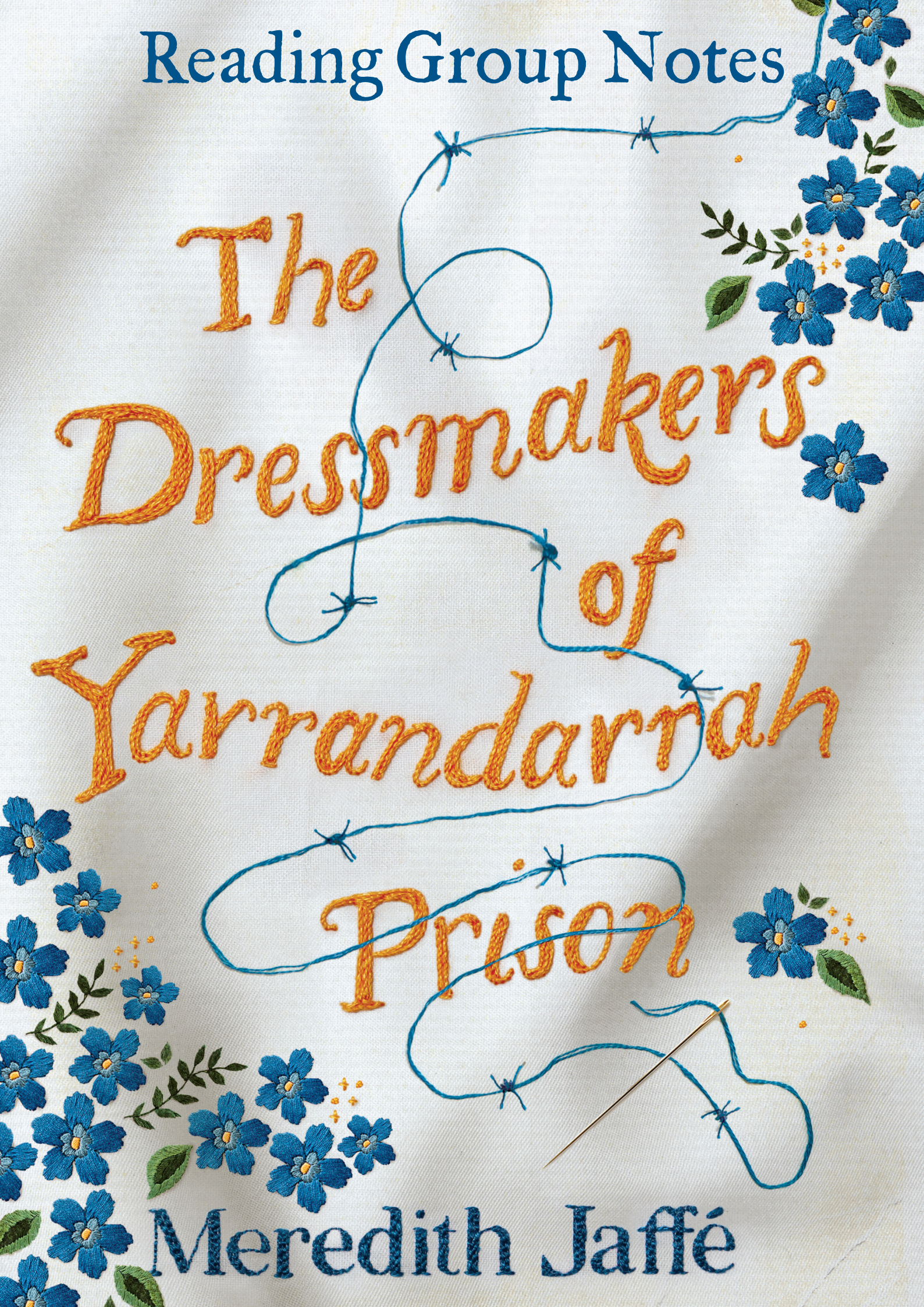


# Reading Group Notes

## The Dressmakers of Yarrandarra Prison

Meredith Jaffé







# The Dressmakers of Yarrandarra Prison

by Meredith Jaffé

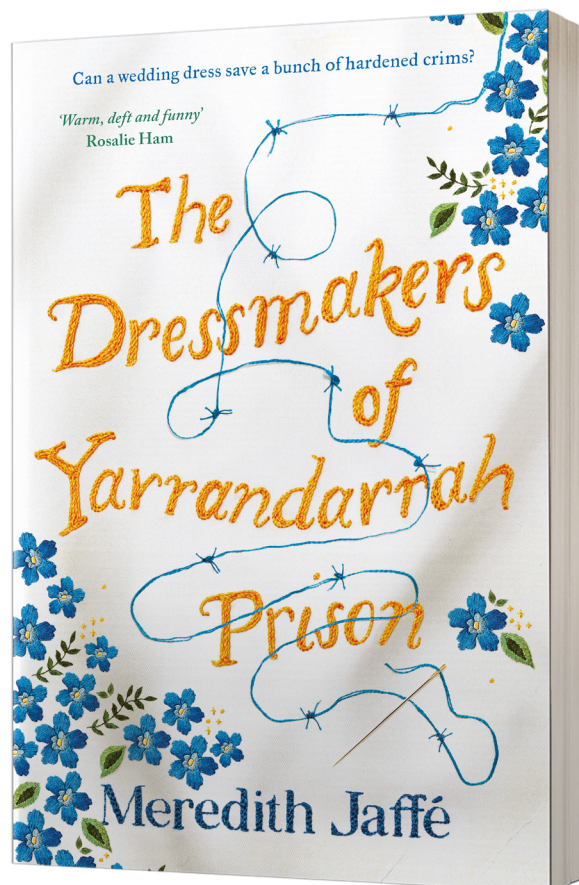
Can a wedding dress save a bunch of hardened crims? *The Full Monty* meets *Orange is the New Black* in a poignantly comic story about a men's prison sewing circle.

Derek's daughter Debbie is getting married. He's desperate to be there, but he's banged up in Yarrandarra Correctional Centre for embezzling funds from the golf club, and, thanks to his ex-wife, Lorraine, he hasn't spoken to Debbie in years. He wants to make a grand gesture, to show her how much he loves her. But what?

Inspiration strikes while he's embroidering a cushion at his weekly prison sewing circle - he'll make her a wedding dress. His fellow stitchers rally around and soon this motley gang of crims is immersed in a joyous whirl of silks, satins and covered buttons.

But as time runs out and tensions rise both inside and outside the prison, the wedding dress project takes on greater significance. With lives at stake, Derek feels his chance to reconcile with Debbie is slipping through his fingers ...

A funny, dark and moving novel about finding humanity, friendship and redemption in unexpected places.





## Praise for *The Dressmakers of Yarrandarra Prison*

‘A warm, deft and funny story where unlikely people show us what’s important.’

Rosalie Ham, bestselling author of *The Dressmaker*

