

Miles Franklin Literary Award 2009  
Longlist

***The Slap***  
**Christos Tsiolkas**  
Allen & Unwin

Reading Group Notes

**About the book**

At a suburban barbecue, a man slaps a child who is not his own.

This event has a shocking ricochet effect on a group of people, mostly friends, who are directly or indirectly influenced by the event.

In this remarkable novel, Christos Tsiolkas turns his unflinching and all-seeing eye onto that which connects us all: the modern family and domestic life in the twenty-first century. *The Slap* is told from the points of view of eight people who were present at the barbecue. The slap and its consequences force them all to question their own families and the way they live, their expectations, beliefs and desires.

What unfolds is a powerful, haunting novel about love, sex and marriage, parenting and children, and the fury and intensity - all the passions and conflicting beliefs - that family can arouse. In its clear-eyed and forensic dissection of the ever-growing middle class and its aspirations and fears, *The Slap* is also a poignant, provocative novel about the nature of loyalty and happiness, compromise and truth.

**Christos Tsiolkas on writing *The Slap***

A small, humorous incident gave rise to *The Slap*. I was at my parent's house, a few years ago, and they were hosting a barbeque for relatives and friends. At the time there was a couple there, friends of mine, who had a three year old son. My mother was in the kitchen cooking up a storm – pita, pasticcio, potatoes – while Dad and “the men” were firing up the barbeque. I was in the kitchen helping my mother, and she, slightly frazzled with all she had to do, was getting annoyed that the three year old boy was opening up cupboards and drawers, taking out pots and pan and using them as building blocks. She kept trying to make him stop and go out and play, but he was taking no notice of her.

Nearly tripping on a saucepan, she became exasperated with him, pulled him up gently and with the smallest of taps on the bum, said ‘No more!’

The little boy - and I won't forget the look of shock on his face - placed his hands on his hips and said to my mother, ‘No-one has a right to touch my body without my premission!’ To which my mother replied, ‘You naughty, I smack you.’

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There was no violence in her action and all the adults laughed, including the parents. But going home afterwards I couldn't help but think over the incident and what it expressed about generational, cultural and familial change. My previous novel, *Dead Europe*, had been a difficult, complex novel, taking seven years to write, about history and legacies of hatred. I wanted to write something set in my own contemporary 'backyard' so to speak, about my time and culture, to simply experience the writer's joy in creating characters and story. Almost from the outset I knew that the novel would evolve through the perspectives of different characters, so that as we revisited the story anew, or saw relationships and incidents from alternate points of view, our assumptions and positions would be challenged. I was also interested in the challenge of maintaining narrative drive across different voices, to see if I could succeed in engaging the reader through all the different worlds and perspectives.

I wanted *The Slap* to be an examination of suburbia and the middle-class in Australia. The suburbs are where the majority of Australians live, and the majority of Australians are said to be middle-class, but what exactly did suburbia and the middle-class look like now. In a sense, *The Slap* emerged from the John Howard years, and the affluent world of the aspirational class was where I wanted to set the novel. But this 'aspirational class' was rarely defined even as the phrase became increasingly popular in the media and cultural commentary. It was my sense that the 'aspirational class' was wog as much as it was Anglo-Celtic, that it had working-class as well as bourgeois roots. I discovered part of what it is in writing this novel.

The years of affluence saw us become less generous, lose some of our so-called 'Australian egalitarianism'. I was writing a book about family, about the relationships between young people and their elders. My experiences as an uncle, a god-parent, a teacher influenced the writing. One particular experience put fire in my belly as a writer. I was on a train heading into the city; it was morning and the train was crowded with office workers and school kids. A group of adolescent boys were swearing their heads off, seemingly unconcerned about the effect this was having on an elderly lady sitting behind them. It was obvious she was humiliated and I decided to say something to the youths. It was the worst thing to do. The boys started yelling obscenities and insults at me and all I achieved was to increase the elderly woman's discomfort. I got off at the next station, fuming, furious, wanting to slap these boys. But when my anger dissipated it was replaced by a sadness. How was it that these young men had not been taught one of the basic universals of human culture, respect for our elders? Or was it best to raise a generation critical of their elders? What did the incident say about my generation as parents, mentors, teachers, citizens? The people that come off worst in my novel are my own generation, those of us at the tail end of the "baby boomers" or "generation x". I will leave it to the individual reader to decide if I have been too harsh about their selfishness and myopia. I will suggest that the most hopeful voices are those of Connie and Richie, the young people. I did that deliberately. Young people get a bad press. I wanted to point that wagging finger at myself.

For a great interview with Christos Tsoilkas, check out:  
<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/literaryminded/>

**Suggested discussion points for *The Slap***

- Were Gary and Rosie right to press charges?
- What would you have done in Harry's place?
- What role does the shifting point of view play in your experience of the novel?
- Which of the characters did you most identify with?
- Which of the characters most irked you?
- Would you have supported Rosie or Harry if you were in Aisha's shoes?
- Do you think that Aisha and Hector should stay married?
- Why did Connie fabricate the story about Hector?
- What do you think *The Slap* says about contemporary Australian life?