

**MEREDITH JAFFÉ**

# the fence



**READING GROUP NOTES**

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## Blurb

*'I promise you one thing, young lady. Building a fence is not going to keep the world out and won't keep your children in. Life's not that simple.'*

Gwen Hill adores Green Valley Avenue. Here she has built friendships, raised her children and nurtured a thriving garden. So when the house next door is sold, Gwen wonders how the new family will settle into this cosy community.

Francesca Desmarchelliers has high hopes for the house on Green Valley Avenue. More than a new home, it's a clean slate for Frankie, who has moved her brood in a bid to save her marriage.

To maintain her privacy and corral her wandering children, Frankie proposes a fence between the properties that would destroy Gwen's picture-perfect front yard.

To Gwen, this is an act of war.

Soon the neighbours are in an escalating battle over more than just council approvals, and boundaries aren't the only things at stake.

*'A keenly observed satire on the boundaries we set. Good fences make good neighbours. Or do they?'* WENDY HARMER

*'There's nothing polite about this white picket fence drama . . . Meredith Jaffé's wicked sense of humour blooms in the fertile compost of domestic discord. A welcome new talent.'* CAROLINE BAUM

*'Not a word is wasted. Jaffé's humour is sly and unerringly finds its mark.'*  
COUNTRY STYLE

## Author Biography

Meredith Jaffé is a writer and occasional book critic. For four years she wrote the weekly literary column 'The Bookshelf' for the online women's magazine *The Hoopla*; sharing literary news, reviewing books and interviewing writers. Meredith regularly chairs panels, presents workshops and interviews fellow authors for various literary events and writers' festivals. As a keen believer in the power of literacy, Meredith volunteers at The Footpath Library where she manages their annual EPIC! writing competition for school children. She is currently working on her next novel in between riding her horses and enjoying farm life with her family on the beautiful NSW south coast.



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## Plot Summary

Gwen Hill has lived on Green Valley Avenue in Rosedale for most of her life. Here she and her husband, Eric, have built friendships with their next-door neighbours: the strong and serene Babs, and her husband, Rohan; and the effervescent Val, and her husband, Keith. Here Gwen has raised her children, Diane and Jonathon, in the safety of the tight-knit community. Here she has nurtured her garden and the ten crab apple trees that act as an informal divider between her and Babs' houses, and compiled gardening tips for her monthly column in *Outback + Outdoors*.

After years of Gwen relying on her neighbours, Babs dies suddenly. So when Babs' son Michael sells the family home, a grieving Gwen can't help but wonder if she will find a neighbour that can replace the hole that Babs left.

Francesca Desmarchelliers has moved her family from Sydney's hip Inner West to the leafy north shore street of Green Valley Avenue. For Frankie, this is a clean slate. A way for her and her husband, Brandon, to escape his past infidelity with Brazilian barista, Camilla. Setting up a new life for her four children – five-year-old twins, Amber and Silver, toddler, Marigold, and baby, Bijoux – includes Brandon staying at home full-time while she concentrates on her career as account director for the Hush Hush baby range. Although Brandon is unhappy about the move to Rosedale, he resigns himself to the change as his penance to Frankie.

As Frankie arrives at their new home, she is uncomfortable with the absence of a fence between the Hills' property and her own. Her young children are roaming freely between the gardens and the twins have taken a liking to the handmade miniature dollhouses in Eric Hill's shed. Although Gwen is insistent that the children are no bother, Frankie wants to maintain her privacy and proposes a fence between the properties that would destroy Gwen's picture-perfect front yard and bulldoze most of her happy memories.

For Gwen, the fence means letting go of the past and coming to terms with the fact that Eric's health is deteriorating. For Frankie, the fence means maintaining control of her family and finding a satisfying work-life balance. As the women start to project their frustration, vulnerability and unhappiness onto the building of this fence, war breaks out between the neighbours, with funny, frustrating and heart-breaking consequences.



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## QUESTION 1

*The only way Gwen is ever leaving this house is in a box. (Gwen, Page 23.)*

In a lot of ways, Gwen's perspective of her life on Green Valley Avenue, and her view of the Desmarchelliers-Boyd family, starts as stubborn and immovable. How does this perspective change over the course of the novel? What events trigger this evolution?

## QUESTION 2

*'Well, yes, I could but then I've always liked the idea of the children roaming free. Fences are so dominant and overbearing. No one can get in but then no one can get out either, can they?' (Gwen, Page 63.)*

A fence symbolises very different things for Gwen and Frankie. What causes these differences and why is each character, including Eric and Brandon, emotionally or physically connected to the building of this fence? How do their views change throughout the novel?

## Thematic Summary

### GENDER STEREOTYPES AND ROLES OF CHILDREN

Meredith Jaffé shakes up gender stereotypes in *The Fence*. She questions the way society views the differences between boys and girls, and the 'appropriate' ways for boys and girls to behave and dress. A constant source of tension is the similarity between Amber and Silver in clothing and appearance. All of the adults question why Silver chooses to dress in 'feminine' colours with long hair to match his sister and why he is so fascinated with Eric's dollhouses.

