KIM LOCK
LIKE I CAN LOVE
READING NOTES
Dear Reader,

There is nothing so tantalising, so evocative as a key. A key calls up images of buried treasure, of secrets, of that which is hidden. So when then-CEO of the Queensland Writers Centre, Meg Vann, recommended I take a look at a manuscript featuring a key, a storage box and a letter from beyond the grave, I read the story immediately. I was not disappointed.

The story of best friends Jenna and Fairlie, of Jenna and Ark’s seemingly perfect marriage and of the secret that binds them all is as addicting as it is devastating. For in *Like I Can Love*, the author has done more than pen a page-turner (though the story is certainly that); she has woven a tale as beautiful and as complex as the very best friendship.

In her first trade novel, columnist and women’s rights activist Kim Lock examines the many different forms of love – the complicated mother/child bond, the supportive, joyous and occasionally competitive nature of female friendship, the tunnel vision of romantic love – and asks readers what they would do to protect it. Within this framework, Kim explores the important issues of postnatal depression and mental illness, adoption, domestic abuse and the struggle to be the perfect mother. The result is a story that will haunt you, leaving you to wonder how you would react when faced with the impossible choices Kim’s characters are given.

*Like I Can Love* is that rare combination of beautiful, deeply layered writing with utterly compelling storytelling. It will have you staying up late reading, raving to your friends and debating in your book clubs.

Enjoy.

Haylee Nash
Commissioning Editor – Fiction
Pan Macmillan Australia
Hello Readers,

Several years ago, a woman close to me ended a long-term relationship. It was at about the same time that I began scratching out ideas for this novel. Today, when people ask me about the inspiration for this story I can’t help but tell the truth: the seed was planted when something similar happened to a friend. This book was a way for me to explore, through the safety of fiction, some of the ‘what ifs’.

Through my research for this novel, I knew that many women face the kinds of adversities that my characters face. And yet, I am still struck by how many people, after reading the novel, have come to me and said, This is exactly what happened to my friend/sister/me.

In this story, that ‘someone I knew’ is far more than just one person. That person is so many women. Motherhood is supposed to be a time of joy, yet one in five women now experience postnatal mental illness. Our domestic relationships are often the most important things in our lives, yet women are more at threat from their domestic partner than they are strangers in a dark alley. And tragically, more new mothers die by their own hand than by any complication from childbirth.

Writing the character of Fairlie Winter, I found her wry humour and somewhat lackadaisical outlook on life provided an opportunity to distance myself from the more confronting themes of the narrative. Jenna’s early experiences of motherhood spoke to me, as I was able to recall some of my own feelings as a new mother.

Like I Can Love is set in regional South Australia, where I grew up. Setting the story amongst its grapevines provided a metaphor for the facades we paint for society – the images we project to avoid the gossip so characterised by small towns.

I sincerely hope you enjoy the experience of reading Like I Can Love. There are many layers in the story that I hope will provide your book club with spirited discussion and debate!

And finally, please accept my warmest thanks for your support.

Kind regards,

Kim Lock
LIKE I CAN LOVE

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WRITING STYLE
On a hot January afternoon, Fairlie Winter receives a phone call. Her best friend has just taken her own life.

Jenna Rudolph, 26 years old, has left behind a devoted husband, an adorable young son and a stunning vineyard. But Fairlie knows she should have seen this coming.

Yet Fairlie doesn’t know what Jenna’s husband Ark is hiding, nor does she know what Jenna’s mother Evelyn did to drive mother and daughter apart all those years ago.

Until Fairlie opens her mail and finds a letter. In Jenna’s handwriting. Along with a key.

Driven to search for answers, Fairlie uncovers a horrifying past, a desperate mother, and a devastating secret kept by those she loves the most.

Heartbreaking and terrifying, Like I Can Love explores love in all its forms - from the most fragile to the most dangerous - and the unthinkable things we do in its name.
LIKE I CAN LOVE

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Kim Lock was born in 1981. She has worked around Australia as a graphic designer and volunteered as a breastfeeding counsellor. Her non-fiction has appeared in The Guardian, Daily Life, and The Sydney Morning Herald online. Her fiction explores the stories that shape people’s lives, but which they hide from society. Like I Can Love is her second novel.

