

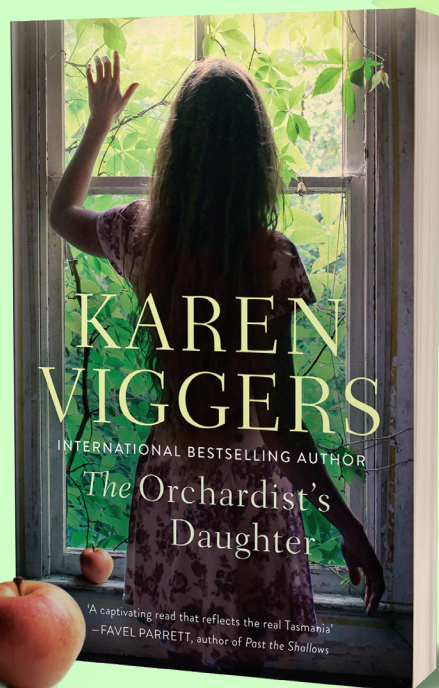
# ALLEN & UNWIN'S

## Book Group Guide

### Conversation Starters

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## Karen Viggers on writing *The Orchardist's Daughter*

This novel grew out of a lifelong sense of being an outsider—not necessarily of being lonely or wrong, but a little bit different. Maybe it's a pre-requisite for being a writer, but I suspect we all feel like outsiders at times. And yet connection and being part of something are important—that's how we define ourselves and fit into the world.

In writing this book, I asked myself: when is it that we are at our most vulnerable, and when is it hardest for us to belong? There are many difficult stages of life, however I feel that belonging is hardest for young people trying to find their feet in the world. So *The Orchardist's Daughter* became a story of three outsiders struggling to belong in a close-knit Tasmanian timber town: a Parks ranger, a young woman being controlled by her older brother, and a ten-year-old boy being bullied at school. It's a tale about invisible oppression, the things that are overlooked or ignored in small communities, and the ways in which we are strong. It's about friendship. Discovering wisdom. Being courageous. Breaking free.

Place is also important in my novels. My narratives arise from my passion for wild landscapes and stories of the people who live in them. *The Orchardist's Daughter* came from my love of southern Tasmania: the apple orchards, tall forests, savage mountains and pearly light. I wanted to explore the timber-cutting and conservation issues of the region, the complexities and characters of small interconnected communities, the journey towards self-determination, finding solace and renewal in nature.

This book is for anyone who, like me, has ever felt a little different or separate from everyone else, and who has struggled to find their place in life. It's for anyone who loves nature, and feels humbled by forests or mountains. It's for those who are fascinated by human nature, our need for connection, and how friendship and kindness have the power to transform us.

## About the author



Born in Melbourne and raised in the Dandenong Ranges riding horses and writing stories, Karen went on to study veterinary science at Melbourne University before working in practice for several years.

She completed a PhD in wildlife health, and since then she has worked on a wide range of Australian native animals, including kangaroos. Karen loves landscapes, wild places, people and animals.

She is the author of three novels: *The Stranding* (2008), the bestselling *The Lightkeeper's Wife* (2011) and *The Grass Castle*. She lives in Canberra with her husband and two children.

*Photo credit: Michelle Higgs*

## Praise for *The Lightkeeper's Wife*

'... an emotional, engrossing read, passionately told.' *Herald-Sun*

'Truly unforgettable reading.' *Woman's Day*





'It will take a lot of beating to remove this from my best book of the year! I loved it.' *Latitude*

'Deeply satisfying ... Viggers draws us in and makes us care.' *Country Style*

'Poignant and beautiful.' *Australian Women Online*

'Vivid, alive, dazzling.' *Courier-Mail*

## Conversation starters

- Leon moves to a new town to escape his family and start afresh. Is it ever really possible to begin again? How much are we bound by our pasts and our family?
- Leon has not only left his family behind, but also a place that he loves—Bruny Island. What are the complexities of leaving home and finding connection with a new place?
- Why are sporting teams so important in country towns?
- Miki is tightly controlled by her brother, Kurt, who places strict limits on her life. To what extent do family members have the right to control others? And when does duty become a form of oppression?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of small communities? Are things often ignored that should be addressed? How should sensitive issues be handled in a close-knit town where everyone knows each other? In what ways can we reach out to those who are oppressed?
- What did you think of the ending of the book? Were all your questions answered?
- How does Miki's friendship with Geraldine expand her mind and her life? Can we really learn about life through books?
- Why is Max a target for bullying? Why is it hard for young people to stand up for themselves? How can we protect children from bullying?
- Leon develops a strong relationship with his grandfather. How important are relationships with older relatives or friends in our lives?
- Belonging is a challenge for all three protagonists. What does each protagonist have to face to find themselves? What can we learn from their struggles? How can we relate their journeys to our own experiences?
- Both Miki and Leon love the natural world. How does a connection with nature help them cope with the challenges of life? How can we tap into nature to help ourselves?
- The forest is essential to the local community. What are the different perceptions of the forest and ways in which people value trees?
- Animals, both wild and tame, are important to all three protagonists. Discuss how relationships with animals help each character. Do animals help you?
- Miki fears the loss of wildness and freedom for her Tasmanian devils. Why is this so important to her?
- What do you consider to be basic elements of a fulfilling life? How do you define freedom?



## Just for fun

- Who would you cast in a screen adaptation of *The Orchardist's Daughter*?
- If you could have a chat with any character from the novel, who would it be and why? What would you like to ask them?
- Pick out a passage that strikes you as particularly moving or interesting and read it to the group.

## If you liked this book ...

We suggest the following:

*The Stranding*

*The Lightkeeper's Wife*

*The Grass Castle*

*The Sisters' Song* by Louise Allan

*The Far-Back Country* by Kate Lyons

*Small Blessings* by Emily Brewin

