



The Golden Age

Joan London

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This is a story of resilience, the irrepressible, enduring nature of love, and the fragility of life. From one of Australia's most loved novelists.

He felt like a pirate landing on an island of little maimed animals. A great wave had swept them up and dumped them here. All of them, like him, stranded, wanting to go home. It is 1954 and thirteen-year-old Frank Gold, refugee from wartime Hungary, is learning to walk again after contracting polio in Australia.

At the Golden Age Children's Polio Convalescent Hospital in Perth, he sees Elsa, a fellow-patient, and they form a forbidden, passionate bond. *The Golden Age* becomes the little world that reflects the larger one, where everything occurs, love and desire, music, death, and poetry. Where children must learn that they are alone, even within their families.

Written in Joan London's customary clear-eyed prose, *The Golden Age* evokes a time past and a yearning for deep connection. It is a rare and precious gem of a book from one of Australia's finest novelists.

The Golden Age Details

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From Reader Review The Golden Age for online ebook

Carolyn says

What struck me most about this book is that although it is dealing with children struck down by the terrible polio epidemic of the 1950s it is a quiet and joyous story. For Frank Gold, recently arrived in Australia from post WWII Hungary and on the cusp of adolescence it should be a horrific time in his life. But Frank is resilient and resourceful and relishes the sudden independence from his parents and the cares of the world. "The Golden Age", the children's convalescent hospital of the title as described by London was indeed a sanctuary for the children where they could be treated as normal children and be shielded from the stares and derision of the world until they were strong enough to go back to it.

It is while in hospital during the acute phase of his polio that Frank discovers the beauty of poetry from an older boy, Sullivan imprisoned in an iron lung and from then on he constantly writes down lines that come to him. When he is later moved to the the Golden Age he sees a girl around his own age, Elsa, and falls in love.

"Her light golden-brown hair was pulled straight back into a single-plait. Little gold wisps escaped and caught the low beams of sun around her forehead. Her skin was pale. She looked like a drawing done with a fine lead pencil. He noted the straightness of her nose, her delicate, grave mouth, the clear curve of her jawline, the length of her neck from the bottom of her earlobe to the hollow of her throat. There was a shadow between her eye and cheekbone. An aristocrat."

Elsa is from a different background to Frank. A solid middle class Australian existence in a big house near the sea, of tennis lessons and endless golden days riding her bike. They form a strong bond and although we never get a strong sense of her personality, she becomes Frank's muse and soul mate.

The prose is simple and beautiful. The themes of displacement and nostalgia (from childhood, from war torn Europe) are woven strongly through those of love and relationships. Through Frank's year long recuperation, his parents finally start to accept their new life in Perth and although it will never be the same as Budapest before the war there is hope for a good future together. 4.5★

Mary says

At the ferry jetty he turned right into Barrack Street, walked up past the Supreme Court Gardens, across St Georges Terrace. This was the city they'd been offered, and had accepted. They were safe here, but even now, at rush hour, the wide streets felt empty. That was the bargain. He'd left his city and would never return.

How short-lived gratitude was!

It was like this. Budapest was the glamorous love of his life who had betrayed him. Perth was a flat-faced, wide-hipped country girl whom he'd been forced to take as a wife. Only time would tell if one day he would reach across and take her hand...

He had a suspicion that never again would he feel at home as he once had. Never again on this earth. And another suspicion: that to love a place, to imagine yourself belonging to it, was a lie, a fiction. It was vanity.

Especially for a Jew.

If he didn't know better about human nature – his education had been swift and irrevocable – he would say that there was an innocence about this city. Nobody here could imagine the waters of the Swan running red. The Causeway bombed, tanks rolling up St Georges Terrace. Block after block of empty buildings, blackened and broken like ruined teeth. Shots ringing out. The hunted running through Kings Park. Bodies piled ten high on the steps of Parliament House... In an eye flash he saw his brother Janos pressed between other bodies, stacked up like firewood, against the wall of a slaughterhouse. Janos was no longer and yet, as Meyer stood there staring, for one moment, suddenly, vividly, Janos...

