

ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

A captivating drama of family secrets and tragedies.

It is London, 1880, and Lucas Jarmyn struggles to make sense of the death of his beloved youngest daughter; his wife, Aurora, seeks solace in rigid social routines; and eighteen-year-old Dinah looks for fulfilment in unusual places. Only the housekeeper, the estimable Mrs Logan, seems able to carry on.






A train accident in a provincial town on the railway Lucas owns claims the life of nine-year-old Alice Brinklow and, amid the public outcry, Alice's father, Thomas, journeys to London demanding justice. As he arrives in the Capital on a frozen January morning his fate, and that of the entire Jarmyn family, will hinge on such strange things as an ill-fated visit to a spiritualist, an errant chicken bone and a single vote cast at a board room meeting.

Written with charm, humour and rich period detail, Maggie Joel has created an intriguing novel of a Victorian family adrift in their rapidly changing world.

About the author

Maggie Joel has been writing fiction since the mid-1990s and her short stories have been widely published in *Southerly*, *Westerly*, *Island*, *Overland* and *Canberra Arts Review*, and broadcast on ABC radio.

For discussion

-  A train crash, a war in a foreign land, an Empire founded on industry and enterprise but with no notion of universal suffrage, welfare or equality... To what extent are the various members of the Jarmyn family victims of the times they live in, and to what extent are their circumstances created by their own actions?
-  What do we think about Aurora Jarmyn's actions? Can we forgive her as a mother, or do we condemn her?
-  Dinah Jarmyn complains that nothing changes and she herself can never be the instigator of change, that she has no control over her, or other people's, lives. To what extent do Dinah's actions impact on the other characters?
-  How far do we sympathise with Thomas Brinklow? Is he entirely a victim or is he in any way to blame for his situation? What might Thomas have done differently?
-  Where do Lucas Jarmyn's loyalties lie? He appears conflicted in each of his roles as railway company director, husband and father. What do we think of his behaviour and actions in each of these roles?

- ☞ Might things have turned out differently if Mrs Logan had stayed? Was she deluding herself or was there something between her and Mr Jarmyn? Do we think Lucas Jarmyn behaved appropriately in his dealings with Mrs Logan?
- ☞ The three Jarmyn sons – Bill, Gus and Jack - appear to play a periphery role in the drama. But does their presence impact on the other characters? Who plays the largest role? Would events have been different without their presence?
- ☞ Sofia Jarmyn is dead before the story opens yet her presence is felt throughout the narrative. Who is to blame for Sofia's death? How much of what transpires is a direct result of her death? How might things have been different had she not died?
- ☞ The story is set very firmly in late Victorian England. Could the same story work in a contemporary setting? Which elements of the story are entirely Victorian and which elements are universal?
- ☞ Death is an ever-present factor in the lives of the Victorian characters in the novel and a number of deaths occur during the story. How do we view the characters' reaction to death? Does it vary from our own twenty-first century attitudes and behaviours?

Suggested further reading

The Second Last Woman in England by Maggie Joel

The Past and Other Lies by Maggie Joel

The Undertaking by Audrey Magee

In Falling Snow by Mary-Rose MacColl

The Railwayman's Wife by Ashley Hay