

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

TITLE: Vertigo

AUTHOR: Amanda Lohrey

ISBN: 9781863954303

PRICE: \$19.99

SUBJECT: Fiction

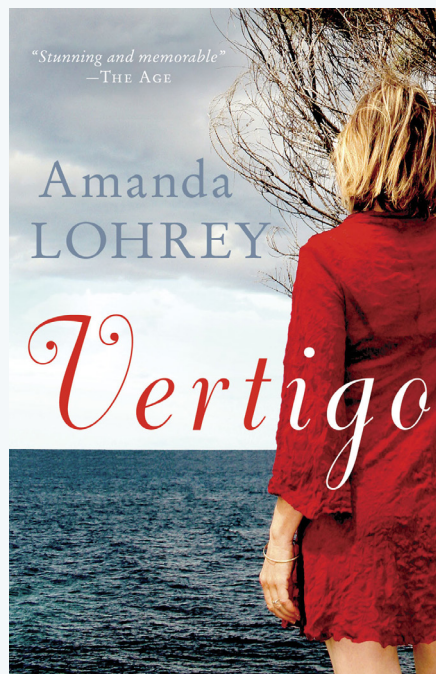
About the Book

Troubled by a shared loss, dissatisfied with city life, Luke and Anna decide to make a sea change. They find what seems the perfect town – free from tourists, and the perfect house – pleasingly proportioned. The place feels like it has always belonged to them. Could it be their Promised Land?

Luke and Anna have different responses to Garra Nalla, and the narrative shifts between their perspectives. Luke finds satisfaction immediately and his contentment is more sustained; he is sure it is their Promised Land. Anna is more ambivalent: sometimes intensely irritated and missing the city, trapped and claustrophobic; sometimes feeling at home, literally putting down roots by planting a garden. The tension between Anna and Luke ebbs and flows.

Looking at her husband from a distance one day, Anna feels a rising panic. She considers people's place on the land, just figures in a landscape, perhaps, coming and going while the land remains. So then, 'what is this pointless dance that they are all engaged in ... locked in the illusion that they are going somewhere, that what they do has meaning beyond their own day-to-day survival?' (p85). Feeling herself small against the land, Anna experiences the vertigo of the title.

Both Anna and Luke are small against the might of the bushfire that threatens their new home. They are also reborn through it. Like the Australian trees that require the heat of the bushfire to become fertile, Luke and Anna are each



able to hold the grief they feel for their dead son but to think past it to a different kind of future.

A Promised Land then? Or country that bears the traces of thousands of insignificant human lives while remaining indifferent to them?

About the Author

Amanda Lohrey is the author of the acclaimed novels *A Short History of Richard Kline*, *Camille's Bread* and *The Morality of Gentlemen*, as well as the award-winning short-story collection *Reading Madame Bovary*. She has also written two Quarterly Essays: *Groundswell* and *Voting for Jesus*. In 2012 she was awarded the Patrick White Literary Award.

Praise for *Vertigo*

'A carefully crafted little gem of a book' – *Advertiser*

'Lohrey achieves a kind of perfection' – *Sydney Morning Herald*

'Extraordinarily vivid and compelling ... A stunning and memorable novella' – *Age*

'Vertigo will keep you up much too late but it's worth a one-sitting read.' – *West Australian*

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think Lohrey has written Luke and Anna's story as a novella rather than a short story or novel? What are the rewards and/or drawbacks of the novella form?
2. Do you think Luke and Anna's story is representative of a common experience? Is it a common experience of modern life? Or of thirty-somethings? Or of loss and grief?
3. Are we all on a pilgrimage for a Promised Land, like Frederick Treves? What are we searching for? Does Treves' story, and Anna and Luke's, suggest that such a search can be fruitful?
4. Arriving in Garra Nalla, 'They felt that in some essential way it was uncultivated, a landscape out of time, and as such it could not define them. Here they could live, and simply be' (p14). Is this how they end up experiencing Garra Nalla?
5. 'The further away from the city they drove, the more the world expanded into a mysterious limbo, a potential space waiting to be filled' (p10). Do you share this experience when leaving the city?
6. How are the city and country set up in opposition to each other? Is one seen as 'better' than another?
7. What makes the novella 'a pastoral'?
8. 'This is not Eden, this is drought country' (p24). What is Luke and Anna's relationship to the land? How does it change? Are they like the squatters or the settlers from the Henry Lawson poem and story Lohrey acknowledges?
9. Is this a quintessentially Australian story?
10. Is Luke or Anna's perspective stronger? Is Lohrey able to balance both equally? Did you identify with one character's experience more than the other's?
11. Anna thinks Luke remains too detached. Do you agree?
12. Anna goes from being a 'bohemian' to being at a 'spiritual impasse' (p9) – is this an inevitable part of ageing?
13. How do you imagine the boy? What kind of being do you think he is? He is meant to be more than a figment of imagination – does this work in an otherwise realistic novella?
14. Luke is drawn to Frederick Treves' travel book, while Anna remains connected to the modern world through TV news and social media. How does this influence the way they experience their new life?
15. There are obvious parallels between Treves' story and Luke's – the search for a Promised Land as the result of grief. What are the differences?
16. *Vertigo* starts with Luke's birdwatching. Discuss the importance of birds throughout the novella. What do they represent?
17. How do the words and photographs work together?
18. Is this ultimately an optimistic book?