

By the acclaimed
author of
AN ISOLATED
INCIDENT

**LOVE
OBJECTS**

EMILY

MAGUIRE

PRAISE FOR
LOVE OBJECTS

‘Revelatory. Three unforgettable characters, their everyday tragedies, and the visceral ties between a woman and her sister’s children. *Love Objects* is moving and deeply human, an exploration of the limits of our understanding and the depths of our compassion.’

—Kristina Olsson, author of *Shell and Boy, Lost*

‘*Love Objects* is that rare thing: a novel of ideas which is also full of heart. Emily Maguire shines a light on elements of contemporary Australian life which are often hidden and in doing so gifts the reader with a rich and vivid world, sizzling with wit, humming with tenderness. Her characters sing on the page but more than that, they live away from the page. I see them everywhere now. It’s a stunning, immersive novel that will change the conversation about class and about what possessions mean. It’s important and funny and sad and beautiful and I absolutely adored it.’

—Kathryn Heyman, author of *Storm and Grace* and *Fury*

‘*Love Objects* is an antidote to the clinical Kondo-world of glossy magazine layouts. Emily Maguire’s characters are as messy as Auntie Nic’s hallway—and every bit as layered and astonishing. She writes of their struggles and pains with dark humour and an unflinching eye, but what prevails—and makes me want to read and re-read her pages—is their tenderness and shared humanity.’

—Ailsa Piper, author of *The Attachment*

‘Maguire channels contemporary life with fierce and fearless attack, targeting our deepest fears and vulnerabilities, exposing hidden shame and questioning the meaning of privacy in today’s digital world. As well as wielding a forensic scalpel to human nature, she brings tender insight and compassion to those so often on the margins of society.’

—Caroline Baum, author of *Only*

‘Emily Maguire pulls no punches in *Love Objects*; it is bold, furious, unapologetic and deeply insightful. This wise, brave author gave me energy and passion and rage, and made me want to write to change the world. Unforgettable.’

—Sofie Laguna, Miles Franklin-winning author of
The Eye of the Sheep and *Infinite Splendours*

‘This story is full of grit, with rough edges and harsh truths, but the humanity that shines through is phenomenal. *Love Objects* has got to be one of the most big-hearted novels I’ve ever read. Each person fully formed, each scene and new catastrophe rooted in truth. I learned something deeper about struggling and coping against class and I looked anew at how I relate to the things I own. I finished this book in two sittings and I challenge anyone to pick it up then simply put it down. I truly believe the talent and insight on display here place Maguire in the company of greats.’

—Bri Lee, author of *Eggshell Skull* and *Beauty*

PRAISE FOR
AN ISOLATED INCIDENT

‘Emily Maguire creates characters whose complexities and fragilities explore despair, loss and grief, and also the redemptive power of love and empathy.’

—*Miles Franklin Literary Award* (2017) judges’ comments

‘Utterly engrossing . . . this hugely chilling and evocative story, mixing lyrical language and brutal events, is told with great psychological acuity.’

—*Sydney Morning Herald*

‘Within its gripping storytelling *An Isolated Incident* raises many disturbing questions about men and women, and about attitudes to what can seem the inevitability of violence by one sex upon the other. But above all this is a powerful and provocative examination of grief, and in Chris Emily Maguire has created a character who resounds in the imagination.’

—*Newtown Review of Books*

‘Harrowing, fascinating, compelling . . . accomplished and thoughtful.’

—*The Australian*

‘Intelligent and compelling.’

—Hannah Richell, *Australian Women’s Weekly*

‘Superb writing and sense of place. Totally credible voices. Read her!’

—Ann Cleeves

EMILY MAGUIRE is the author of six novels, including the Stella Prize and Miles Franklin Award shortlisted *An Isolated Incident*, and three non-fiction books. Her articles and essays on sex, feminism, culture and literature have been published widely, including in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, *The Observer* and *The Age*. Emily works as a teacher and as a mentor to young and emerging writers and was the 2018/2019 Writer-in-Residence at the Charles Perkins Centre at the University of Sydney.

