

## **A short guide to: The Golden Age by Joan London**

*written by Jonathan Wong*

### **Author Bio**

**Name:** Joan London

### **Key facts:**

- Western Australian writer
- The Golden Age (2014) is London's third novel, following Gilgamesh (2001) and The Good Parents (2008)

### **Mini Plot Summary:**

**Frank Gold** and **Elsa Briggs**, two children suffering from polio, form an unshakeable bond in 1940's Perth. Frank, alongside his parents, **Meyer** and **Ida Gold**, arrive from war-torn Hungary as 'New Australians'. Each of them, in their own way, adjusts to their new life in Australia.

### **Extended Plot Summary:**

Note regarding perspective: The novel switches perspectives between a number of characters including Frank Gold, his parents (Meyer and Ida), Elsa, Elsa's mother (Margaret) and Sister Olive Penny.

The story primarily follows Frank Gold, a 13-year old polio sufferer, and his time at 'The Golden Age', which is a children's polio centre, converted from a pub. The Golden Age is a 'cheerful place', and its rooms are 'spacious, cool and high-ceilinged'.

From the beginning, Frank is infatuated with a girl residing at the Golden Age named Elsa Briggs. Elsa is 12 and a half. (Frank and Elsa are the oldest children at the Golden Age, and their bond forms the heart of the novel.)

Frank's family are Jewish. They migrated to Western Australia from Hungary after World War II. In Hungary, Frank's father was an importer/exporter, and his mother was a supremely talented pianist. They had wanted to go to America, but when sponsorship was offered from Australia, they accepted it. They initially struggled with the new environment, feeling 'guttled, feeble, shellshocked'.

Frank reminisces about his time at the 'IDB' (The Infectious Disease Branch of the Royal Perth Hospital), where he met a poet named Sullivan Backhouse, who was confined to an Iron Lung. Sullivan, a young man, introduced Frank to poetry. It was Sullivan who inspired Frank to begin writing his own poems in a prescription pad. Frank recalls that Sullivan was working on a poem called 'On My Last Day on Earth', and how 'everything [Sullivan] wrote was now part of it'. Sullivan soon died. Frank, privately, vowed to finish 'On My Last Day on Earth' for his friend Sullivan.

The focus shifts to Frank's time as a child in war-torn Hungary, where Frank and Ida (mother) are both separated from Meyer (father), who is in the Ukraine. At one point, Frank has to hide in the house of his mother's piano teacher, Julia Marai, and her companion, a woman named Hedwiga. Ida is stern by nature, and weary from the war, but she possesses a 'little fighting core of survival, of self-love, which she'd always had'.

One day, a man named Mr Arpad comes in for a piano lesson at Julia's house, and Frank has to hide alone in a small 'roof space above the ceiling'. He usually hides in the bathroom, but Mr Arpad always uses it. His short time hiding in this space changes him: 'The effort of lying still in that space, alone, never left him'. 'When Hedwiga opened the trapdoor, and lifted him down, something had happened to him. For many days he did not speak with his voice. He spoke in thoughts.' In Australia, at The Golden Age, Frank notes that 'he could still sense that time in the ceiling somewhere deep in his body. Attics, trapdoors, cinemas activated it for a split-second.' He also feels it is 'the weak spot, the broken part, the gap that had let polio in'.

Frank recalls his first days at the Golden Age, which he initially describes as a 'place for babies' with a 'kindergarten atmosphere' and 'no privacy, nowhere to go, nothing to do'.

He is at odds with the boys in his ward, particularly a cricket-obsessed boy named Warren Barrett. Warren is incredulous that Frank has never heard of Keith Miller, an all-round cricketer, and Frank feels he has been ‘tested and found out, revealing himself to be un-Australian’. He has also not made any progress with ‘On My Last Day on Earth’, Sullivan’s unfinished poem, because ‘poetry has deserted him / there was no poetry here’. Then Frank notices Elsa, who is tall, thin and beautiful. He is immediately enamoured with her and she sparks his inspiration.

Elsa feels comforted by the Netting Factory near the Golden Age, which is ‘lit up all night like a theatre or dancehall or the Royal Show’. She thinks that the factory lights ‘[seem] to be promising something ... A future. No one will ever die here. Or that life was not so serious after all. That the future was a brightness.’ She was heartened when she arrived at The Golden Age: ‘As soon as she came to the Golden Age she’d begun to feel all right.’

Elsa initially dislikes Frank, who she describes as ‘snobby’ and ‘critical of the other kids’, but notes that he is a ‘funny boy’ and ‘clever in a way she’d never known before’.