(p.92)

Dillwynia Peter says

This book was for my local library book club.

The main theme for me in this one is all the main characters change to become “new” Australians. In the case of Frank & his parents, they are Hungarian migrants that escaped the Jewish extermination thru deception. They were professionals in Budapest & are now doing menial jobs in their new life in Perth. In the case of the children, they are all severely affected by polio & are learning to walk again. The active lifestyles they once had are gone, and it is interesting that all the children become quite cerebral. Even the baby Fabio, croons when he is on his own, making his own songs during his enforced inactivity. Sullivan sees snow on the white hospital ceiling, while in the iron lung & composes poetry. Most of the children become active readers, and mature sooner than normal.

The determination of these children will be fierce as they try to rebuild their lives as young adults in a world that will stigmatises them. Elsa's aunt suggests a typing college where she can be of service to a charity, because she is now deformed & not fit to pursue an active career like medicine. Patients will be turned off by someone scared by Polio. How our two main characters become adults in an afterword at the end. In some ways, I didn't feel it was necessary, but I remember the ending to Gilgamesh was also weakened by a similar device.

Sister Penny is a dynamic character: a lusty woman, her husband is a war casualty and she is stigmatised by both her sister-in-law and daughter. I felt the daughter was a cruel person, pandering to her new “family” that gives her some sense of social superiority against her mother who works long hours to pay for her earlier education. She enjoys men & we see her being a pragmatist with her sexual encounters; she doesn't expect a lasting, permanent relationship- to the extent that she shrugs off a possible long term lover.

The strength in London's writing is in her ability to write good, strong, multidimensional characters. All of them are believable & as such the story carries along well. There was no incident that didn't feel true. You discover that much is a result of her interviewing patients that attended the hospital during this period. I also suspect she visited the hospital as a child, for whatever reason.

Again, like Gilgamesh, the main themes are relationships & displacement & resolving issues thru strength of character. My complaint is the sense of nostalgia that flows through the book. For me, this was a problem, and I see it creating a problem with this book lasting the test of time. Who cares about ChooChoo Bars, or the leading brand of soft drink in Perth. With books such as this, will we care what happened in 1950s Australia?? So many people now have forgotten the Polio epidemic, that I doubt it will resonate with younger readers.

Brenda says

Frank Gold, along with parents Ida and Meyer arrived from Hungary as refugees fleeing a war torn country. Their original hope was to go to America but an earlier ship was leaving for Australia from Vienna where they were waiting. They found it hard to settle into their new country, Ida especially – New Australians and their funny accents were the butt of many jokes. In 1954 when Frank contracted polio and was placed into isolation, their shock and devastation was great.

When Frank was transferred to the Golden Age Children's Polio Convalescent Hospital in Perth, he felt that he definitely didn't belong. For a start he was one of the oldest children there at almost thirteen – many more were babies; but he felt as if they had all been shut away to be forgotten just because of their illness. Frank had a curious nature – his investigation of the hospital as he wheeled himself around in his wheelchair led him to the ward where the iron lungs were housed. It was here he met a young man by the name of Sullivan Backhouse who was to have a huge influence on his life.

Elsa Briggs was from a large family – the eldest of her siblings, at twelve years of age she was a bright and active child. When the debilitating disease that was polio struck Elsa, it was with force. She was also at the Golden Age Hospital and when Frank saw her first he was mesmerised. A burgeoning and secret friendship between the two developed, slowly and cautiously – Elsa brightened Frank's life, and Elsa found herself missing him when he wasn't in the room...

The Golden Age is a beautiful book – melancholy and sad, uplifting and hopeful, the word pictures are painted with a passion that shows the fragility of life, the deep impressions of a childhood love and the strength of coping with what life sometimes throws at you. This is my first read by Aussie author Joan London, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. Highly recommended.