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This a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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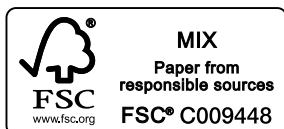


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ONE

NIC

Nic's shoes had always worn unevenly. *Pigeon-toed* was what the ballet teacher, who was actually just an ordinary mum who had lived in France for a year when she was younger, had called her. *Such a pretty face, but those feet!* the fake-French ballet teacher would cry, patting six-year-old Nic's smooth cheeks and gazing not at the terrible feet but away from them at the school hall rafters. What would she say now? Nic wonders, watching each foot press its inside into the asphalt as it stepped. *Such a sagging face! At last a match for your sloppy feet!*

Sagging face, sloppy feet, arse outgrowing its pants, right hip which has, in the three years since she's turned forty, woken her most nights with its urgent ache. Not all bad, though, or else Jase from the stockroom, who goes to the gym every morning before work and wears tight shorts and tighter singlets to show how well that regime is working for him, wouldn't whistle appreciatively and call her gorgeous when she passed him, and Reg the store's night manager wouldn't stand far closer than polite in the break

room and ask her for the thousandth time if she wouldn't consider joining the night shift so he'd have something good to look at during the long quiet hours between six and closing.

Night shift is better money, but aside from having to dodge Reg there's the matter of transport. Nic isn't a panicky person; not like her sister Michelle, who sees rapists and meth heads where there are only passing motorists and harmless neighbourhood kids. Still, even the calmest and most reasonable woman doesn't take twenty-minute walks alone after midnight. Or accept the no-doubt-insistent offer of a lift from the creepy manager finishing work at the same time.

Besides, if she got home after midnight she wouldn't get to sleep before one, but would have to rise at six anyway to make sure the cats didn't howl the neighbourhood awake in hunger.

Besides, if she didn't walk home in the bright, clear light of afternoon she would miss so much.

Like the newly pasted telegraph pole poster telling whoever passes to LOOSE WEIGHT NOW!!!! She tears a tab off and slips it into her uniform pocket to nestle with the SECRETS OF YOUR SOUL TAROT business card she picked up from the shopping centre information desk this morning and the kebab shop receipt with today's queue number 14 in thick black text on the top. On second thought, she unsticks the whole poster, working carefully so the bits of tape come away with the paper. Folds it in three so the tabs are safely tucked away.

Like the way this pair of sneakers looks ready to chuck on the inside edge and yet near new on the outer. Is it time to swap them with one of the pairs she bought in Kmart's January sale or

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should she wait until the canvas wears right through? First sight of skin, that was the marker.

Like the fact the diamond chip in Mum's engagement ring is not sparkling as it should in the late afternoon sun. Michelle, who wears Mum's plain gold wedding band, told Nic to keep it sparkly with a monthly bath of half hydrogen peroxide, half Windex solution, but that was typical Michelle over-fussiness. Dishwashing liquid, warm water, soft toothbrush, good as new. She'll do it tonight while watching *Married at First Sight*.

Like the peeling polish on her left index fingernail. A raw pink spot at the edge of an otherwise perfectly glossy lavender finish. How long had it been that way? All day she looks at her own hands without seeing them. Product-scanning robots. Only on the walk home do they become part of her again; only now can she see their messiness and feel the shame of it. She should have expected this. The lavender polish had been gloopy and her usual solution of acetone drops had not sufficiently thinned it. She'd known it and now look!

Like the mustard-coloured envelope slipped under the wind-screen wipers of a shiny black Jeep in the no-parking zone outside of the nursing home. Some people had so much money they treated a ticket as a minor fee for the convenience of parking wherever they damn well liked. Never used to see those kinds of people in Leichhardt. The owner of this car probably didn't even know anyone in the home. Another scavenger tracking which old ladies were due to die next, leaving their unrenovated 1960s houses to be bought cheap, flipped and sold within a month for millions.

Nic plucks the parking fine from beneath the wiper blade and drops it into her handbag, next to the empty Coke bottle from lunch and the Thermomix pamphlet from the pop-up stall outside the shopping centre toilets.

If she walked home at night she would not see treasures like the doll's bonnet (she at first thinks *baby's* bonnet, but not even a newborn's head could be so tiny, surely?) that winks at her from under the swings in the pocket park three doors from her house. It must have been dropped only that afternoon, so unblemished by dust or dog piss or cigarette ash is the white brocade. When she holds it up close, she can see that a length of shiny satin ribbon meant to act as an under-chin tie has been attached to each side, but unevenly and in a jagged stitch. A handmade bonnet, imperfectly made but so clean and crisp it hurts her heart to think how the one who sewed it would feel about its casual discarding. She pulls a scrunched plastic bag from her jacket pocket, shakes it smooth and gently places the bonnet inside.

So much she would miss if she were to walk home in the dark with only the too-far-apart streetlights to guide her.