Sister Olive Penny, the head nurse, is visited by a number of local policemen who she has brief romantic encounters with. She is sexually liberal, and notes that ‘the funny thing was, they never got her wrong. Didn’t judge her, didn’t think they had to escape her clutches, or even that they should see her again.’ Olive’s husband is dead, and she now lives with her grown-up daughter, Elizabeth Ann.

The children at the Golden Age are studying poetry. Frank does not like the poem they are reading, named ‘Bellbirds’, because it rhymes. He doesn’t believe poems have to rhyme anymore. He recalls Sullivan’s advice that ‘a poem should follow the speaking voice’.

Lidja, a physiotherapist at the Golden Age, is adored by all the children. ‘Everyone knew that Lidja would never give up on you’.

Frank visits Elsa in the bath. He notes that the shape of the bath is like ‘angel wings’, and Elsa replies: ‘I was trying to think of what it was like. Angel wings is perfect.’ Lidja catches Frank and escorts him out of the bath.

Frank's father, Meyer, walks home from work. He is struggling with being a 'New Australian': '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.' He also thinks that 'never again would he feel at home as he once had. Never again on this earth.' Meyer decides to visit Frank spontaneously. It is apparent, from their exchange in the hospital, that Meyer and Frank have a good relationship, and when Frank tells his father he's started to walk again, Meyer replies 'You'll do everything you really want ... You'll see.'

Meyer encounters Sister Penny, who he finds himself attracted to. They have a conversation about Frank. When Meyer leaves, he feels 'different', uplifted, because of his encounter with Sister Penny. He believes 'there was a call between them, clear as a bird's, so that you looked up at once to trace it. They recognised each other.'

Margaret, Elsa's mother, is struggling at home, due to being kept from Elsa on account of her polio. Elsa is Margaret's favourite daughter (Elsa has a sister, Sally). Margaret feels isolated from the community because of Elsa's polio.

Frank's parents volunteer to serve lunch and wash up at the Golden Age so that Nella and the local nurses can spend the day with their families. Christmas at the Golden Age is a joyous affair. Ida plays the piano, and Frank feels it as a 'relief'. He likes to watch her play, and 'in this role he had respect for her, and gratitude. It seemed to justify everything, their foreignness, their victimhood in the other country. It brought honour to them.'

Elsa tells Frank about the onset of her polio. It happened on a Saturday morning at the tennis club. Elsa felt suddenly tired and couldn't hit the tennis ball. Upon Elsa's return home, Sally had kicked her whilst she was on the ground for arriving late.

A heatwave hits Perth after Christmas. The children are allowed outside at night, to sit on the verandah, where it is cool. 'The verandah was a halfway existence, half-inside, half-out. It took them one step closer to normal life. They felt themselves lighten.'

After the heatwave, the children go on a trip to the sea. However, 'Elsa [is] quiet', because she is familiar with the location, and feels it belongs to her. 'This was her world, the ocean and its white sandhills and the streets behind ...' - 'She felt a clutch of loss, of

possessiveness.’ She laments her condition. She is nervous when she stands in the water with the help of Norm.

Frank thinks about how he loves English. ‘English excited him, he wanted to take possession of it. To express all that had been lost.’

Frank and Elsa share a moment where he describes them as animals. He describes her as a Palomino, and he describes himself as ‘a fox, following a Palomino’, which causes her to laugh.

Elsa ponders Frank. She feels as if ‘right from the start Frank had acted as if they were members of a secret club. A two-member club to which she’d just been elected.’ She realises that she ‘missed him when he left a room ... A light went out.’

As the nurses call them back, Frank mentions the next line of his poem to Elsa: ‘Slowly we are turning into something else’.

Meyer, who has started a new job driving a truck for Bickford’s, stop at the Golden Age and offers Sister Olive Penny a drink. He thinks about how beautiful she is. He feels like ‘there was a light inside her’. Olive tells Meyer she likes to go to the beach to be alone.

Lidja (the beloved physiotherapist) has died in a boating accident in Darwin. A new physio comes in to replace her, but the children ‘long for [Lidja], like a mother’... ‘Over and over, it seemed, they were reminded that they were alone, that in the end, their success or failure in overcoming polio was up to them.’

The Queen arrives in Perth, and tours through the streets, though a distance is maintained from civilians on account of the polio risk. This event is uplifting for the children. ‘Her face had become familiar to them, she was everywhere, like a beautiful godmother’. The Queen’s motorcade rolls past the Golden Age, and the children call out ‘Hooray! Hooray!’.

