

the Albatross

'A
spectacularly
good book'
-ANNABEL
CRABB

'Captivated
both my mind
and heart.'
-HANNAH BENT



Nina Wan

Reading Group Notes

About the Book

'The albatross is just about the rarest thing in golf – two shots on a par 5. A hole-in-one, anywhere on the course, is just a random event, a fluke. It's not your own doing. But an albatross . . . It's a thing of beauty. One. Two. It must be very deliberate, very thoughtful, one superb shot followed by another. You can say it's got to take a degree of belief. You've got to really want it, and aim for it, and try for it.'

When Primrose makes an unplanned detour into a dilapidated suburban golf course called Whistles, she has no idea that the past will come rushing back at her, bringing every detail of her life into stark focus.

At 36, her marriage is teetering from illness and infidelity. A visit from her commanding brother-in-law looms ominously on the horizon. And by a twist of fate, Peter, the boy she loved twenty years ago, is now living across the street.

Primrose cannot escape the increasing demands to make a choice, between her first love and her marriage, duty and desire, fear and freedom. Slowly, the grounds of Whistles, and a sport she proves to be terrible at, become her meditation and cure.

From a sparkling new Australian voice, *The Albatross* is a bighearted, beautifully written and utterly engaging novel about first love, second chances and the most elusive shot in golf.

About the Author

Nina Wan is a former journalist. She was born in Shanghai and moved to Australia as a child. The inspiration for *The Albatross* came from an inner-city golf course in Melbourne, where she once found unexpected joys at a time of formidable challenges.

Plot Summary

Note: This summary contains spoilers

One stormy day in May 2019, Primrose Li surprises herself by driving into her local public golf course, Whistles, which she hasn't been to since her youth. Speaking to the teenage course attendant, she learns that Whistles is due to be shut down for redevelopment, and they discuss the lay of the course – including the rarity of achieving an albatross, two shots on a par 5 hole.

After buying a set of second-hand golf clubs, Primrose returns home to her husband Adrian. At home, Primrose's life has been one of routine as a stay-at-home mum to six-year-old Bebe. She cleans the house excessively, scouring floors until her hands are raw – a coping mechanism that started with Adrian's cancer diagnosis and has lasted through his recovery. From their strained conversation, we understand that Primrose's agitation is linked to an upcoming visit from her brother-in-law, Terence, and that there is tension around Adrian's return to work.

Through flashbacks, we learn about Primrose's early years: moving to Melbourne from Shanghai at eight years old, feeling out of place at school, working at her parents' café, The Comet, and meeting Peter Loy, an older student with whom she began an intense relationship when she was sixteen. It was Peter who introduced her to golf, and who first took her to Whistles. Peter's family is also Chinese, but has been in Australia for five generations and is much wealthier and more established. Peter then moved to New York for university and, despite talk of a long-distance relationship, the two lost contact.

Meanwhile, in present day 2019, Primrose takes up golfing regularly, returning to Whistles and learning from Harriet, an experienced older golfer. She speaks to her therapist. She visits her father, and they disagree about politics, golf and Primrose's life choices. At the invitation of her glamorous neighbour, Louisa, Primrose agrees to go away for the weekend as part of birthday celebrations for Louisa's husband – Peter, from high school. It is by coincidence that Primrose and Peter are now living across the street from one another. They never discuss their history, and their partners don't know that they had been in love twenty years ago.

Primrose, Adrian and Bebe drive to Homer, the grand Loy family residence in Flinders. At dinner, the guests get in a drunken discussion about politics and race, putting Primrose in an awkward position. Early the next morning, Primrose wanders around Homer and stumbles upon Peter in his study. What begins as a conversation about Peter's Chinese art collection turns into an argument about identity. In the heat of the moment, old feelings

come to the fore and they make love. The next day, the group goes to Lost Cove, an exclusive golf course nearby. Louisa takes Primrose out to a cliff to hit golf balls into the sea. They discuss Adrian's likely affair with a coworker. Primrose says she will stay with him regardless. Louisa seems pleased by this decision, and goes on to allude that she suspects Primrose to be hiding secrets herself.

