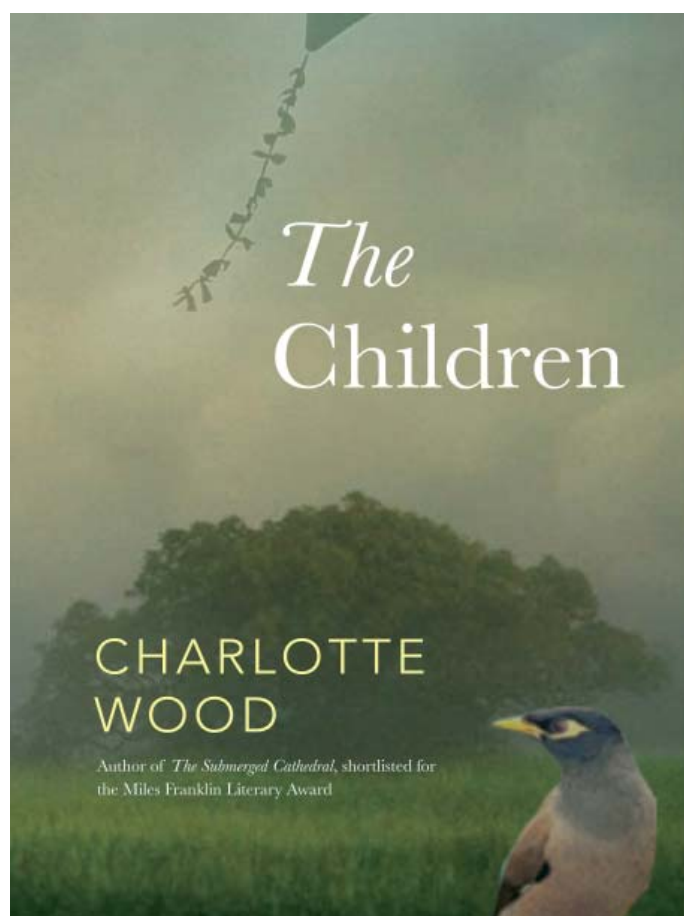


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the Author

Charlotte Wood's first novel, *Pieces of a Girl*, was published in 1999, and won the 1998 Jim Hamilton Award for an unpublished manuscript. Both this and her second novel, *The Submerged Cathedral* (2004), were highly praised by reviewers and award judges, and the latter was shortlisted for the 2005 Miles Franklin Award and the 2005 Commonwealth Writers' Prize, SE Asia/South Pacific. She lives in Sydney.

To read more about Charlotte Wood, go to her website <http://www.charlottewood.com.au/thechildren.html>

Charlotte Wood - On Writing *The Children*

It's about the Connollys, a family of grownup siblings returning to their home town because their father has had an accident. This novel, too, has turned out to be more complicated and contradictory than I'd imagined at the start.

There were several initial inspirations for *The Children*. For a start, I have always been interested in family relationships, especially between siblings, and how even as adults when we get together with our families, it's so easy to get sucked back, subtly but definitely, into the hierarchies and behaviours of childhood.

But one of the central ideas for the book, about witnessing the pain of others, began percolating when I had dinner one evening with an old friend who had become a foreign correspondent, who was home in Australia for a visit between long assignments in Kabul and Baghdad.

I found it difficult to understand why and how my friend - a bookish, sensitive woman a little younger than me and who, like me, had grown up in an Australian country town - now seemed to have become a hard-nosed, tough-nut reporter.

I found it disturbing that she willingly inhabited a life steeped in violence and what I then saw as a kind of voyeuristic observation of the suffering of others. And she seemed to have developed a kind of carapace to protect herself from what all that might mean, and, equally it seemed, to shield herself from the judgement of stay-at-home others - like me. (I should add here that since then, thanks largely to my friend who has been incredibly generous in helping with my research for this book, and being very supportive of it, I have come to a much deeper understanding of the costs of that kind of life).

But back then, over the next year or so I kept thinking about what might lead a sensitive young woman from ordinary workaday journalism into that kind of adrenaline-fuelled existence, to live not only with its dangers but immersed in the horrific suffering of others. And I wondered what it must be like to come home from that and try to settle in to ordinary, insular life in Australia. At the same time I had begun thinking about a story where several adult siblings go home to the country town they grew up in, facing up to their prickly relationships with each other, and to the town that contains each of their own pasts, each of their own adolescent selves.