In the course of Meyer’s new job with Bickford’s, he often drops in to see Frank. Frank notices that his father is happier, and says ‘You look different’. His father replies: ‘The past seems further away.’ And he ponders the idea that, ‘What had been temporary had become settled. What had seemed like the end of the world had become the centre.’

A small piano concert happens at the Golden Age. It is a solo performance by Ida. This performance means a lot to Ida, who is a perfectionist, and she has been practising diligently. 'She wanted to give them something, something they would remember.' The children love the music.

Ida receives immense praise for her performance, and Nance's boss says he will give her address to the ABC, possibly for a job. She finally understands that this is her new home: 'This is the land in which her life would take place. In which her music must grow. This was her audience.'

Elsa and Frank wander off alone after the concert, walking with callipers. 'Once she'd belonged to the whole world, Elsa thought. Now she belonged to Frank.'

Albert Sutton, one of the children, runs away from the Golden Age, attempting to go back home. He is able to leave because the doors are always unlocked. But he struggles with a steep hill, and his wheelchair topples over, and he breaks his leg.

Elsa and Frank are discovered in bed together, undressed. Hadley has contacted the governors.

Frank tells Elsa that love '[is] the big thing, maybe the best thing, that [happens] in lives', and that 'he and she had received it very young'. They spend a lot of time together. 'Being close made them stronger.' They make rapid progress with their exercises, and feel motivated.

Elsa and Frank are both ousted from the Golden Age because of what happened in Elsa's bed. Elsa feels deeply embarrassed by the governor's questions about the matter, and she also refuses to blame Frank. Sister Olive Penny knows she will lose her job.

Frank goes to the library to read poetry. He is hurt by the 'lack of faith in him at the Golden Age'. 'No respect was shown for the depth of his and Elsa's feelings, no trust in the truth of their love. Even Sister Penny ... had not stood up for him and Elsa'. He doesn't blame Elsa for being expelled, however: 'She'd refused to blame him, or deny her feelings for him.' ... 'She had gone to the stake for him. The only one to stand by him.'

Meyer, by happenstance, spots Sister Olive Penny at the beach. They talk about Frank and Elsa. Sister Olive Penny says: ‘Frank needs her. They were good for each other. They shouldn’t be kept apart.’

Also, Sister Olive Penny (who has been fired from the Golden Age) has taken a job in Darwin. ‘Soon she would leave and very likely they would never meet again. They would forget each other, as so many had been forgotten.’ Meyer tells her that he learned from her ‘how to live here’.

Elsa, who hasn’t returned to school yet, is desperate to talk to Frank. ‘More and more now she felt as if part of her were missing.’ Margaret informs Elsa that the Golds are coming over for afternoon tea, and Elsa walks to her and kisses her.

The Golds come over. Elsa and Frank slip away. Meyer, who understands their relationship, glad they have done so. “‘Let them go”, thought Meyer.’

Elsa and Frank hold each other in a den underneath a peppermint tree. Frank, who is claustrophobic, cannot stay there too long. Elsa understands this and leads him outside. They set off back to their families, together.

Many, many years later, when Frank is an old man, he is visited by a man named Jack, who is the son of Elsa Briggs. Jack interviews him about the poetry books he has written. They also talk about Elsa, who was a doctor, but has now retired. It is explained that after school, Elsa went to Adelaide to study medicine and Frank taught at a high school in WA. Elsa met her husband in Adelaide. Frank tells Jack about child he raised, named Edie, who was the daughter of a friend who had caught TB. His reflection on how much he loved Edie brings back memories of the Golden Age.

Finally, Frank reflects on love, and his time at the Golden Age: ‘Polio is like love, Frank says .... Years later, when you think you have recovered, it comes back.’

### **Overarching Themes:**

- *Bonds of love & friendship*
  - The bond between Frank and Elsa has a deep impact on both their lives. It helps them to deal with their illness, and it provides them with a sense

of hope and optimism. This change in outlook results in both of them making rapid improvements in their recovery.

