



Useful: book club reading notes

Sullivan Moss is useless.

Once a charming underachiever, he's now such a loser that he can't even commit suicide properly. Waking up in hospital after falling the wrong way on a rooftop, he comes to a decision. He shouldn't waste perfectly good organs just because they're attached to his head. After a life of regrets, Sully wants to do one useful thing: he wants to donate a kidney to a stranger.

As he scrambles over the hurdles to become a donor, Sully almost accidentally forges a new life for himself. Sober and employed, he makes new friends, not least radio producer Natalie and her son Louis, and begins to patch things up with old ones, like his ex-best mate Tim. Suddenly, everyone wants a piece of him. But altruism is not as easy as it seems. Just when he thinks he's got himself together, Sully discovers that he's most at risk of falling apart. From the creator of *Offspring* comes a smart, moving and wry portrait of one man's desire to give something of himself.

'With characteristic charm, wit and humanity, Debra Oswald has crafted an irresistible story of metamorphosis, as Sullivan Moss evolves from a self-described bag of spare parts to something altogether more whole – and way more complicated. As Sullivan opts in to the mess that is life, Oswald makes the most of every twist and turn, while also finding room for poignancy, insightfulness and the ups and downs that are part of being human.' **Nick Earls**

'I don't know when I have had the absolute pleasure of immersing myself in a novel as rich and rewarding as *Useful*. With gimlet eye and boundless heart, Debra Oswald pulls together the threads of disparate lives, including an old dog, a suicidal loser, a narcissistic movie star and a crew of Khmer asbestos removers. Their fates entwine in a plot that is by turns dark and light, brimming with insight, mesmerising, and above all, true. This novel is more than useful, it's absolutely essential.' **Geraldine Brooks**

'[*Useful*] bears Oswald's creative signature of a story about messy human entanglements told with heart and a liberal dash of humour . . . the kind of novel in which any reader might find an echo of their own life, finding comedy in human imperfection but making a judgment about the real cost of moral vanity as a driver of good works and what we value.' **Sydney Morning Herald**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debra Oswald is a writer for stage, television and fiction. She is co-creator and head writer of the successful TV series *Offspring* which recently finished its fifth season. Debra won the 2011 NSW Premier's Literary Award for the *Offspring* tele-movie script and the 2014 AACTA for Best TV Screenplay for the final episode of series 4. Her other television credits include award-winning episodes of *Police Rescue*, *Palace of Dreams*, *The Secret Life of Us*, *Sweet and Sour* and *Banana in Pyjamas*.

Debra's stage plays have been produced around Australia. *Gary's House*, *Sweet Road* and *The Peach Season* were all shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Literary Award and *Dags* has had many productions. *Gary's House* has been performed in translation in Denmark and Japan. *Mr Bailey's Minder* was produced in Philadelphia in 2008. Debra has written three plays for young audiences – *Skate*, *Stories in the Dark* (NSW Premier's Play Award in 2008) and *House on Fire*. She is the author of three 'Aussie Bite' books and six novels for teenage readers.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



1. *Useful* is all about the ways in which we try to make our lives seem worthwhile – to others and to ourselves. Pete has saved lives as a doctor; Juliet's life revolves around physical self-improvement; Astrid is involved in countless causes and projects. When Astrid wonders why Sully can't just be 'a reasonable productive person like the rest of us' (p. 86), what does she mean? How do we define a productive member of society?
2. Sully's failed suicide is a catalyst in his life, as Frank's death is in Natalie's. How did the novel make you think about death and the ways in which we respond to it?
3. Sully is constantly surprised by the strength of both his old and new friendships, which save him - figuratively and literally. Would you forgive Sully for his screw-ups? Are there some things a friendship can't withstand?
4. What does the character of Rory Wallace tell us about the highs and lows of a celebrity-obsessed culture? Do you think it is an accurate portrayal?
5. Discuss the connection between sex, love and self-image in the book: how does the author prompt us to value certain expressions of intimacy more than others?
6. When things don't work out with Sully, Astrid's decision to embrace a new life with Grahame seems to make her much happier. What do you think about Juliet's decision to stay with Tim – how much should you work to keep a relationship alive?
7. Sully doesn't realise how much his cheating hurts Astrid. But Natalie realises that Frank and Gordana's affair might have been a positive thing for everyone concerned. Are there some cases in which infidelity 'works'?
8. Why does Mack play such an important role in the book? Do we relate to and connect with animals in a way that we can't with each other?
9. Families are central to the book. Discuss the way in which the development of Sully's relationship with Louis might be influenced by the death of his own father – and the point in the novel where you think Sully finally 'grows up'.
10. As in her much-loved series *Offspring*, Oswald's characters draw you in because of, not despite, their quirks and flaws. Who is your favourite character in *Useful* and why?
11. Despite Natalie's experience, skill and rapport with her manager, she is passed over for an important job opportunity in favour of a younger and less experienced male colleague. Is this a gender issue – and are some workplaces more prone to sexism than others?
12. Tim is uncomfortable with the idea that he's 'sold out' to the world of finance and banking, while for Juliet, having no need to earn money makes a career seem meaningless. How does this contrast with Jose Luis's pride in his work, and the strong work ethic of his Cambodian employees Ricky and Daramy? Is the idea of a vocation a particularly Western one?
13. Why is organ donation anonymous? Do you agree with Sully that to reveal a donor's identity is to 'burden the recipient with a radioactive piece of information' (p. 311)?
14. Sully is surprised and moved by Ken's wish for one more good piss. *Useful* is full of the small moments and experiences that make us human – what other scenes best capture this? What moments do you most savour?