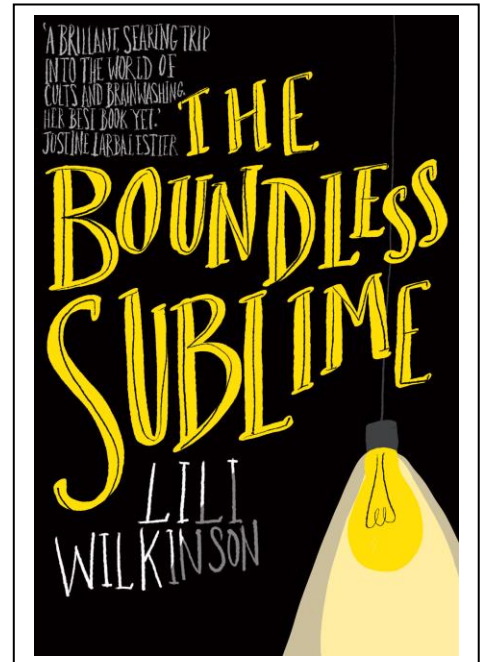


# The Boundless Sublime

By Lili Wilkinson

August 2016 ISBN 9781760113360 pb  
For readers aged 14+ years.



## Summary

*The Boundless Sublime* represents a dramatic new direction in Lili Wilkinson's YA writing. It is about a teenage girl, Ruby, who, numb and confused by grief, joins a cult. Seemingly benign, the group turns out to hide sinister secrets, all centering on its enigmatic leader Zosimon, known as 'Daddy'. The Institute of the Boundless Sublime is a fictional cult, drawing on elements from many real-life religious groups. The novel chronicles Ruby's journey through belief and obsession, to a total breakdown of self-identity, and eventual recovery and escape.

The author says: 'New religious movements have always preyed on the young and vulnerable, particularly young women. Cult stories too often place women in the role of victim or frenzied acolyte, denying them a voice or political agency. *The Boundless Sublime* repositions the traditional cult narrative by placing a young woman at the centre of the story, chronicling her journey from powerlessness to agency and control.'

## Use in the classroom

*The Boundless Sublime* is an excellent Australian contribution to the YA 'escaping a cult' genre and would be very suitable for a Literature Circle study of this genre, including films (e.g. *The Chocolate War*) as a comparative text type.

Though there are many novels, particularly from the USA, which focus on Christian fundamentalist sects, there are sufficient novels available, including *The Boundless Sublime*, which avoid a specifically religious focus and instead investigate 'group think', 'mob mentality', the attraction of conformity versus free thought, the extent to which a teenager will make sacrifices in order to belong to a group and the competing claims of family, institutions, friends and romance in the development of one's adult identity.

Literature Circle topics could include YA genre fiction and Australian YA fiction as well as thematic topics from the list below.

## Themes

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|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grief</li> <li>• Conformity/rebellion</li> <li>• Betrayal</li> <li>• Love</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Belief and credulity/Science (and pseudoscience)</li> <li>• Religion and cults</li> <li>• Identity</li> </ul> |
|---|--|

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# In the classroom...



## Discussion questions

1. Discuss the different manifestations of grief shown by Fox, Ruby and her mother.
2. Grief is often accompanied by blame and guilt. Is Ruby justified in blaming herself for her brother's death? Is she to blame for Fox's incarceration? Should we blame her mother and father, and if so, what for?
3. How important are the negative feelings of blame and guilt in motivating Ruby's actions?
4. Could any of the thoughts and feelings that motivated Ruby to join the Institute be considered positive?
5. Do you think teenagers are more idealistic than older people?
6. Everyone must face grief at some stage in their life. Can you think of any positive aspects to grief?
7. Ruby commits a shocking act of violence to demonstrate her commitment to the Institute and Daddy. Many organisations demand commitment from members: how can we decide if a demand is reasonable or not?
8. How far would you be prepared to go for a group you really wanted to join e.g. a sport club, an orchestra, an on-line community, a particular group of students in your school....?
9. Research The Stanford prison experiment, where university students took on the roles of guards and prisoners. The experiment was abandoned after only six days due to the violence and degradation that the students rapidly fell into. Do the findings of this experiment explain events in *The Boundless Sublime*?
10. At times in the novel, it seems that Val, Lib and Newton have seen through Daddy. Why don't they leave the Institute? Brainstorm some practical and some psychological factors that might lead to them staying.
11. Is the Institute a prison or a sanctuary? What is the attraction of conformity and obedience to rules?
12. There are threads of truth in what Daddy preaches e.g. the threat of pollution, political and financial corruption etc. How might this appeal to someone at a vulnerable time in their life?
13. It is sometimes said that teenagers are particularly vulnerable to cults. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
14. Is it possible to put all religions on a line, whereby extreme cults are separated from 'established' religion only by a matter of degree? If so, at what point do you think an organisation moves from 'worthwhile religion' to 'dangerous cult'?
15. Define 'belief system' and brainstorm some examples in our own society. Are all belief systems inherently dangerous? Why/why not?
16. Map the progress of Ruby's relationship with Fox. What qualities are manifested in their changing relationship e.g. sacrifice, betrayal, dependence...?
17. As you were reading the novel, did your opinion about Ruby and Fox's feelings for each other change? Did you believe that they would 'win through together in the end' or did you think theirs was a relationship that was going nowhere?