- Although it is ambiguous as to how much Meyer and Ida (once in Australia) love each other in a romantic sense, it is clear their bond with each other is strong. Ida and Frank persevered through a time of war in Hungary, in part with the hope of seeing Meyer again (who was in the Ukraine).
  - Both Meyer and Ida possess unconditional love for their son Frank. In Hungary, Ida hides him with her former piano teacher, at great risk to all. In Australia, they are devastated by the onset of their son's illness and worry about his wellbeing and future. They also visit Frank at the Golden Age regularly, and help out with the polio centre during Christmas, and towards novel's end, Ida provides them with a memorable piano concert.
  - Frank loves both his parents. His love comes easier for his father, Meyer, who is warm-hearted and caring. His mother, on the other hand, is stern, bossy and strong-willed, which often puts a distance between them, although it does not diminish their bond entirely. When Ida plays the piano at her concert, Frank is moved: 'For a moment all was forgiven between them - how he'd regularly stolen from her purse, what a snob she'd been to his friends - all was understood.'
  - Frank's friendship with Sullivan Backhouse, forged at the IDB, in the late stages of Sullivan's short life, has a profound impact on Frank. Sullivan's earnest guidance of Frank - who discovers an interest in poetry - allows him to see meaning, purpose, beauty. Because of Sullivan, Frank concludes that 'polio [has] taken his legs, but given him his vocation: poet.'
  - Meyer's interactions with Sister Olive Penny - in which it is clear there is a romantic bond between them, despite nothing ever happening - provide him with a new perspective in an unfamiliar country. He finds her beautiful and tender. He tells her that she taught him 'how to live [in Australia]'
- *Loneliness & isolation*
    - Both Frank and Elsa feel immense loneliness throughout their lives, especially at the Golden Age, where they are kept away from their

families. Their illness is isolating in itself. Polio makes them weak. It confines them to the indoors and to constant lethargy.

- Elsa, who was once seen as the pretty sister, full of life, is now kept from her family and from regular schooling. Her illness has changed how people perceive her, and there is a fear from her mother (Margaret) and Margaret's friends that it will cause her to be isolated for the rest of her days.
  - Frank seems to be introspective by nature, although he finds a method to deal with his thoughts - poetry - with the guidance of Sullivan. His poems allow him to articulate his feelings; to contemplate what makes him feel sad, or lonely, but also to express what is beautiful.
  - Meyer and Ida experience isolation, too. They are newcomers in a strange country. Both of them struggle with accepting their new home, and its vast, empty lands, and at times they long for the familiarity of a European town.
  - Sullivan suggests that 'his real life had always been when he was alone.' He also says to Frank: 'in the end we are all orphans'.
  - Sister Olive Penny values her solitude, and takes trips to the beach to think.
- *Being the 'Other'*
    - Frank does not fit in with the other boys at the Golden Age, particular Warren Barrett, who looks down on him for not being familiar with the game of cricket.
    - Many characters in *The Golden Age* are outsiders, or the 'other': Elsa (the girl with polio); Sullivan (the isolated young poet); Frank, Meyer and Ida, who are new to the country.
- *Displacement & adjusting to new environments*
    - Frank and Elsa have to adjust to the Golden Age, to an environment away from their families.
    - Frank, Meyer and Ida are displaced from their home, because of the war, and have to adjust to a new country.
- *Resilience in the face of tragedy*

- Both Frank and Elsa are resilient in the face of their illness. Frank is motivated by his poetry, and Elsa. Elsa is more optimistic by nature. She stares at the lights of the Netting Factory with wonder and hope.
  - Sullivan combats his personal tragedy (polio) with resilience, and with beauty, and in his last days he continues to work on an important poem of his - 'On My Last Day on Earth'.
  - Meyer, Ida and Margaret attempt to be as resilient as they can in the face of the illnesses of their children. They have to be strong for themselves, but also for Frank and Elsa.
- *The influence of the past*
    - Frank's short experience in the roof space of his mother's old piano teacher (back in Hungary) has a lasting impact on his life. He suffers from claustrophobia.
    - Meyer and Ida, who are from Europe, have different sensibilities to the people they encounter in Australia.
    - Ida is influenced by her past. She was very driven by nature, having been a brilliant pianist in her youth; a trait that allowed to survive through the war.