Kim lives in the Barossa Valley, South Australia, with her partner and their children, a dog and a couple of cats.
LIKE I CAN LOVE

PLOT

Question 1

“That just occur to you?” Fairlie huffed as she rose to her feet, setting her bag back on the chair. “Haven’t you noticed that for twenty-odd years, I’ve been obese and black and you’re skinny and white?” (‘Then’, Page 43.)

‘Fairlie’s mother and father flank her. Growing up with white parents, in a white community, Fairlie never felt black. As a young child she thought she had been painted – that she was a white girl dipped in brown ink. Her parents’ friends called her cute and fuzzy and patted her head and talked about the problems with Aborigines: drinking and stealing and welfare-bludging. That wasn’t her: she wasn’t one of them. But she didn’t feel white either.’ (‘Now’, Page 86.)

• How did Fairlie’s race affect the plot, Fairlie’s character and her feelings of self-worth? How did this strengthen, limit or provide opportunities for the story and affect the general reading experience?
LIKE I CAN LOVE

THEMES

FAMILY

Question 2

‘The detective looks interested. “Lucky, living so close to your mate.” Blinking furiously, Fairlie is determined not to cry. “We were one hundred and fourteen steps from each other.”’ (‘Now’, Page 62.)

“‘Hell no.” Ark laughed abruptly. “Mum knew better than to answer back.” Jenna started. “He didn’t hit her, did he?” Ark shot her a quick sideways look.’ (‘Then’, Page 72.)

• The novel has a diverse portrayal of families: Ark remembers his upbringing with scorn, but brings about a similar cycle of abuse for his own family; while Jenna and Fairlie are more of a family – just like sisters – before they even know their true connection. Discuss the definition of family, or different types of families, based on this.

Question 3

‘All of this? This is between you and me only, sister.’ (‘Now’, Page 139.)

‘And while your wails filled my life from one sunrise to the next, always from the second cot came nothing but silence. It was as though you spoke for the both of you – the selected member of the jury who announces: we find you guilty.’ (Letter to Jenna, Page 243.)

‘Fairlie digs her fingers into her palms. She doesn’t give a tiny skidmark about local political history and people in the shops. “Bullshit!” she cries. “This is about the colour of my skin. You couldn’t fucking hide it. Black people stick out amongst all your white privilege.”’ (‘Now’, Page 284.)

• Fairlie judges Evelyn for being more concerned about the outward appearance of her family than actually raising both her daughters, while Evelyn believes that the only way she could be a good mother was to separate the twins. Did Evelyn make the right decision? Or does Jenna and Fairlie’s friendship prove they were always meant to be together?
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Question 4

‘Eventually, the doctor looked up. He stared at me with such intensity that I wanted to look away. Then he turned to Stephen and he said: “There is another girl.”
In the background, you wailed. But – where was our new baby? This second girl? Then the doctor lifted his hands. And nothing would be the same ever again.’
(Letter to Jenna, Page 213.)

‘She remembered the horrified look of judgement on Fairlie’s face: her insistence that Jenna not leave her son, her contempt that Jenna could even contemplate such atrocity. No. Like Ark’s mother had abandoned him when he needed her protection from his father, like Fairlie’s birth mother had abandoned Fairlie when she was a helpless infant, Jenna too must fall prey to the unthinkable. Severed ties, the rupture of lifelong bonds.’
(‘Then’, Page 253.)

• Discuss the legacy of family in Like I Can Love. Why can’t Ark, Fairlie or Evelyn escape their past?

DEPRESSION

Question 5

““If it’s been going on for a while, I’d say it’s postnatal depression,” the doctor went on. “But since Henry is eighteen months old now, we’ll call it plain depression. We tend to diagnose the ‘postnatal’ part before twelve months post partum.”
Jenna was trying to name the colour of the carpet. Too light for grey, it was also too bland for silver.
“But you definitely think this is postnatal?” Ark asked.
“If it’s been going on for some time, yes.”
“It has. A long time. We should have come to see you sooner.”
Off white? she wondered. No, it wasn’t cream enough.’
(‘Then’, Page 205.)