Soon afterwards, back home, Adrian's brother, the rich and powerful Terence, arrives. The source of Primrose's fear and revulsion becomes clear: Terence gave her \$300,000 for Adrian's cancer treatment, which saved his life, but at the cost of sex with Primrose, which she did not want. It also turns out that Terence is the real reason Primrose left a successful career as a business and politics writer; her work was interfering with his business dealings.

Already close to breaking point, Primrose is shocked when her father is hospitalised after a racially motivated attack. In her distress, she calls Peter. In the night, they go to Whistles, which they last visited together before Peter left to go overseas for university. The pair finally speak honestly about their feelings – and the significance of the albatross. Back then, Peter had promised to stay with Primrose instead of going overseas if he could hit that impossible shot at Whistles. He failed, and he left.

In the present, Primrose must decide if she's willing to risk taking a second shot at love and happiness with Peter. The book ends with a sense of hope, as Primrose tells Peter she will not live the rest of her life as it is now.

Themes

Marriage and Family

1. **Every marriage contains at its heart something that is unnegotiable; for us, it must be Terence.** (Page 34)

When we first read this line, it seems to point to Adrian's devotion to his brother. But once we learn about Primrose's own experience with Terence, how does it change our understanding of this line? How does Terence colour and overshadow their marriage?

2. **We are good at keeping secrets, Adrian and I.** (Page 135)

What secrets do Primrose and Adrian keep from each other? Should they be more open with each other? Why is Primrose reluctant to confront Adrian about his affair?

3. **'Sometimes mistakes are made. People lose their way and they marry wrongly. Believe me, those two are just regular people with a regular set of marital problems.'** (Page 203)

Louisa tells Primrose that her marriage to Peter is open and unconventional, but Marin scoffs at this idea. What do you think Louisa and Peter's marriage is actually like? Why might Louisa lie? Does this quote also apply to Primrose and Adrian, or are their problems different?

4. Primrose and Adrian hide their difficulties from their daughter, Bebe. But Bebe often seems to understand more than she lets on. What are some examples of this? Do you think Primrose is doing the right thing for her daughter?
5. Primrose's father seems unhappy with the way his daughter's life has turned out, especially marrying Adrian and leaving her job. Is he right to be concerned? What makes it hard for them to communicate about these issues?

Race and Racism

6. **'I understand that racism is an issue, I do. But sometimes I wonder if it isn't counterproductive for people to be reminded of it so often.'** (Page 145)

Primrose experiences a range of racial prejudice, including Terence's stereotype of submissive Asian women, well-meaning liberal pamphlets and racism disguised as national security. She generally chooses to ignore it instead of reacting. What do you think of Primrose's approach? Does it make sense for the real world?

7. 'I think it's only at the moment you react that you give them a way to become dangerous, because then they become part of the conversation. The more things are talked about, the more they become legitimate. Everything can be talked into becoming logic.' (Page 193)

Primrose's refusal to speak out on race often frustrates other people, such as Peter and the lady on the bus. Why might it make others uncomfortable? In what way is it also a kind of defiance? What do we owe each other when it comes to shared or differing identities?

8. 'Can't you feel it? Aren't you aware how every little thing in the news these days is shifting the way people look at you? ... If someone in your situation chooses not to speak up, then won't the target on your back just get bigger and bigger?' (Page 297)

When Primrose's father refuses to incriminate the young men who attacked him, Primrose is upset and frustrated. Why do you think Primrose finds it so difficult to understand, despite her earlier belief that reacting is dangerous? Do you agree with her father's reasoning? Is there a definite right thing to do in this situation?

9. Peter's family have been in Australia for five generations, and Jonathan's family for six. How does their family's distance from the time of immigration influence the way these characters see themselves? Are they fully assimilated to Australian culture? How do they see and respond to racism?

Interiority and Silence

10. 'When you were little, when we first brought you here, you didn't talk for two years. I thought it was the language, but even after you learned, you never really talked again.' (Page 295)

Why do you think Primrose tends to stay quiet? Is it because she likes her own company, or she has nothing to say? Or was there a turning point for her, either in her childhood or adult life?

11. 'But human nature is faulty. I think most people have a tendency to look inward rather than out.'

'They've got to resist that. We all do.' (Page 206)

Marin, a sculptor, believes that we should see ourselves as a small part of a big universe instead of focusing on the self. Do you agree? Do you think Primrose tends to look inward or outward? Is this to her benefit or detriment?