Gabril says

Golden Age è il nome di un sanatorio, realmente esistito, in Australia negli anni 50. Vi sono ricoverati i bambini vittime della polio. È un microcosmo: di dolore, ma anche di speranza, anche di conoscenza di sé, anche di amore.

A Golden Age il tredicenne Frank, aspirante poeta, si innamora di Elsa, radiosa nuvola bionda su esili gambe offese. Intorno a loro, a quel nucleo di possente luminosa verità, si muovono diversi personaggi, dai genitori alle infermiere.

Frank è figlio di migranti : profughi ungheresi scampati alla deportazione. Motivo collaterale è il confronto fra civiltà e mentalità differenti: quella mitteleuropea, per certi versi più evoluta, e quella angloaustraliana, che riconosce la paternità dei conquistatori inglesi (puritani) e ne venera la corona.

Il percorso di emancipazione di Frank e Elsa, simbolo di una generazione ferita, è anche un viaggio di formazione verso la riconquista della propria vita, la scoperta della propria vocazione alla quale, nonostante tutto, non si può e non si deve rinunciare.

Julie says

Glows with beautiful language

Sharp edged nostalgia but a nebulous narrative

There was a lot to love. London is a poetic, visual writer. Her prose is sharp. Without waxing lyrical, she sets the scene vividly. I loved her commentary on the Royal Visit (the photographed flowers, the framed letter). I felt I could see and breath-in the Perth of the '50's that she pictured so clearly for me. Many memories from my own golden childhood were tickled in the narrative from Argonauts to Choo Choo bars (though shame on Frank for being a little dismissive of Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopedia* - my treasure trove of trivia!).

The backstory was deftly woven : comparing Old World Europe and provincial Perth; setting nostalgia for what was against hope for a new life; showing family as belonging and family as isolation.

But I was disappointed. I am a big fan of *Gilgamesh* (pushing it on anyone interested in Australian literature). I so wanted to love this one. My husband is a polio survivor, still haunted by his time in hospital as a child, so there is a personal context. Unfortunately there was little substance woven within the beautiful prose.

The story of the emerging "first love" between Frank and Elsa wasn't enough to make the Golden Age anything more than a mellow, nebulous embrace. All the niceties were there, but you were left wanting so much more : something as sharp-edged and unsentimental as the characterisation. We have a series of poignant vignettes without an emotional investment in the characters.

I love this quote from towards the end (and well done to an author who has done her homework)

"Polio is like love, ... years later, when you think you have recovered, it comes back."

A small, almost meaningless point : I wasn't taken by the cover before I even started and, now that I am finished, I see it as questionable and irrelevant. It shows a young man on a train - something that doesn't pertain to the narrative at all. This is meaningless stock photography, a cheap letdown for the author and the reader.

(Having just finished reading, I will see how it settles in my memory and may come back and change this to a 4 star review ... so I guess it is a 3-and-a-half review.)

Kimbofo says

It seems remarkable that poliomyelitis (otherwise known as polio or infantile paralysis), which has almost been eradicated from the world thanks to the development of a vaccine in the 1950s, was so prevalent just a few generations ago. In the 20th century, there were major outbreaks of this incurable infectious disease, which caused paralysis in infants and children, in Europe, the USA and Australia.

One of those outbreaks was in Perth, Western Australia, in the early 1950s. The outbreak was so bad — one newspaper report from 6 March 1954 claims “there were 15 cases in January, 80 in February and 40 for the first five days of March” — that an impending visit by The Queen and Duke of Edinburgh had to be

seriously curtailed.

That outbreak — and the Royal Tour of Western Australia — feature in Joan London's most recent novel, *The Golden Age*, which takes its name from an actual children's convalescent home, which existed in Leederville, a suburb of Perth, from 1949-1959.

In this home we meet a varied cast of characters including Frank Gold, a 13-year-old Jewish refugee from wartime Hungary, and his parents Ida and Meyer; Elsa, a 13-year-old patient, and her anxious guilt-ridden mother Margaret; and Sister Olive Penny, a nurse and war widow with a teenage daughter of her own.