• One of the important issues explored in the novel is mental illness and the effect it has not just on those suffering with it, but their families and friends. What did you think of the way Jenna dealt with the illness? How was her illness used by Ark to manipulate Jenna? Do you think Jenna’s depression was purely a medical issue or was it a symptom of her circumstances (i.e. her troubled relationship with Ark and her mother)?
'And then something happened. Ark’s mouth continued to move, but no words came out. Instead, Jenna heard a rushing sound, a solid body of white noise; she saw her bare feet moving across the tiles, then the toaster was in her hands. Cord snapping tight, the plug popped from the outlet as she lifted the toaster above her, crumbs falling like brown rain. She threw the appliance as hard as she could at Ark’s head. Ark yelped and ducked as the toaster smashed into the overhead cabinet behind him.' ('Then', Page 191.)

‘The elastic bands snapped around the pile of books. Jenna lowered the bundle into the box, then stuffed balls of newspaper to secure them. Long strips of packing tape peeled from the roll with screeching sounds. Wrapping the strips tightly around the whole box, she picked up a marker and wrote on the cardboard.’ (‘Then’, Page 287.)

- Jenna’s resistance to Ark’s domineering behaviour is an important step towards her breaking away from the pattern of abuse. Which method of resistance do you think is more effective: Jenna’s direct resistance (e.g. the toaster), or subversive resistance (e.g. hiding the accounting books)?
'Fairlie feels nothing as she pulls into the gravel drive, the tyres crunching as she gazes up at the house that has been like a second home to her for almost her entire life. Inside, she will smell the familiar scent of stone and memories, a century of life whispering from the walls adorned with so many photographs of Jenna. But when she finally steps from her car, and slams the door, and hears the birds twittering in the wattle where she knows she will find a littering of rusted, forgotten Matchbox cars if she digs in the steel-coloured sand at its shallow roots, she feels a surge of nervous anger in her chest. When she swallows, it tastes coppery.' ('Now', Page 261–2.)

'Henry was clutched high on his chest; Ark had one arm slung effortlessly around his small body, veins standing up in his bare forearm. Four years ago, at the pub, it had been the same smile: promising, convivial, almost peaceful, like upward-held palms. Promises. Reassurances. It was all bullshit. All shattered.' ('Then', Page 287–288.)

- Like I Can Love switches between present and past tense in the ‘Now’ and ‘Then’ chapters. Describe the effectiveness of this writing technique. Does the use of present tense make Fairlie’s journey more immediate? As if she is on the same journey of discovery as the reader?

  “At the start, she was deliriously happy.”
  “And then?”
  “And then . . .” Air whooshes from Fairlie’s nose. “I don’t know, exactly. They fought. She faded away.” ('Now', Page 130.)

And hadn’t they had sex four days ago? In truth, Jenna hadn’t been in the mood for it lately. Not because she wasn’t interested in Ark, or because they didn’t make time for it, but because she’d felt increasingly alienated from him for reasons, amongst other things, she had hoped this counsellor might have been able to illuminate. Was she being over-sensitive? She began to feel whiney, childish. It was true that she hadn’t exactly been raised by a shining pillar of integrity, nor had her upbringing demonstrated healthy, open relationships. Jenna’s heart dropped into her stomach, a dead weight of self-loathing.’ (‘Then’, Page 161.)

- Discuss how the alternating ‘Then’ and ‘Now’ point-of-view chapters are used as a device for creating mystery and suspense.
LIKE I CAN LOVE

Question 8

‘I will leave you with this. But there’s more, Jenna, so much more. If only I could know if you will ever hear it. And so, until next time.

Love, Mum’ (Letter to Jenna, p.46)

• Letters are an important feature of *Like I Can Love*, between Jenna’s letter to Fairlie and Evelyn’s correspondence to Jenna. Discuss the pacing and gradual revelations of Evelyn’s letters to Jenna. How do they add to the building of suspense as Evelyn simultaneously reveals new information, and creates more questions?