12. 'I am tired of that kind of work, of having an opinion and of having people harangue me about it. I only wish to empty my mind, that it might be so empty that I'd no longer have so much as a fleeting dream at night.' (Page 59)

Before we learn the real reason Primrose left her job, she states that she is tired of having opinions. Is this an accurate representation of journalism? What characteristics might have made Primrose an effective business and political writer? Do you think she would ever return to writing?

13. In this story, Primrose has sex with three men: Peter (Pages 107, 197), Adrian (Pages 211, 241) and Terence (Page 271). Her feelings about sex are sometimes positive, sometimes negative, sometimes mixed. Is she always able to communicate her feelings to her partner, or admit them to herself? As a reader, there are times we can see the line of consent being crossed. Do you think Primrose would agree, in the moment or afterwards?

Fate and History

14. Even as life moved determinedly along the path of work and marriage and motherhood – still the same town, the same neighbourhood, the same side of the highway. I suppose it's a kind of fate at work, since it certainly has not happened by design. (Page 139)

Primrose often feels that her life has been determined by being a first-generation immigrant. How much is determined by our social class and upbringing? How much are we in control of our lives? Contrast Primrose's life with Peter and Erin's.

15. 'Every single thing that happens to people is history. Would you like to hold on to it all?' (Page 280)

Harriet advocates a very straightforward, matter-of-fact approach to both life and golf: address what's in front of you, and don't worry too much about the past. Is this always practical, or possible? How does Primrose's story support this, or not?

16. Primrose has an irrational belief that she is to blame for Adrian's cancer: 'All the bad things that would happen to him, no matter how small or large, were going to be tied to me forever whether I liked it or not.' (Page 58) How does this kind of deterministic thinking affect Primrose?

17. 'It's just history repeating itself. Despite appearances, humans have very limited ability to reinvent themselves.' (Page 181)

The novel traces Primrose's story through many of the important social and political events of her lifetime: the republican referendum of 1999, terrorist attacks of September 11 2001, the Global Financial Crisis of 2009 and Donald Trump's presidency. Why might Nina Wan have chosen to include so much of this context? What does it add to our understanding of Primrose, and our reading of the book?

Golf

18. 'Of all the things people do to pass their time, I think golf must be the strangest.' (Page 23)

At first, Primrose is a complete novice at golf and doesn't seem to understand the appeal. But she learns to appreciate the game. What was your attitude towards golf before you read this book? Did it change over the course of the story?

19. In my mind I pictured myself golfing in solitude. I pictured a perambulation through fresh air and greenness; in a way I pictured emptiness, an uninterrupted aloneness punctuated only by the sporadic flight of birds or a plane overhead. (Page 78)

Primrose seeks solitude in golf, but doesn't get it – instead, she golfs with Harriet, chats with Josh, the young golf attendant, and gets to know other regulars from afar, such as Matthew with the war medals. What does Primrose think of the people at the golf course? What role do these people play in her healing, as well as the golf itself?

20. The epigraph of this book refers to the first rule in the golf rule book: you must play the course as you find it, and play the ball as it lies. What do you think this means in the broader context of Primrose's life? How do you think this helps her understanding of her difficulties, and her ability to overcome them?

21. Strangely, the thought no longer daunts me. I merely look forward to another display of my own ineptitude. Is it possible to feel schadenfreude towards oneself? (Page 89)
- What does Primrose come to enjoy about golf? Why might she be particularly suited to this sport? What might she learn about Peter and his passion for golf as she embarks on this activity herself, so many years later?

22. How would you compare Whistles, the public golf course, with the private and exclusive Lost Cove? What elements of these settings show the differences in clientele and social status? Is golf really 'an activity which lacks any utility' (Page 151), a luxury, like Primrose's father says?

Characters

Primrose Li

23. On the very first page, Primrose tells the reader: 'I do things all the time without knowing the reason.' (Page 1) How does this line set up Primrose's character? Do we as the reader always know why Primrose does things?
24. Primrose doesn't have a diagnosis from her therapist, but we do know that she was prescribed medication that she doesn't take, and that she has an unhealthy compulsion for cleaning. What do you think of Primrose's coping mechanisms? Does therapy help Primrose with these issues?
25. I am barley in a field of wheat and, now that I am mixed up with all this wheat, how in the world is anybody ever going to recognise me? How will they find out who or where I am? (Page 55)
Primrose's recurring dream of being threshed troubles her, and her therapist. What do you think it means? What does it say about Primrose's unconscious or conscious concerns?
26. Primrose and her father communicate in different languages – he speaks in the Shanghainese dialect, and she replies in English. How does this represent or affect their relationship?
27. How does Primrose change throughout the course of the novel? What do you imagine her future to look like after the last page?