## QUESTION 3

*There's something odd about the way the Desmarchelliers dress the twins identically and with that long blond hair of theirs it's no wonder Eric has trouble telling which one's which. Even she struggles.*

*'Don't be silly,' Eric snaps. 'Why would a little boy want to play with dollhouses?'* (Gwen, Page 85.)



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How do the older generations view Amber and Silver's similar appearance and interests in *The Fence*? How does Silver's diversion from gender stereotypes support his parents' ability to shake up gender roles? How does this reflect our society's changing understanding of gender, LGBT rights and fixed versus fluid gender?

## MASCULINITY AND TRADITIONAL ROLES OF MEN

Brandon's identity is in a state of flux. He wants to be a full-time stay-at-home father but this – along with the views of other characters and societal pressures – causes him to question his masculinity. *The Fence* explores and interrogates traditional roles of men and society's changing expectations of masculinity.

### QUESTION 4

*For some reason it is acceptable to call a woman who stays at home a housewife but the same term cannot be applied to a man. The rare times they socialise, Frankie hears this in Brandon's replies to the question, 'So what do you do for a crust, mate?' The answer is never 'I am a house husband' or even 'I am the primary caregiver to our four children'. Brandon says he is taking time out to renovate the house. Once she heard him cite he was recovering from a back injury earned at soccer. Frankie cannot recall Brandon ever playing soccer or having a back injury. His palpable lie beds in her chest. (Frankie, Page 43–44.)*

*Eric, Rohan, Val's Keith were the men in her generation. Work was how they defined themselves. She couldn't imagine any of them staying at home to raise children. (Gwen, Page 153.)*

*Maybe at a deep primitive level, Brandon needs to be the hunter and to deny him that, deliberately or otherwise, was to deny him his most basic instinct. (Gwen, Page 154.)*

Why does Brandon question his masculinity as a stay-at-home father? What internal and external pressures affect his perception of being less of a man for raising his children? Why does Brandon abhor the word 'wife'? Discuss the word and its connotations.



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## TRADITIONAL ROLES OF WOMEN

*The Fence* is a deep exploration of conventional roles of women in the home and in the workplace. It shows the pressures that women are under from society, their families and their careers. Frankie feels a need to both adhere to and break away from certain traditional roles. She feels pushed by society to sacrifice her career for their children and allow her husband to be the breadwinner. And she feels pulled by her workplace to put her career first rather than finding a perfect work–life balance.

### QUESTION 5

*Those people uncomfortable that she chose work over staying at home with her children could never resist the joke about trusting Brandon around the nanny. She laughed along, recognising the price of being different. (Frankie, Page 42.)*

Discuss the choices that Frankie has made to break the traditional roles of women in the home. Discuss how this affects her relationship with Brandon and her mother. If she is confident with her choices, why does she feel vulnerable when participating in the children's school lives?

### QUESTION 6

*' . . . in this new millennium it seems it is still frowned upon for a mother to return to work after a mere three months maternity leave and still considered somewhat unusual to leave her children in the care of their father. Somehow people hold two points of view in perfect balance. One that there must be something wrong with Francesca that she can sacrifice raising her children for the sake of pursuing her career, and two, that Brandon is some sort of domestic saint foregoing his career to nurture his offspring.' (Frankie, Page 42–43.)*

Discuss if Frankie's experiences in *The Fence* are an accurate portrayal of women in the workplace. What pressures does Frankie face?



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## QUESTION 7

*To her mind, women working is a double-edged sword. Other countries pay parents to stay home and raise their children, at least until they are of an age where socialising becomes important. As a mother, she had seen raising her children as a purpose in and of itself. This younger generation expect to have careers and motherhood at the same time, not wanting to lose one identity for another. (Gwen, Page 106–107.)*

*Noelle carried on as if Francesca had answered, 'You can't have it all and certainly not at the same time.' (Frankie, Page 49.)*

What does 'having it all' mean to you, the reader? Discuss whether or not women can 'have it all'. Why do some in the older generations still believe that women can't have a balance in career and family life?

## DEMENTIA

*The Fence* explores how dementia can manifest over a period of time and how this affects the people around the sufferer, marriage and family life.

## QUESTION 8

*But there is a lot about Eric that troubles her these days. The forgetfulness is one thing, but the old Eric would never have indulged in anything as crazy as snail farming. (Gwen, Page 125.)*

How does the author effectively show Eric's deteriorating health throughout the novel? What is the significance of Eric's snail farm? How does Gwen cope with Eric's decline in health?



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## MEMORIES AND THE PAST

Both Gwen and Frankie view the past very differently. Gwen reminisces about the 'good old days' when Babs was alive, when her kids could play in the street, when life was simpler. However, in Frankie's past she only sees Brandon's infidelity and the disappointing relationship with her mother.

