

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

TITLE: The Family Men
AUTHOR: Catherine Harris
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SUBJECT: Fiction

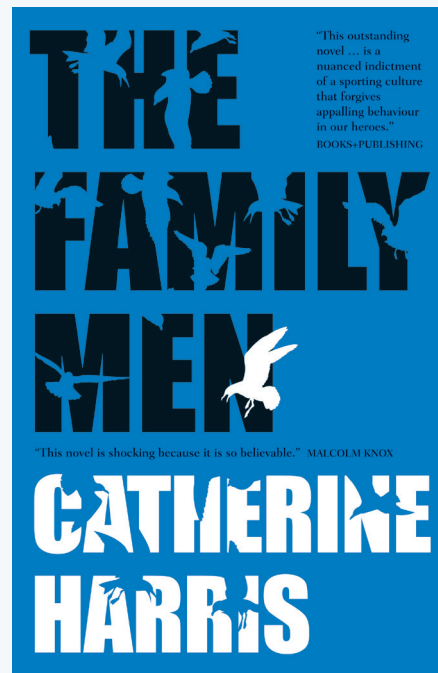
About the book

Topical yet personal, *The Family Men* thrusts us into the troubled inner life of a star footy player, Harry Furey. Harry has been angry for a long time (his surname is Furey after all), but events at his Club's ironically named Sportsman's Night have brought all his repressed rage to a head. So too has it exacerbated his doubt about his place in the Club that has been the 'home' of his brother, father and grandfather before him.

Sportsman's Night serves in the novel as the epitome of all that is wrong with football culture. Women as identity-less commodities but also as desperate worshippers at the altar of football fame. The 'values' of mateship and loyalty – 'What happens at Sportsman's Night stays at Sportsman's Night' – is a constant refrain throughout the novel. The complicity of many people in creating and then covering-up horrendous acts. The desperation of the media to get the dirt.

So just what did happen at Sportsman's Night? Harry did something that his teammates couldn't countenance. After a 'split-second decision' he saw the 'disgusted expressions on the boys' faces (page 24). We get one idea of his actions at the start of the novel; a very different one at its end. But still we are left asking how culpable Harry was in what happened to a nameless girl.

The Family Men also imagines this girl's experience of Sportsman's Night: her excitement to be chosen for it,



her dreams of the life it will bring her, her naive belief that everything will turn out OK.

And the novel also links Harry's story with his father's, an old story raked up by the media in which a drug-addicted stripper dies because of his negligence.

Family; sport and the culture that surrounds it; group and individual guilt and culpability; loyalty – all themes ripe for debate in your discussion about this incisive novel.

About the author

Catherine Harris's short story collection, *Like Being A Wife*, was shortlisted for the 2011 Age Fiction Prize, the 2011 Barbara Jefferis award and as a manuscript for the 2009 Victorian Premier's Literary Awards. She won the 2009 Josephine Ulrick Literature Prize and was shortlisted for the 2013 Fish International Short Story Prize and the 2013 Bridport Prize. She lives in Melbourne.

Quotes

The Family Men is an intense distillation of the darkness that falls after the Friday and Saturday night lights have been turned out. This novel is shocking because it is so believable. Sometimes you hear football

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insiders mutter about a scandal in the game, “It’s worse than you think.” Catherine Harris has cut right through to that shadowy truth, and come back with horror, yes, but also a sign of hope.’ – **Malcolm Knox**

‘*The Family Men* unfolds like a slow-motion car crash... [It] is a nuanced indictment of a sporting culture that forgives appalling behaviour in our heroes, and it is as ‘true’ as the best journalism.’ – **Books+Publishing**

‘Regardless of your interest in sport, *The Family Men* is a starkly brilliant and uniquely Australian novel that stays with you long after reading.’ – **Readings Monthly**

Questions for discussion

1. *The Family Men* is written as a close reflection of reality. How close do you think it gets to reality? How does a novel illuminate social reality differently to non-fiction? If you have read Anna Krien’s *Night Games*, discuss the similarities and differences between the two books.
2. Which characters are most culpable in what happened to the unnamed girl? What responsibility does Harry bear?
3. Did you feel empathy for Harry? What about other characters in the novel? Does anyone in this novel behave well?
4. Family has negative connotations in the novel. Does it have any positive aspects? Is the Club a de facto family to Harry or any of the other players? Is the Club any better or worse than Harry’s actual family?
5. Discuss Harry’s epiphany (his confession on pages 263–4) and his decision at the end of the novel. Was his decision a good one? Was it a credible one? Are we to leave the novel feeling optimistic?
6. Discuss personal responsibility in the face of group pressure. “Nobody likes a shit-stirrer,” Matt reminds Harry (page 109). Would you have been able to resist the pressure that Harry is put under to keep the code of silence?
7. Harry is ‘vulnerable on the subject of loyalty’ (pages 132–3). Is loyalty ever a positive quality in the novel? What about in life?
8. “I can’t believe you did that,” Matt says, ‘as though Harry has betrayed them both with his behaviour, publicly compromising the reputation of the entire family with his actions, much as their father had with his’ (page 54). Are Harry’s actions equivalent to his father’s? How similar are their characters?
9. ‘Without a name the girl is still just an idea ... Someone capable of being bypassed, overlooked, omitted, let go.’ (page 15). Why doesn’t Catherine Harris give the girl a name? What sense do you get of her as a character? The girl from Alan’s past does have a name – why? Harry imagines he and his father have ‘an equivalent palette of sorrows ... no clear distinction anymore where one torment starts and the other ends. Which girl is it who keeps him up at night? Whose injustice does he cry for? What is it that he is losing, has lost?’ (page 183). What are the similarities and differences between the two girls, and what do these similarities and differences suggest?
10. ‘The past is never past’ (page 20). How is Harry defined by his past? Is he able to escape it? To what extent do our pasts determine our lives?

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11. What do you think about Harry's mother? Is she like a 'racehorse with a broken leg' (page 63)? Why is Harry's relationship with her so bad?
12. Harry asks Dean if there's anything he regrets (page 248). What exactly does Harry regret?
13. Why does Harry like Dean? What kind of alternative does he offer to Harry's teammates?
14. 'So many people expect so much yet so little is offered in return,' Harry reflects (page 138). What does Harry have a right to expect in return? What do sports stars have a right to?
15. How far is the media implicated in the culture surrounding AFL in this novel? What about in life? What do you make of the character of Margo? Why does Harry feel such a connection to her? Is she Harry's conscience, despite her motives as a journalist? What do you think about her motives? Margo says she wants to write about 'the culture of the sport, the way you're forced into situations you can't deal with, encouraged to engage in antisocial behaviour right from the get go' (page 245). Is Margo a force for good?

Further reading

Night Games: Sex, Power and Sport, Anna Krien, Black Inc., 2012