The letterbox is satisfyingly stuffed. Nic sifts through the pile as she approaches the front door: new catalogues from Target and Bunnings and Aldi, a voucher book from a local pizza shop and a couple of real estate ads. Rosa D'Angelo's place down the street has a price guide of \$2.2 million. Rosa used to wrap her torso in newspapers to keep warm during the winter. The last

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time Nic visited, a month or so before Rosa died, there'd been a pot of beef bones boiling on her stove. The butcher gave her the bones for free because her late husband had worked with his grandfather forty years ago.

Shouting rudely from among the real estate brochures is a page torn from a school exercise book: perfect, pale-blue lines marred by angry block letters.

PLEASE STOP FEEDING STRAY CATS!!! IT MAKES THEM GATHER IN OUR STREET AND THEY FIGHT AND CLIMB ON OUR CARS WHERE THEY LEAVE MARKS. I KNOW YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING A NICE THING BUT PLEASE THINK OF YOUR NEIGHBOURS.

THANK YOU!

Instant heat, like she's sitting under the hairdresser's lamp. Thought she'd seen the last of this nastiness when she quit the neighbourhood Facebook group. She reads the note over, rage rising. Anonymous, too, the coward. She returns to the letterbox, glares a challenge up and down the street. Nobody is out. Nobody watching from behind glass, either, far as she can tell. Well. When she figures out who it is she will *anonymously* dump a tin of Fancy Feast chicken liver on their precious car. *Anonymously* scatter dry kibble all over their lawn. Because if it's someone with a car who can't tolerate cat paw prints it will be someone who lives in one of the new places built on the blocks that used to hold two or three houses like hers. It'll be one of them and they all have lawns—showy, tree- and shrub- and flower-less expanses of green. The buzz and whine of mowers around here on Saturday mornings is louder these days than the planes overhead.

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Returning to her front porch, she slips the foul note into the middle of the stack of catalogues, smothering the nasty slip of paper with colour and gloss. Imagine being ALL CAPS angry at a sleepy, well-fed cat! Miserable fuckers.

Nic unlocks the door and turns to her side to squeeze through, careful not to catch her clothes or bag on the swinging latch. Inside, she takes a moment to adjust to the gloom. The light bulb blew weeks or months ago, and every day at this time she curses herself for not changing it, but then her eyes recover from the transition and she sidles smoothly past the newspaper stacks and into the kitchen and doesn't think of it again until the next re-entry.

Her niece Lena says that beating yourself up for failing to reach your goals is a waste of energy; recommit or ditch the goal but no negative self-talk about what you woulda-shoulda-coulda. Lena was usually talking about her diet, which week by week seemed increasingly strict and easy to fail at: no sugar, no dairy, no gluten, no artificial sweeteners, no caffeine. If she ate something she shouldn't, she would ask herself: is it important to me to stick to this rule? If it was, she forgave herself the mistake and promised herself she'd do better. If it wasn't, she would decide to ditch the restriction.

Lena had never, to Nic's knowledge, made the latter choice, but that doesn't mean Nic can't. To hell with changing the hallway light bulb, she decides, edging her way through the kitchen. If it worked she would only worry about forgetting to switch it off, then worry about the electricity bill being even more than it was already.

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She feels immediately lighter. Lena's been a wise old thing since she was a baby. Proven by the fact she's always liked me more than her own mother, Nic would say if either mother or daughter were here right now. Lena would tell her not to be such a bitch, but wouldn't mean it; Michelle would laugh, and she wouldn't mean that either.

Nic adds the catalogues to the stack beside the microwave and the vouchers to the one on the front left hotplate. She puts today's newspaper on the kitchen table, where it slips about for a few seconds before settling nicely. It would sit on the kitchen table until she had a chance to finish reading it, and if that hasn't happened by bedtime she will put it with its colleagues in the hallway, waiting for a day when she has more time, better concentration.

Nic opens her handbag, sees the plastic bag within, thrills at the baby doll bonnet. The problem, though, is where to put it. It is such a new and special thing that it has no place.

The kitchen is out of the question. It's for paperwork and food containers and recipes and medicines, for things that need processing or dealing with or eating or discarding, for life's ephemera (a word from Lena's vocabulary homework a decade ago and which Nic loves so much she uses at every opportunity).

She scuffs her way through to the living room, holding the bonnet in both hands. It would be safe from physical harm atop one of the towers of DVDs or VHS tapes lining the right-hand wall, but it'd be lonely surrounded by hard plastic with only the dull grey popcorn ceiling above. The toy crates were a better choice. There, the bonnet could nestle against other things made to be fondled by tiny hands, other things left behind by a child

too spoilt or ignorant to appreciate what she had. The top toys on the top crates had views clear out into the street—or would if Nic opened the curtains. Even with them closed, they were able to enjoy the filtered sunlight for much of the day and the friendly glow of the streetlights after dark.

