



The natural way of things

By Charlotte Wood
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Genre & subject
Suspense fiction
Kidnapping
Female friendship

Synopsis

Two women awaken from a drugged sleep to find themselves imprisoned in a broken-down property in the middle of a desert. Strangers to each other, they have no idea where they are or how they came to be there with eight other girls, forced to wear strange uniforms, their heads shaved, guarded by two inept yet vicious armed jailers and a 'nurse'. The girls all have something in common, but what is it? What crime has brought them here from the city? Who is the mysterious security company responsible for this desolate place with its brutal rules, its total isolation from the contemporary world? Doing hard labour under a sweltering sun, the prisoners soon learn what links them: in each girl's past is a sexual scandal with a powerful man. They pray for rescue - but when the food starts running out it becomes clear that the jailers have also become the jailed. The girls can only rescue themselves.

Author biography

Charlotte Wood was born in 1965 in Cooma, New South Wales. She is the author of five novels – *Pieces of a Girl* (1999), *The Submerged Cathedral* (2004), *The Children* (2007), *Animal People* (2011), and *The Natural Way of Things* (2015). She has also written a collection of interviews with Australian writers, *The Writer's Room* (2016), a collection of personal reflections on cooking, *Love & Hunger* (2012). She was also editor of an anthology of writing about siblings, *Brothers & Sisters* (2009).

Her books have been critically well received and frequently mentioned in prize lists. In 2016 *The Natural Way of Things* won the Stella Prize, the Indie Book Awards Novel of the Year and Book of the Year, and was short-listed for various other prizes including the Miles Franklin and Barbara Jefferis. *Animal People* was shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Literary Awards in 2013 and longlisted for the 2012 Miles Franklin Award. She has a background in journalism and has also taught writing at a variety of levels.[3]

In 2014 she was appointed Chair of Arts Practice, Literature, at the Australia Council for the Arts, a three-year appointment cut short by budget restrictions to one year.

She currently lives in Sydney. She has a PhD from the University of New South Wales; previous degrees are a Master of Creative Arts from UTS and a BA from Charles Sturt University.

Discussion starters

- ‘You need to know what you are’ (p.18). Consider this statement by Boncer. ‘What’ are these girls – to society, the media, the guards, their families and partners? And how do these conflicting perceptions ultimately shape the girls’ sense of self?
- Compare and discuss your interpretations of ‘Hardings International’. Who or what do they represent? And why do they want these girls removed from society?
- In what ways do you think gender impacted your reading of the book? If you have men and women in your reading group, discuss the different ways you related and reacted to the characters and events in the novel.
- Consider the developing relationship between Yolanda and Verla. What brings them together and, ultimately, sets them apart?
- Discuss the ways the book addresses issues surrounding the female body. How do the girls view their bodies? In what ways are they sites of both power and oppression?
- ‘Animal blood and guts, the moon and the season. It was beyond her named self, beyond girl, or female. Beyond human, even.’ (p. 193) What power and promise does the animal world increasingly hold for Yolanda? How does going back to a primitive state enable her understand herself and her world?
- Consider the conflicting representations of violence throughout the book. How does it challenge the boundaries between human and animal nature? Male and female? Power and oppression?
- Throughout the book, Wood creates a powerful tension between death and survival. Why do some characters die while others endure?
- What does the white horse symbolise for Verla?
- ‘In The Natural Ways of Things, Wood creates a dystopian world through which we may better understand our own.’ Discuss this statement.
- What is your interpretation of the final scene? Where are the girls going? And what kind of world are they leaving behind?

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