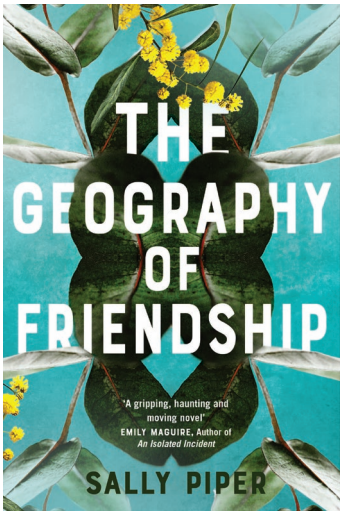
TEXT review

No safety in numbers

review by Kate Cantrell



Sally Piper
The geography of friendship
University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2018
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In 1993, Mary Morris, in her compilation of women's travel writing, *Maiden voyages,* observed that women, while travelling, are always vulnerable to sexual violence: 'the fear of rape, for example, whether crossing the Sahara, or just crossing a city street at night' (Morris 1993: xvii). Twenty-five years later, the reality remains. In June 2018, three weeks before Sally Piper launched her new novel, *The geography of friendship,* Melbourne comedian Eurydice Dixon was raped and murdered in Carlton North while walking home from a Melbourne bar.

In the aftermath of Dixon's death, public discourse was, at first, predictable. In a press conference the following day, a detective from Victoria Police urged women to practise 'situational awareness' and 'consider their personal safety' (Clayton quoted in Noonan 2018). At a second media conference, held less than twenty-four hours later, a homicide detective repeated the sentiment when he advised women 'to be aware of their own personal security and be mindful of their surroundings' (Noonan 2018). On social media, and in the popular press, the backlash against these 'safety' warnings was palpable. On Twitter, Clementine Ford captured the feeling of many women when she tweeted, 'It was not a lack of "situational awareness" that ended the life of Eurydice Dixon – it was a person who made a conscious choice to exercise extreme violence against her' (Ford 2018). Behind the backlash was, first, a consensus that the police's alleged focus on risk-mitigation was thinly-veiled victim-blaming, and second, a shared frustration amongst women that we are already conditioned to be afraid. In other words, we already know the risks that accompany

our movement through the world, and we already observe the long list of cautions that are levelled at us constantly: travel in pairs, don't walk home alone, take out your headphones, avoid isolated places, stay alert, don't drink too much, don't flirt, don't talk to strangers, check in with a friend, take a whistle, a pepper spray, a panic alarm. The list goes on.

Piper's *The geography of friendship* comes at an interesting time.

Set in the present, the story follows three women in their forties – Lisa, Nicole, and Sam – as they embark on a five-day hike in a national park based loosely on Wilsons Promontory: a coastal wilderness in South Gippsland where Piper herself first bushwalked as a girl (Piper 2018). Threaded through the narrative tapestry are recollections of a past hike, in which we learn that on the same trail, twenty years earlier, the women – then in their twenties – were terrorised and assaulted by a fellow hiker, known only as 'the man'. As the two narratives intertwine in a lemniscatory pattern, Piper exposes a sobering reality of women's lives: how profoundly our movements are affected and impeded by men. As the three friends make their way across the headland – an area that is damaged and deeply scarred – their progress is obstructed by their memories of the man: his evil wizardry, his disappearing footprints, and 'the ugly geography' of their own failings, perceived or real (Piper 2018: 141). We learn, as the past replays, that the women are physically and emotionally tormented by the man: he defecates on their path, steals the tension ropes from their tent, and leaves crude images on the trail. The novel culminates in a final act of violence: a traumatising moment that regenerates itself as a memory. The fact that this violence plays out in a national park, while the women are exercising, reminds us that sexual harassment is often very public. That there is a group of three women and only one man is also significant. For Piper's characters, as for many women, the timeworn guidance that 'there is safety in numbers' proves false, as the narrator suggests:

> Those disappearing footprints unnerved Samantha more than anything else that had happened till then. Leaving his shit on a rock was more schoolboy than psycho. Stealing someone's bikini top and using it for toilet paper was disgusting. But the evaporation of his trail, that had all the hallmarks of some kind of evil wizardry. A manipulative force more powerful than the force the three of them combined could hope to project. This was the point at which Samantha realised they were no match for him. (Piper 2018: 152)

At the end of the novel, there is a moment of reckoning, an opportunity for retribution rarely afforded women like Dixon. Yet the resolution itself is not as important as the escalating sense of crisis that pervades the book. Piper's narrator tells us that the man 'knew of the dark places that existed in a girl's mind, the deep pockets of fear they hold' (Piper 2018: 147). There is a sense that these women are not only carrying the weight of their backpacks but some historical baggage as well. Travel, in its broadest sense, has always been 'risky' terrain for women due to the sociocultural connections between women's movement and its perceived sexual transgressions. In Victorian times, for example, there is a clear link between wandering and promiscuity. Piper knows this, and she exploits this complex interplay between mobility and morality in order to pose important questions that are relevant to us all: questions about pride and shame, release and restraint, and the trauma of humiliation, which resides in the body

'like a small, hot stone' (Piper 2018: 234). There are, of course, no answers to these questions; there are only more questions, which Piper raises skillfully, without leading her readers: 'How to articulate shame? How to stop it existing only as a deadening of feeling? To give it a face and character, some purpose, so that it might be studied from all sides and better understood, used for good?' (Piper 2018: 234).

Published in the wake of the #MeToo movement, *The geography of friendship* is a timely look at the inscribed power of male aggression and its devastating effects. At the same time, the novel offers a form of resistance through the intimate and unifying force suggested in the novel's title: friendship. While there is no safety in numbers, there is strength in shared knowledge and experience. The resulting concept, collective resilience, is what lies at the heart of this novel. Collective resilience was evident too at the community vigil that was held for Eurydice Dixon in Princes Park. As one Melbourne woman, present at the memorial, quietly observed, 'If you hurt one of us, you hurt all of us' (Smith 2018). *The geography of friendship* is complex terrain that we all must chart.

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