Nic lays the bonnet on top of the centre crate, which is full enough that the new addition perches like a crown with the clear air and views it deserves. She takes a careful step back. Something is making her heart hammer. What what what what? She returns to the crate. There! Little Bo-Peep with her crinkly blonde hair and wonky staff lined with tiny teeth marks is suffocating! Nic snatches up the bonnet. ‘Sorry, sorry.’ She repositions the doll, tiny chin on the edge of the crate so she is looking out to the street. ‘I was only resting it there, to see. You’re okay now.’

Bonnet in hand, Nic surveys the room as her heartbeat returns to normal. The TV cabinet is for trophies and ornaments, vases and decorative jars. Pretty things, yes, but hard: all metal, plastic and glass. Any of the sofas in here would make appropriately soft beds for the bonnet, but it is such a small, dear thing that it would easily get lost among the cushions and throws and blankets.

Back in the hallway she shuffles along the left-hand wall, pausing at the break in the newspaper stacks that leads to Lena’s room. She’s long thought of it that way, even though it was originally her own room, shared with Michelle, and then, after Michelle moved out and Mum died, it was the guest room and both kids would use it on their sleepovers, first snuggled together in the single bed then, older, fighting over who would get the

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bed and who the makeshift mattress of couch cushions on the floor. Around the time Will turned twelve, sleepovers with school friends became more attractive than sleepovers with Aunty Nic, and so it became Lena's room, indisputably. Not every weekend, but a lot. Not every night in the school holidays, but most.

Until the horror year. The year Michelle's husband Joe died and Will—sweet, kind, tough little Will, in training to be a child-care worker, for goodness sake!—went to prison. And Michelle, as though deliberately testing how much loss the human spirit could take, swept fourteen-year-old Lena away to live in Brisbane. And Nic had to let her go. No such thing as custody rights to your sister's kid. No matter how destroyed you are by her absence.

She has her back now, though. A serious, fiery twenty-year-old so smart it amazes Nic that the girl would want to spend any time with a dullard like her at all. But she does! Miraculously, she really does seem to enjoy hanging with her old aunty, insisting, now that she is living in Sydney again, that they have lunch together every Sunday.

I should clear this room out, Nic thinks, pushing open the door, taking a cautious step inside. Tell her there's always a bed for her here. It wouldn't be so hard: the rag dolls and teddy bears and lions and puppies could move onto her own bed. The books—well, some of them could stay. It'd just be a matter of sorting through them, so only the most worthy remained. Only enough to fit neatly in the walnut-stained bookshelf, which is itself a beautiful, Lena-worthy thing currently hidden by all the non-Lena-worthy books stacked on and over and around it.

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The clothes would be trickier to rehome. Some in plastic washing baskets, moving boxes and black garbage bags, others making multi-coloured soft statues or waterfalling off the furniture. Could she shift some of them to the living room? The lounge blankets wouldn't mind the weight of clothing on them, surely. If she put only woollen jumpers and fleecy tracksuits out there it'd be like blankets for the blankets, wouldn't it? But blankets don't need to be blanketed. It would insult and offend and anyway, if they were gone, if the toys and the books and the clothes were gone, that would still leave the other things, the precious painful needed beautiful awful beloved things over there in the wardrobe in the corner, and what could she do with those that wouldn't hurt them hurt her hurt hurt hurt—

Nic squishes down between the bags. The pillowy weight of clothes presses into her. Cuddles her. It is easier to regain her breath sitting here. *In: one, two, three. Hold: one, two, three. Out: one, two, three.* Lena would not want to sleep here, anyway. It's too far on the bus to get back to uni, where she often has early classes, and too far from the supermarket, where she often works late. *In: one, two, three. Hold: one, two, three. Out: one, two, three.* Meeting for lunch on a Sunday was perfect for them both. No need to complicate things out of nostalgia. *In: one, two, three. Hold: one, two, three. Out: one, two, three.*

Nic rubs the satin ribbons of the bonnet with her thumbs and forefingers. This is too delicate an object for this room of heavy love and heavier pain. The bonnet needs a simpler space.