‘Deliciously original, immersive and darkly funny ... a refreshing take on redemption and second chances.’

Joanna Nell, bestselling author of *The Single Ladies of Jacaranda Retirement Village*

‘Like the wedding dress, this story is unique, memorable, exquisitely detailed and full of both heart and hope.’

Kylie Ladd, bestselling author of *Mothers and Daughters*

‘Overflowing with humour and heart. Meredith Jaffé takes a fabulous premise and weaves it into a tale of friendship and fun, as well as a journey of discovery about what matters most in life. If you like a story about misfits making good, but with the added lustre of silk and satin, then this book is for you.’

Natasha Lester, bestselling author of *The Paris Secret*



### About the author

Meredith Jaffé is the author of three novels for adults: *The Dressmakers of Yarrandarra Prison* (May 2021), *The Making of Christina* (2017) and *The Fence* (2016). *Horse Warrior*, the first in a children’s series, was published in 2019. She also contributed a short story, ‘Emergency Undies’, to the 2019 anthology *Funny Bones*. She is the Festival Director of StoryFest, held on the NSW South Coast, and regularly facilitates at other writers’ festivals and author events. Previously, she wrote the weekly literary column for the online women’s magazine *The Hoopla*. Her feature articles, reviews, and opinion pieces have also appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Mamamia*.