### QUESTION 9

*She continues raking the leaves while sending out waves of disapproval beneath the shadows of her wide-brimmed hat. (Gwen, Page 30.)*

Gwen's memory of Babs' arrival at Green Valley Avenue is painted in vivid contrast to Frankie's arrival. How do Gwen's memories of the past affect her present?

### QUESTION 10

*'She knew she sounded senile, but the trees were all that was left of Babs now the Desmarchelliers had finished destroying the front garden. Why did these young people not care about preserving the past?'* (Gwen, Page 127.)

Discuss reminiscence as a concept and the juxtaposition between the way Gwen reveres the past and the way Frankie shuns the past.

## MARRIAGE

In *The Fence* there is a contrast between Frankie and Brandon's marriage and the other marriages. Frankie and Brandon are in a constant power struggle because of Brandon's infidelity, as well as their inability to come to terms with their contemporary marital and gender roles. They are also surrounded by 'traditional' marriages and this generational divide is exemplified by Noelle and her husband, and Gwen and Eric.





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## QUESTION 11

*The sex didn't thrill him half as much as slipping beneath Frankie's radar, undermining the control she thought she had over him. (Brandon, Page 212.)*

How did the power dynamics and complexities of marriage lead to the breakdown of Frankie and Brandon's marriage? Was this breakdown a reflection of Frankie and Brandon's incompatibility, Brandon's infidelity or Frankie's need to maintain control? How does their marriage compare to that of Frankie's mother and father? And how do these examples support and/or undermine traditional gender roles in a marriage?

## MOTHER–DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

There are three vastly different mother–daughter relationships in the novel. Gwen and Diane are close, trusting, nurturing and reliant on each other; Noelle and Frankie's relationship is built on resentment, miscommunication and a perceived difference in values; and Frankie's relationship with her daughters is just beginning, as she builds the foundations for their future relationship and tries desperately to avoid the mistakes her mother made.

## QUESTION 12

*Noelle had given up work the day she married Frankie's father, Bernard, so she could maintain a harmonious home for her barrister husband, and everybody else, including her six children, had come a firm second. How much that hurt, still hurt, burning Frankie up with resentment that she, only a child herself, was left to organise her younger siblings so they did not interfere with her mother's priorities. (Frankie, Page 47.)*

Discuss the dramatic juxtaposition between Gwen and Diane's, Noelle and Frankie's, and Frankie and her daughters' relationships. Why do you think the author chose to make these vastly different relationships so prominent? What does it bring to the storyline? What does it say about the nature of mother–daughter relationships?



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## NATURE VERSUS NUTURE

Amber and Silver's behavioural issues in the home and at school give rise to the 'nature versus nurture' debate. It makes the reader question whether the twins' behaviour, including their ability and willingness to lie, are inherited, innate qualities or whether they are learned.

### QUESTION 13

*One of them had let the dogs out, one of them was being less than truthful. But she couldn't bring herself to call her daughter a liar. (Frankie, Page 140.)*

*He can think of plenty of things wrong with the twins' social skills. Amber is bossy and lies about everything. Silver is quiet and sly. (Brandon, Page 173.)*

Discuss the peculiar things that Amber and Silver do through the course of the novel. What do Amber and Silver's actions – lying, stealing, and, to an extent, committing violence – say about inherited traits versus learned behaviour? Are the twins just being kids and acting out? Or are they mirroring Brandon's actions and their experience with the Christmas Catastrophe?



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## Writing Style

*The Fence* is written in third person as a dual narrative. It explores in-depth Gwen and Frankie's points of view with subtle hints of perspective from their husbands Eric and Brandon. Gwen's chapters detail her grief over the loss of her best friend, hint to her feelings about her husband's deteriorating health and air her concerns about the demolishing of her garden. Frankie's chapters give the reader insight into her growing apprehensions concerning Brandon's fidelity, her children and her work-home life balance, and why she projects her vulnerabilities on the next-door neighbours. The subtle hints of Eric and Brandon embolden their voices and add a different perspective to Gwen and Frankie's stories. Gwen's gardening columns add an additional layer to the overarching narrative.

### QUESTION 14

*With time to spare, Gwen makes a start on next month's column. Inspiration is slow coming, her mind sticks on fences and hedges. But she'd done Planting for Privacy earlier in the year and a December column needs an upbeat feel. (Gwen, Page 151.)*

Discuss the effectiveness of Gwen's monthly columns as a storytelling device. Why has the author chosen to use these incorporate these columns and what complexities does this add to the narrative?

### QUESTION 15

How does *The Fence* effectively utilise the dual narrative structure? How does this structure affect the reader's ability to empathise with Gwen and Frankie's points of view? On top of this, why is it essential that we see snippets of thought from Eric and Brandon?

