

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

TITLE: Rain Birds

AUTHOR: Harriet McKnight

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SUBJECT: Fiction

Book description

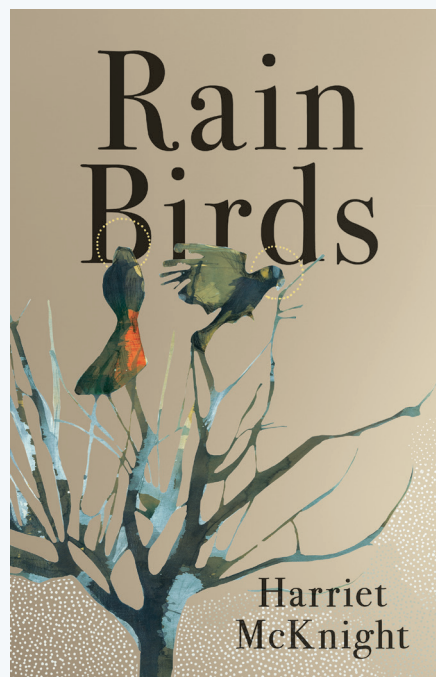
Alan and Pina have lived contentedly in isolated – and insular – Boney Point for thirty years. Now they are dealing with Alan’s devastating early-onset Alzheimer’s diagnosis. As he is cast adrift in the depths of his own mind, Pina is left to face the consequences alone, until the arrival of a flock of black cockatoos seems to tie him, somehow, to the present.

Nearby, conservation biologist Arianna Brandt is involved in a project trying to reintroduce the threatened glossy black cockatoos into the wilds of Murrungowar National Park. Alone in the haunted bush, and with her birds failing to thrive, Arianna’s personal demons start to overwhelm her and risk undoing everything.

At first, when the two women’s paths cross, they appear at loggerheads but – in many ways – they are invested in the same outcome but for different reasons.

Ultimately, unexpected events will force them both to let go of their pasts and focus on the future.

Rain Birds is a powerful and lyrical novel about love, grief and loss, one that examines personal tragedy as set against global and environmental responsibilities, and how we negotiate our often-conflicting ideals.



Praise for Rain Birds

“With a delicate yet decisive hand, Harriet McKnight deftly weaves the stories of two forthright women searching for moments of stillness in an ever-changing world. Intelligent and absorbing, Rain Birds eschews sentiment in favour of clear-eyed empathy for its characters.”

—MELANIE JOOSTEN

“Heartbreaking and real, grounded in a stunning natural environment. McKnight questions our responsibilities – to loved ones, and to places we love.”

—INGA SIMPSON

“A poetic and powerful portrayal of how hard it is for humans to change – even while the world changes around us. Rain Birds is a moving meditation on the deeply intimate kinds of loss experienced within families, and the harrowing losses our entire planet is facing.”

—CERIDWEN DOVEY

About the author

Harriet McKnight’s work has been shortlisted for the 2014 Overland VU Short Story Prize, the 2015 ABR Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize, and the 2016 Overland Neilma Sidney Short Story Prize. She works as Managing Editor of The Canary Press. Rain Birds is her debut novel.

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Questions for discussion

1. Think about Pina's role as Alan's carer: why is Pina resisting putting him into care? Why does she feel that weight of responsibility so forcefully?
2. As a carer, how could Pina have acted differently? Do you think she should exercise more self-care towards herself?
3. Why does the glossy black cockatoo reintroduction program mean so much to Arianna? What does she have invested in its success?
4. Arianna is grappling with her traumatic upbringing. How have her childhood experiences affected her perception of herself?
5. Do you think Tim could be more supportive of Arianna? Or is it still important to keep a professional distance from your colleagues when working in extreme environments?
6. Do you think there are parallels between Arianna and Pina? How do you experience the pain emanating from each of them?
7. Why does Arianna feel so connected to her birds, and how does that compare to what Alan might be feeling when he looks at them?
8. How significant is landscape in *Rain Birds*? Is it important to you as a reader that an author accurately depicts the natural world in which their novel is set?
9. What do you think the author is trying to tell us about the broader context of environmentalism and industry? Do you think the tensions between those two areas can ever be resolved?
10. Do you consider Arianna's and Pina's stories somewhat resolved by the end of the book? Do you feel optimistic about their futures?