### **Key Characters:**

- *Frank Gold*
  - Protagonist
  - 13-year old Jewish boy, from Hungary, who suffers from polio.
  - The oldest child at the Golden Age
  - New to Australia
  - Forms a strong bond with Elsa Briggs
- *Elsa Briggs*
  - 12-and-a-half, suffers from polio
  - Bonds with Frank
  - Mature and optimistic
  - Beautiful
  - Often feels lonely and isolated

- *Ida Gold*
  - Frank's mother
  - Stern
  - Brilliant pianist
  - Resilient
  
- *Meyer Gold*
  - Former businessman from Hungary, who now drives a truck
  - Frank's father
  - Likeable and warm-hearted
  - Forms a bond with Sister Olive Penny
  
- *Sister Oliver Penny*
  - Head nurse at the Golden Age
  - Competent
  - Well-loved
  - Sexually liberated, taking numerous lovers
  
- *Sullivan Backhouse*
  - Young poet kept in an Iron Lung
  - Becomes friends with Frank at the ICD
  - Optimistic in spite of his illness
  - Has a love of poetry, which he imparts on Frank
  
- *Margaret Briggs*
  - Elsa's mother
  - Loves her daughter
  - Resilient in the face of her daughter's illness
  - Reunites Elsa and Frank towards the end, by inviting the Golds over for afternoon tea

**Other characters:**

- Jack Briggs (Elsa's father)
- Nance Briggs (Jack's sister)
- Sally Briggs (Elsa's sister)

- Julia Marai (piano teacher in Hungary) and Hedwiga (companion)

**Key quotes:**

‘Frank always felt the need to go outside.’

‘Saved, but not yet back into real life.’

‘Sullivan said his real life had always been when he was alone.’

‘I refuse to be their only light.’

‘In the end we are all orphans.’

‘Deep in her sad, tight heart, she searched for that little fighting core of survival, of self-love, which she’d always had, and must not now lose.’

‘To stay quiet could be a matter of life or death. But the effort of lying still in that space, alone, never left him.’

‘But when Hedwiga opened the trapdoor and lifted him down, something had happened to him. For many days he did not speak with his voice. He spoke in his thoughts.’

‘But he could still sense that time in the ceiling somewhere deep in his body. Attics, trapdoors, cinemas activated it for a split-second. His eyes closed and he went blank, as if he’d passed out for a moment. He once sat in the gods in His Majesty’s Theatre and had to leave. He avoided tunnels, subways, cubby houses. Refused to play hide-and-seek. Didn’t even like reaching under a ber or table. He felt it as the weak spot, the broken part, the gap that had let polio in.’

‘The children, blank-faced, lay on their beds. They felt displaced. Where did they belong? And to whom?’

‘Visitors reminded you of how much you had grown apart from them. It was almost a relief when they went home.’

‘It seemed to him she was alone.’

‘Frank had been tested and found out, revealing himself as un-Australian.’

‘But the Netting Factory stayed lit up all night like a theatre or dancehall or the Royal Show ... It seemed to be promising something. A future. No one will ever die here. Or just that life was not so serious after all. That the future was a brightness.’

‘As soon as she came to the Golden Age she’d begun to feel all right.’

‘Yet when he thought of Elsa, that he shared her fate, he did not feel that shame.’

‘This is why the human race goes on having children, he thought. To remind us of the bliss of being loved.’

‘This nurse was not a conventional person ... How had a woman like that come to live alone? All this, standing at the bottom of the stairs, he had known in a glance.’

‘There was a call between them, clear as a bird’s, so that you looked up at once to trace it. They recognised each other.’

‘What her mother had to get used to was that it was she, Elsa, who had to deal with what had happened to her.’

‘Polio had taken her legs, made her pale with thin cheeks, and yet, somehow, herself.’

‘She was amazed at the loneliness in some men’s hearts. Vast as an ocean or a desert: no woman she knew would ever be so lonely.’

‘Yet it was nursing that sustained her.’

‘Poetry gave relief. From what? From everything else.’

‘English excited him, he wanted to take possession of it. To express all that had been lost.’

‘They belonged to no one but themselves.’

‘Right from the start Frank had acted as if they were members of a secret club. A two-member club to which she’d just been elected.’

‘Until they went home they’d forgotten they were in a tragedy.’

‘The verandah was a halfway existence, half-inside, half-out. It took them one step closer to normal life. They felt themselves lighten.’

‘Over and over, it seemed, they were reminded that they were alone, that in the end, their success or failure in overcoming polio was up to them.’

‘For a moment all was forgiven between them - how he’d regularly stolen from her purse, what a snob she’d been to his friends - all was understood. Watching her play, Frank was moved. He saw her strength, her vast determination.’

‘This was the land in which her life would take place. In which her music must grow. This was her audience.’

‘Being close made them stronger.’

‘Two people living together were always learning about each other, Frank thought.’

“‘What did you learn?’” ... “‘How to live here.’”

‘They hadn’t learnt what he now knew, that he, and only he, could cope with his condition.’

‘Polio is like love... Years later, when you think you have recovered, it comes back.’