## Related texts/Further reading

### Award-winning classics

***People might hear you***, Robin Klein (Penguin Books Australia, 1983)

***The Gathering***, Isobelle Carmody (Puffin Australia, 1993)

***The Chocolate War***, Robert Cormier (Puffin UK, 2001)

### More recent YA novels

***Ratface***, Garry Disher (HarperCollins Publishers Australia, 1993)

Christina and Max start to have doubts about the White League which controls their life but leaving isn't easy. 'A straightforward escape and chase thriller with few of the complexities of this author's *The Bamboo Flute*.' *The Source, Magpies*

***Black***, Fleur Ferris (Random House Australia, 2016)

A Christian-based church is at the heart of a series of crimes, protected and supported by the town policeman. Ebony 'Black' Marshall becomes the focus of superstitious prejudice and religious hysteria. Her fight against this combines with the crime story to create a 'gothic mystery tale with a touch of romance'. *The Source, Magpies*

***Grace***, Morris Gleitzman (Penguin Group (Australia) 2009)

Grace's previously close and secure world becomes strange just because she and her father (members of a church with strict rules for living) ask questions. 'Gleitzman writes with his characteristic humour and Grace shares the questing, innocent qualities of his other characters but the story [remains a grim one]. A telling and effective criticism of despots and religious mania.' *The Source, Magpies*

***State of Grace***, Hilary Badger (Hardie Grant Egmont, 2014)

Wren lives in a literal paradise but eventually discovers she is actually part of a trial for an ominous drug called Grace. Wren must decide whether to live within the comforting delusion of faith or fight for the right to face the (potentially ugly) truth of the real world.

***Everything Beautiful***, Simmone Howell (2008, Pan Australia)

Riley and Dylan are reluctant attendees of a Christian summer camp. A sometimes humorous coming-of-age story that focuses on their determination to question the nature of belief systems.

***Leaving Fishers***, Margaret Peterson Haddix (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2012)

Lonely at her new school, Dorry is relieved to make friends with Angela. She is drawn into Angela's cult, The Fishers of Men, who demand greater and greater sacrifices from Dorry to demonstrate her devotion.

***I am not Esther, I am Rebecca, Being Magdalene***, Fleur Beale (Penguin Random House Australia, 1998, 2014, 2015)

Three sisters and their struggle to be free of a closed religious community, The Children of the Faith.

### Other books by Lili Wilkinson

***Green Valentine*** (Allen & Unwin, 2015)

***The Zigzag Effect*** (Allen & Unwin, 2013)

***Love-shy*** (Allen & Unwin, 2012)

***A Pocketful of Eyes*** (Allen & Unwin, 2011)

***Pink*** (Allen & Unwin, 2009)

***Angel Fish*** (Black Dog Books, 2009)

# From the author...



***The (not quite) Perfect Boyfriend***, Girlfriend Fiction (Allen & Unwin, 2008)

**Short** (ed) (Black Dog Books, 2008)

***Scatterheart*** (Black Dog Books, 2007)

**"fantastic worlds"**, chapter in *Right Book, Right Time*, Agnes Nieuwenhuizen, (Allen & Unwin, 2007)

***Joan of Arc: the story of Jehanne Darc*** (Black Dog Books, 2006)

## About writing this novel

*The Boundless Sublime* draws strongly on my own family experience. My grandfather brought Scientology from Western Australia to the Eastern States, and was personally commended by L Ron Hubbard. His brother, my great uncle, was the 70th person to "go Clear" in Scientology. My own father grew up in a strictly Scientologist household in Adelaide in an era where Scientology was illegal. I have first-hand experience of the quirks and peculiarities of so-called 'alternative religions', as well as their destructive power on relationships and families. Growing up in a secular household, I have always been fascinated by the engine of belief and its historical links to power, control and conspiracy. I have researched over forty cults and charted their common attributes (e.g. a charismatic leader, child abuse, psychotropic drugs, etc.), as well as their ties and similarities to mainstream religious groups (the line between 'cult' and 'religion' is often invisible).

I am particularly interested in the links between religion and health/lifestyle, noting that some of the most infamous cults (Aum Shinrikyo, The Family, Raelism, The Divine Light Mission) began as yoga clubs. I believe the health/fitness movement shares traits in common with religious cults, in particular exclusive 'fanatic' health movements. This can be seen in the exclusive yogawear brand Lululemon, its ties with self-help organisation Landmark, and the events that led to the tragic murder of Jayna Murray by her coworker in 2011. These stories of obsession, sacrifice, power and control/abuse of the body have closely informed the shape and feel of *The Boundless Sublime*.

Cults are fascinating. Whether it is the couch-jumping craziness of Scientology, the lizard-alien worshipping of the Raelians, or the dark violence of the Manson Family or Heaven's Gate, people are frightened, threatened and intrigued by new religious movements. Teenagers in particular are drawn to these alternative belief structures, as cult leaders prey on the heightened emotional state of adolescence, and the need to simultaneously fit in and stand out.

As a teen, I was obsessed with Robin Klein's *People Might Hear You* and Isobelle Carmody's *The Gathering*. These dark psychological thrillers continue to entrance readers today, and I hope to add to the very small body of YA work that tackles religion, belief and obsession in this way.

In the eight weeks leading up to publication, I released a series of YouTube videos detailing some of my research for the book - <https://www.youtube.com/user/videosofalili>

## About the author

I was born in Clifton Hill, Melbourne, in the front room of the house my parents still live in. I'm an only child who always loved books and reading. I was first published at age 12 in *Voiceworks* Magazine - at the time I was the youngest writer they'd ever published. As an adult I sat on the board of Express Media (which publishes *Voiceworks*) and was presented with the Ongoing Contribution Award in 2012. In 2004 I began working at the Centre for Youth Literature, where I stayed for eight years, establishing the award-winning Read Alert blog, the [insideadog.com.au](http://insideadog.com.au) website, the Inky Awards and the Inkys Creative Reading Prize. In 2006 my first book was published. My PhD research explored the ways in which YA literature and online fandom inspires/empowers young people to be more socially and politically engaged.