To read the rest of my review, please visit my blog.

Michael Livingston says

The second last book in my quest to read the 2015 Stella Prize longlist. I wasn't hugely taken by London's previous novel, *Gilgamesh*, so I wasn't super excited to tackle this. Somewhat surprisingly, I loved it - a gorgeously written evocation of a 1950s children's polio rehabilitation centre in Perth, *The Golden Age* has a lot to say about love, family, independence and coming to terms with the hand life deals you. The supporting characters are rich and memorable (Frank's parents in particular), while the two teenagers at the centre of the plot feel a bit idealised. The writing is luminous and the sense of time and place effortlessly conveyed.

(The cover of the book is ludicrous though - there's no character who fits the demographic of the dude on the cover, and no train trips in the whole book. A bafflingly lazy bit of production.)

Amanda - Mrs B's Book Reviews says

*<https://mrsbbookreviews.wordpress.com>

From time to time I like to read a book from my signed collection shelf. These are books that are on my 'keeps' shelf. *The Golden Age* is a book that has been sitting on my special 'keeps' book cabinet since I met the author Joan London back at a Stories on Stage author in 2015. I recall enjoying the author event given by Joan, to mark the release of her much anticipated third book, *The Golden Age*. What struck me most about the author talk and the book itself was the extent of research and historical detail London included in her book. It hardly comes as a surprise to me that since its release in 2014, *The Golden Age* has received a whole host of literary awards and it has been shortlisted for many more. This novel is set in my home state of Western Australian, during the 1950's and it was simply a joy to read. London perfectly captures the nostalgia of Perth during this era. London's examination into the effects of polio and the narrative focus on a convalescent home for victims of polio based in Perth was historically fascinating. A moving tribute to times past, I endorse *The Golden Age* completely.

Lisa says

An extremely easy read. Gorgeous prose.

Jill says

If someone were to have told me that *The Golden Age* was written in 1954 – the time of its setting – I would have believed them. The book has the tone of a classic, with the potential of rediscovery upon future readings.

There are no bells and whistles here. The writing is spare but powerful, carefully calibrated to reveal but not lead the reader. I often separate books into warm (those that touch the heart) and cool (those that touch the brain). On that continuum, I'd place this book at "cool-ish", not at all manipulative despite its theme.

And what IS the theme? In a word, it's displacement. *The Golden Age* refers to an actual polio children's convalescent home in Australia that existed between 1949-1959. Frank Gold (no coincidence, I think, that his name is similar to the home) is sent there just as he stands on the brink of maturity (he is 13 years old). There he meets Elsa, also on the cusp of adulthood, and according to the book jacket, they fall in love.

Still, the love story is not truly the focal point of the book. Frank considers this: "Every country had its rules. He had to learn them. How long would he be allowed to stay here? Was this the country where he could finally feel at home?" Frank and his family have already been displaced; they are Hungarian Jews who were forced to leave their homeland during the war and in Australia, view themselves as strangers in a strange land. Polio is a metaphor for this displacement and forces Frank, once again, to learn to adjust in a home with its own history and rules.

Frank's illness and recovery are aligned, in ways, with that of his parents, Meyer and Ida. Ida was an esteemed pianist in Hungary and has not performed for a while; one might say she is dealing with her own form of paralysis. Meyer, who is more optimistic, must come to the realization that his new city "is its own place. It is not like anywhere else." The entire family moves towards acceptance of a new reality.

There are many secondary characters here as well, and none of them receive short shrift. This is a gentle book and it requires careful reading to fully glean all its nuances. Consider it a parlor study of the progression from paralysis to movement.

Peter Devenish says

I seldom comment on why I rate a book, probably because I'm basically lazy, but I feel I must comment on this beautifully written story by the Western Australian writer, Joan London. It is set in a tragic time when the blight of a polio epidemic struck. But it is not a tragic story, rather one of love and hope - love in its several forms and hope for the future, varying with each character. The locale I know intimately; the era is my own; and I relate to the polio epidemic personally because a life-long friend, who has since died, was struck down at that time. But I think the story holds up and is worthy of five stars regardless of my personal bias.

