

# Q&A with George Kemp

## Tell us a little bit about *Soft Serve*.

*Soft Serve* explores the snakes and ladders of grief and early queer love. How do we navigate life's hook turns when most of the time we don't even know where we were headed in the first place? The characters in this novel are stuck in limbo between their present and their hoped-for future. It's written for anyone who has snuck in a six-nugget meal after work, after a bad day, after a funeral. It's short, poetic, tragic, surprising and funny – just like life. It's filled with a Chekhovian longing for something else, somewhere else.

## This book focuses on the lives of young people in their early twenties. What is it about this period of people's lives that interests you most?

Early twenties feels like a time of mismatch. Small things seem huge; huge things pass as insignificant. These characters aren't finding themselves, I think they've found themselves but aren't sure that they like what they've found. Do they have the energy to try again in a world that seems to be on fire? That seems like an exhausting prospect. Without a support system around, how do young people learn emotional regulation, work ethic, rejection, resilience, how to do tax, in essence, adulthood? These characters are tadpoles with legs – too big for the pool of

childhood, but ill-at-ease in the world outside of it. That is rich territory, in which everything feels enormous, but enormous emotions aren't cool. How do young people figure out who they are when every perceivable possibility is behind the glass in the palm of their hand?

## In *Soft Serve*, you show that small-town lives are complex. How does the small-town setting allow you to explore the ordinary and the mythic elements of people's lives?

The emotions, high and low, are by no means made small to fit the container of a small town, they only intensify as they push against its edges. It's harder for one to lose oneself in a small town - the claustrophobia creates a forced intimacy. So when the stuff of life appears – grief, finding sexuality, dreams, fears, first love – they can become outsized and epic. There is a theatricality to the sense that everyone is on show. With fewer options available for places to find meaning, the search for it is intensified and people look for it doggedly – community, religion, the footy team, pub trivia, love. Chekhov's characters use the words 'I'm bored' as though they are daggers, swear words even. The gap between action, and whatever is prohibiting that action, is a place rich in drama, both mythic and mundane.



Photo credit: Bee Elton

## What do you hope readers will take away from the book?

I hope for four things. First, that they recognise themselves in one of these characters: in their pain, their grief, their hoped-for future, their sense of humour, their particular slanted and personal view of the world. Second, a sense of empathy: that the next time they see a Pat working behind the counter at Maccas, or a Jacob with a mullet fishing in their tracksuit, they think of the enormity of the story that may have led them there. Fourth, a sense of admiration and gratitude for the selflessness and bravery of the RFS who walk into that deadly heat every summer to keep us safe. And finally, an enjoyable, reading experience – an evocative and poetic journey into the lives of these people, who are just trying to make their way through. Aren't we all.

## AUTHOR INTERVIEWS AND EXTRACTS AVAILABLE

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