Breath normal, Nic gets to her feet and steps into the hallway, turns right and, after four more stacks, right again into her

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bedroom. It's the only space left, save the bathroom, which is unthinkable; all that moisture and heat, the easily spilt lotions and beauty products. The toilet with its gaping maw! No, her room, the best and safest place. Standing here it is immediately obvious. That hook on the wall over the dresser. It once held a painting of a white horse being fed by a girl with a brown ponytail, but that fell a long time ago and now lives somewhere behind the dresser, which is fine because the moment being captured between girl and horse is so intimate and tender it made Nic feel embarrassed to look at it. It made her think of the shock of hate she saw in the big tabby's eyes when it caught her watching while it lay on its side and let its kittens suck on its teats. This is not for you, the cat's eyes told her, and she'd scurried away, appalled at her own trespass. That was how the painting made her feel, and for years she'd avoid looking up at it, but then it dropped itself behind the dresser of its own accord and they'd all lived happily together—Nic, girl, horse and empty hook—ever since.

But now it is evident that the hook is tired of being alone and unused. What is it for if not to support and display something of interest and beauty? Poor thing, sticking out there all naked and unemployed. And here in her hand the thing that would make the hook know she had not abandoned it, only kept it free waiting for its true match.

A burst of happiness surprises her. Like whenever she looked at her buzzing phone and saw Lena's name glowing up at her. She squeezes between the nail salon chairs and steps over a box of records, nudging aside the piles of *Women's Weekly* and *Who* magazines. Holding the bonnet in her left hand, she uses her right

to move the fishbowl filled with copper coins onto the top of the stacked jewellery boxes to its left. She assesses the cleared space. Her calves are not as narrow as they once were, more's the pity. 'Sorry, darl,' she tells the unplugged clock radio, moving it to rest on the Sydney Olympic Games commemorative Weet-Bix tin. It looks good up there, and the hair ties and ribbons and scrunchies in the tin will not be bothered by its presence. Perhaps they will feel even safer with that extra weight on top. Yes! Serendipity. Lena's favourite word when she was nine. It felt like this: like joy that had been waiting for you to catch up to it.

Space enough now. She shivers with excitement, lifts a leg experimentally. No, that won't be happening. No way she can get onto the dresser unboosted. She tests the closest pile with her foot; magazines slide against each other beneath the barely applied pressure. She apologises, withdraws. The records are too easily damaged to put her weight on. She could go back to the living room and empty one of the toy crates, but that seems unfair. She has already messed with their serenity this afternoon.

Of course! Like the empty hook, the exercise bike has been hiding in plain sight. Over there, under the window, a little further from the dresser than is ideal, but with only a few shoeboxes, a hairdryer and three small lamps between her and it. Easy. She reaches the bike without disturbing anything. Its bars are a tangle of bag straps, but the seat and frame are miraculously clear. She hoists herself up, sits for a second while she evaluates the task. If she can reach the top of the mirror frame on the dresser she can use it to steady herself as she leaps across. It isn't even as far as she jumps to reach her bed each night, but that is at ground

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level and soft mounds of clothing form a crash mat if she misses. There is further to fall here and the landing ground a variety of hard, irregularly shaped things.

But that won't happen. The bonnet urges her on. She is standing more steadily than she thought possible on the bike frame. 'Sorry, but I have to.' She tosses the bonnet onto the dresser. Keeping her eyes on the hook, she reaches across and gets a firm grip on the mirror. One foot up on the seat, waits a beat then squishes the other beside it. She wobbles and her heart is going nuts, but she breathes calmly and keeps hold of the mirror, eyes on the hook. Go on. Go on now. And she does, just steps out, and her foot connects with the wood and then the other follows and something clicks in her hip and she stumbles a step and loses her stomach, but then there she is, up on the dresser, eye level with the hook, the bonnet at her feet.

A simple thing from here: she picks up the bonnet, brushes away invisible dust, runs her fingers over the satin ribbons one final time. 'Welcome, beautiful,' she says and drapes it over the hook. Her whole body hums with the rightness of it. Like it's 1996 and she's in the back seat of Tony's Datsun again. Like it's 1999 and she's holding Lena for the first time. Like it's 2003 and she's being held by her dying mother and the fear that she is unlovable even to the woman who gave birth to her dissipates and is replaced with surety of her worth. Some things your body just knows.

Her body, humming like this, alive and delighted, missteps. She is on the dresser and then she is not. She is falling backwards, twisting. On the ground, fast. So much blood so quickly. The sound of the lamp smashing must have been muffled by her flesh,

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but smashed it has, under her. Into her. Her right ankle screams differently to her gouged arm. Her left leg different again. So many varieties of pain to feel all at once. She thinks about what to do next and then doesn't think at all.