Another preoccupation began to emerge as I wrote. Like so many people, I have over the last several years begun

to fear switching on the television news. The onslaught of imagery of global suffering and my feelings of guilt and impotence associated with watching them has for a long time had me wondering about the way we individuals in rich Western countries respond to these images; how we absorb them in between unpacking our organic groceries and going out to a nice restaurant for dinner. The obscenity of this has always bothered me. But is it better to do this than switch off altogether? At what point is it acceptable to turn away from the pain of strangers?

Then in my writing, I wanted to create a very different, more contemporary and overtly dramatic story than I had written till now.

And so all these strands began to plait together, and the country town became a metaphor for the family, but also for the insularity of Australia – and my main character, the reporter Mandy's return home creates a clash of two worlds - the larger world beyond Australia, and the small, mundane but no less complex moral stage of the family.

Mandy is highly alert to suffering on a global scale - she is frustrated and angry at the insular, parochial life of the little Australian country town where it seems to her nobody looks beyond the end of their nose. Their ignorance of global issues, and their complacency, is abhorrent to her.

But at the same time she herself has little time for the suffering of those close to her: the pain her long absences cause her husband Chris, the fears of her mother Margaret, who finds Mandy rather intimidating and worries constantly about her safety. She is unaware of the hurt she causes her brother Stephen and sister Cathy with her brusqueness and blunt assessments.

Then, into this story blunders an outsider, Tony. Tony is a wardsman at the hospital, but has a connection with Mandy from years ago, to do with something that happened when she was a cadet on the local paper. Tony is the type of person we've all come across; essentially good-hearted, a little bit slow to pick up on signals, and therefore sometimes a bit intrusive. He's the kind of person who in his darker moments suspects he is the butt of jokes and derision, but most of the time works hard to keep this suspicion at bay, for otherwise his existence would be unbearable.

Reviews

Mandy is a foreign correspondent who has seen it all: the slaughter of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, the death of civilians, including women and children, in the streets of Baghdad. But when she receives a call from her mother and learns that her father has been critically injured in an accident, Mandy returns home carrying a war of her own within her.

From her rapidly deteriorating marriage to her strained relationships with her sister Cathy and brother Stephen, Mandy is thrust into the middle of a battle she can't keep at arm's length or view through the eyes of a reporter. Burdened with grief, disappointment, and anger towards the small-town ignorance that drove her to her destiny and the damaged person she's become, the only way Mandy can find peace is through tragedy.

Charlotte Wood's writing is haunting, building tension so subtly the action hits like an unexpected blow. Her characters are wounded and human, their dialogue profound without meaning to be. Simple and real, this is a beautifully heavy and affecting story that will linger in your mind long after you've read the last page.

- *Good Reading Magazine* **** (four stars - "highly recommended")

'Wood's first book was superbly polished, her second was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin, so it is no surprise that her third novel, *The Children*, captivates from the first dramatic paragraph... An Australian Jodi Picoult? Definitely comparable to Picoult's themes, but more aware of, and attuned and appealing to Australian readers of the literary family drama, laced with social commentary and mystery.' – Lucy Meredith, *Bookseller + Publisher*, August 2007.

Discussion points

- ☞ What does this novel have to say about witnessing the pain of others, or bearing witness? Whose pain is being observed?
- ☞ What does the metaphor of the Indian mynah bird mean to you?
- ☞ In the fight at the Ciphers restaurant, who's right, Mandy or Stephen?
- ☞ What do you think of Tony? Is he to be feared or pitied?
- ☞ One of the book's main themes is bearing witness to the pain of others, and whether there is a point at which it's acceptable to turn away. Discuss.
- ☞ What do you think Rundle says about Australia, and about the family?
- ☞ Do you think the Connollys are a very Australian family, or could they be from anywhere?
- ☞ Why do you think the book is called *The Children*?

Further Reading

The Submerged Cathedral by Charlotte Wood

Of A Boy Sonia Hartnett

Radiance Louis Nowra