Peter Loy

28. 'What you are asking me to do is to be completely literal about myself, to say that I'm either white or I'm Asian, I'm either poor or I'm rich, I'm either liked or I'm detested. But as long as I can live with myself as a human being who is good and decent, why should I have the need to draw these circles around myself?' (Page 302)
Peter is in many ways the opposite of Primrose – rich and self-assured – though they share a common heritage. How has his upbringing contributed to these differences? How does Primrose make Peter question himself?
29. What do you think Peter saw in Primrose as a teenager? Should he have stayed with her, instead of going to New York? What attracts him to her, even after all these years?

30. Peter works at the family bank but is also a knowledgeable and passionate art collector of European and Chinese classics – just like his dad. Why do you think he hides the Zhang Daqian paintings in his study instead of displaying them? What do they mean to him?

Adrian Gillings

31. *That was the thing about making love to Adrian: it was always reliable and predictably nice, like Adrian himself.* (Page 242)
When we meet Adrian, he is recovering from cancer, struggling with his own issues. He is also having an unconfirmed extra-marital affair. But we learn that he and Primrose used to have a loving and mutually supportive relationship. Do you see Adrian a bad person or a bad husband, or do you sympathise with him at all?
32. To Adrian, older brother Terence is *'friend and confidant and father figure all rolled into one'* (Page 35). How do we see this play out when Terence comes to visit, or in the past? Why is this dynamic so unhealthy, for Adrian and his marriage?

Louisa

33. Louisa is described as having *'whimsical, modern'* (Page 70) taste and trendy friends – and she makes a point of letting Primrose know about her unconventional, open marriage. How do you think the author intends for the reader to feel about Louisa? Could she and Primrose ever really be friends?
34. *'What is keeping you so quiet? Are you shy? Are you empty? Or just a bit dim? I've realised, as time goes on, that it's none of those things. It's because you just don't like me.'* (Page 234)
Louisa recognises that Primrose's silence is more complicated than it seems. Why do you think Louisa continues to push Primrose to reveal herself? Do you think she suspects Primrose's history with Peter?

Settings

35. Nina Wan anchors *The Albatross* firmly in space and time (inner Melbourne, 1999 to 2019), using specific details about the local landscape, weather and politics. How does the setting inform our ideas about the characters in the story? Does the setting itself shape the events of the novel?

36. The main characters travel to Homer, Peter's family home in Flinders, and each person sees it very differently. Homer is Peter's pride and joy, but Louisa sees it as 'a kind of outpost, a far-flung colony in a storm-battered sea' (Page 170). Primrose calls it 'a stallion in bronze, riding high on the hill' (Page 170), while Adrian thinks it's old-fashioned. How does each character's reaction to the same house reveal their differences?

Writing Style

37. *The Albatross* starts in Primrose's present before tracing her backstory in flashbacks, revealing key elements of Primrose's story very deliberately. How does this structure show Primrose's perspective and personality? What atmosphere does it give the novel?
38. By writing in first person, Nina Wan is able to provide insight into the character of Primrose Li. However, she sometimes leaves important moments or characters out of Primrose's narration. What are some examples? Why do you think the author did this?
39. 'On the course, everything is so large that you can be as small as you like. And if you are small, then every thought in your head becomes insignificant, negligible.' (Page 152)
The golf course is often described as having strange proportions and perspectives, where angles and sightlines shift. How does this metaphor reflect the way the book is written?
40. The idea of 'the albatross' has multiple meanings. The golf term – a par 5 or higher, achieved in two shots – is explained as being particularly hard to achieve, and more special than a hole-in-one. There is also the literary reference to Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a poem about curses, guilt and redemption, when Marin 'sees' Primrose as a sailor with a dead bird around her neck. How do these metaphors extend into Primrose's life? Do they overlap, or is there one that you feel resonates more?