# Reading Group Questions



‘Isn’t spending your weekends traipsing around the mall spending money on stuff you don’t need an addiction? What about lining up at the crack of dawn to get in early on the Boxing Day sales? Buying the latest mobile phone, television, coffee machine. How did they expect him to pay for it all?’

**Question 1:** One of the themes the novel explores is addiction. The main character, Derek, is in gaol for embezzling funds from the golf club to fund his gambling addiction. He looks down his nose at the drug addicts he is in gaol with, and he holds his ex-wife, Lorraine, partially responsible for landing him in gaol because of her blatant consumerism. How has the novel changed or reinforced your views on addiction? Is Derek right when he says spending money on stuff you don’t need is a form of addiction?

‘Guest lists and seating arrangements are easy. How you look is the only thing that matters.’

**Question 2:** The upcoming marriage of Derek’s daughter, Debbie, is central to the narrative. In Chapter 8, where the reader first meets Debbie, she is trying on wedding dresses. How does the author use comedy in scenes such as this to challenge social norms (such as how a bride ‘should’ look on her wedding day) and explore social issues?

Jacko risks edging closer. ‘Which reminds me, I’ve been meaning to ask. Does your little boyfriend Maloney know you’re only gay for the stay?’

**Question 3:** The central conceit of *The Dressmakers of Yarrandarra Prison* is that the dressmakers are all men. Most of the action in the novel happens within C Wing of the prison, and most of the characters are male. In what way do these things allow the author to explore ideas about masculinity?

‘It was about sticking at something in the face of adversity. All them ladies stitching, hour by hour, added up to tell their story. It just goes to prove that beautiful things can come from dark, lonely places, doesn’t it?’

**Question 4:** In Chapter 37, Sean shows Derek a picture of the Rajah Quilt as a means of convincing Derek to return to Backtackers. How true is Sean’s assertion that ‘things of beauty can come from dark lonely places’?

**Question 5:** The dressmakers all belong to a sewing group called the Backtackers, which is run by a fictional charity called Connecting Threads. How does this sewing group exemplify the author’s premise that people can transcend their backgrounds and circumstances to become their better selves? And is this premise right?





*‘Couldn’t believe how the stitching ate away at the loneliness rather than let the loneliness eat me. It’s a precious gift, Dezza. Not one to give up lightly.’*



**Question 6:** One of the core issues in the novel is the mental health of the men incarcerated in Yarrandarra Correctional Centre. How does the novel articulate the value of groups like the Backtackers in helping inmates deal with their mental health issues?

*‘As a child, Yarrandarra Library was my refuge. A place to escape from the bullies and the boredom. A place to travel far away from a small life in an even smaller country town. To immerse myself in other worlds. To exercise a right that belongs to us all.’*

**Question 7:** The novel explores the role of libraries in a community as well as the right of every individual to have access to reading materials. Why are libraries important to the story?

*‘I got those eight years for a reason. Now look at me. Walking out of here with a lot more going for me than when I came in. All because of other people. The Doc taught me to read. Thanks to Jane, I found out about me course. And if it wasn’t for you, I’d never have met Sean. But none of it changes who I am on the inside.’*

**Question 8:** The Doc, the prisoner librarian, is serving a life sentence for murder. Maloney is in for manslaughter. What do these two characters say about the idea of rehabilitation? Is it possible for anyone to be rehabilitated, and are prison sentences an effective means of rehabilitating criminals? Of course, no one mentions the mother of the bride, without whom none of them would be there.

**Question 9:** The character of Lorraine verges on caricature. Apart from providing comic relief, what purpose does she serve in the novel?

**Question 10:** The story is mainly told from three character’s points of view: Derek’s, Debbie’s and Jane’s. How does this structure affect the reader’s ability to empathise with each character? Is using multiple points of view an effective storytelling technique? We also see snippets of thoughts from the other Backtackers throughout – what do these insights add to the novel?

**Question 11:** The sewing teacher, Jane, is desperate for the men in Backtackers to have a group project they can work on, which is why she seizes on the idea of making the wedding dress. Apart from facilitating the making of the wedding dress, what function does she play in the story?