Kaylene says

Meh... I'm abandoning this book half-way through as it wasn't holding my interest and was a bit blah for me. I kept going long after I wanted to stop as the reviews have been glowing. I began to think is there something wrong with me, am I not getting something here?? But it has not put me off reading any of her other books.

Jennifer (JC-S) says

‘Once you get used to your condition, he said, your imagination becomes free again.’

The Golden Age is set in a convalescent home for children who were victims of poliomyelitis in Perth, Western Australia in the early 1950s. (The Golden Age Convalescent Home for Polio Children which operated in Leederville from 1949 to 1959, really existed. It was once a hotel, and has since been demolished.) This novel tells the story of a twelve year boy, Frank Gold. Frank and his parents Ida and Meyer were Hungarian refugees who had wanted to go to America but had reluctantly come to Australia. Meyer has adapted, Ida has not. And when Frank contracts polio after they settle in Perth, she has even less reason to be happy. Ida was once a concert pianist, but once Frank became ill she no longer played.

‘Once you have tasted meaninglessness, you lose any idea of reward, or punishment, or conventional virtue.’

Frank has been moved from the adult polio hospital (where he was the youngest patient) to The Golden Age (where he is the oldest). At first he is not happy about this move, coming soon after the death of Sullivan (aged 18) whom he’d met in the iron lung ward. Sullivan had composed poetry, which Frank transcribed for him, and the two of them had become close.

At The Golden Age, Frank explores the corridors in his wheelchair, trying to catch a glimpse of Elsa, the only other child of his age. The two become friends. The reader learns more about each of them, about Elsa’s strength and sense of self, about Frank’s intense desire to belong and to write poetry. There’s an encounter which changes both their lives, and quite soon after the story moves (abruptly) to the present day and we learn a little about the intervening years of their lives.

The story is told in the third-person, and moves through a number of different points of view. I enjoyed this, as it gave an opportunity to see events through the lives of some of the other characters including Frank’s father, Elsa’s mother and Sister Olive Penny who is in charge at The Golden Age. Through Frank and Elsa, Ms London describes the onset, impact and isolation caused by polio. Through their parents (particularly Elsa’s mother and Frank’s parents) she describes the post-war world in Australia, the impacts of difference, disease and war. It’s a rich world, shaped but not destroyed by events. I read this novel accompanied by memories of my father, who contracted polio as a young man (in Tasmania) during this epidemic.

This is the kind of story that stays with you, long after you’ve finished reading it.

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

Amanda says

I don't think I've ever given a book such a low rating, but I can't even pretend to have liked this book and am abandoning it before finishing.

London is a WA writer and has won a healthy swag of gongs for her work. I read this novel as part of my quest to get to know some of the authors in Adelaide for Adelaide Writers Week, otherwise I might not have picked it up - pity, that.

I have no issue with the dreamy pace of the book or the setting and sense of place, but I have loads of issue with plenty else.

The characters are dull, two dimensional and detached - from each other and the story. Each scene in the book could almost have been written as a solo piece, such was the lack of association between each character.

Even the refugee family come across as cardboard cutouts, where they should be a complex, seething mass of emotions, hopes and insecurities. The delicate, stricken boy, Frank, is mostly wet. I found it very difficult to be convinced of his sensitive, poetic soul through her portrayal of his teenaged moping about over a fellow patient.

The book is sloppy in parts and in others just wrong. On one page she talks of purple oleander flowers. Oleander doesn't come in purple - white, red and many shades of pink, but no purple.

Shortly after that she talks of children being seated for a performance - the small ones in the front row. In the very next page, now that everyone is seated, she refers to the eldest children being in the front row.

Elsewhere the book is dotted with inane, meaningless sentences posing as profound prose.

Joan London may well be a great writer, but I'm not seeing it in this book.
Don't bother.
