

# READING GROUP NOTES

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## About the book

Kurt Stocker's Swiss childhood is dominated by strict and god-fearing parents. He enters a seminary with the intent of becoming a priest and making his parents proud of him, but struggles to adapt. Leaving this vocation behind, he marries Liesl and they eventually emigrate to Australia.

Decades later in small town Australia, Terry Riley feels drawn to convent life, despite her family's objections. At the convent she is haunted by a strange sickness and knows in time that she must return to a more conventional life. It is then she begins a relationship with the now divorced Kurt, who was once her high school teacher.

This is the story of an odd couple, of an older man and a younger woman in love with one another, but so damaged by their past lives that even a regular sexual relationship seems impossible. Beautiful in its frankness but disturbing in its examination of faith and human existence, this is a novel that is affectionate, haunting and ultimately unforgettable.

*'Truly bold, honest, tender and amazingly assured.'* Robert Drewe, 2018

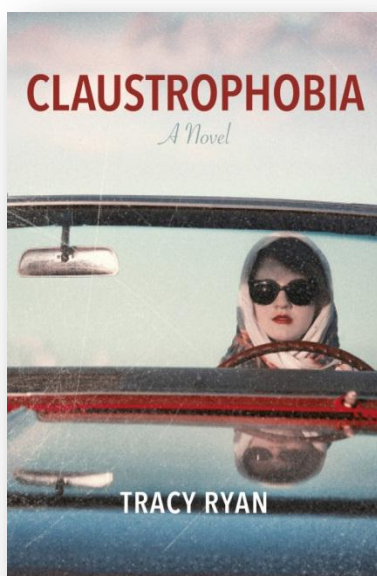
## About the author

Tracy Ryan has taught literature, creative writing and film at various universities in Australia and in England, and worked as a bookseller, editor and translator. Her writing has won many awards including the WA and Victorian Premier's Prizes.

Transit Lounge published her fourth novel *Claustrophobia* in 2015. The title was subsequently published in Italy by Newton Compton as *Un Vita Tranquilla*.

Tracy lives with her partner John Kinsella, and their son, in Toodyay, Western Australia.

## Previous works – Fiction



### Shortlisted for The Western Australian Premier's Literary Awards 2016

*'...a little book that will start big conversations.'* – 4 Stars  
Stefen Brazulaitis, *Books+Publishing*

*'Tracy Ryan does a brilliant job of conveying the psychological intensity and oddity of the situation.'*

Kerryn Goldsworthy, *The Age/Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 July 2014

*'Part love story and part psychological thriller, Claustrophobia is a book that shouldn't be missed.'*

<http://samstillreading.wordpress.com/2014/07/24/clostraphobia-by-tracy-ryan/>

*'Claustrophobia is a gripping domestic noir. It's convincing in the motivations of the characters and the deadpan sense of Perth that works through the narrative, and it's chilling in the way place and character combine to make the city and its people uncanny.'*

Daniel Jukes, *Westerly*

*'The novel evokes Perth so very well, from suburban life in the hills, to the hallways and cafes of UWA, as well as the bush town of Pemberton. There are too few novels set in Perth, and this one is convincingly grounded in it. It's possible to loosely associate it with the crime genre, and suggest that with the work of David Whish-Wilson and Felicity Young it begins to map out Perth as an increasingly plausible setting for crime fiction. On the subject of genre, the characters discuss the novels of Patricia Highsmith and Georges Simenon, perhaps a case of the novel wearing its influences proudly. These are the right reference points for a contemporary novel in the tradition of these two writers, with the fresh setting of Perth.'*

<https://nathanhobby.com>

*'Taut, tense and surprising ... Claustrophobia is a slow-burner with themes that lingered in my mind long after I put the book down. If obsessive attachment, isolation, betrayals, secrets and lies is the sort of thing that gets under your skin, give this one a go. It will hook you slowly, but when it does, it will reel you in tight.'*

<http://moniquemulligan.com>

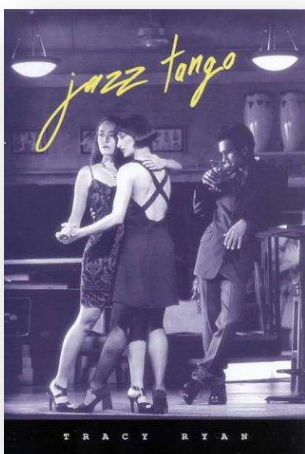
*'Claustrophobia is a smart and fast-paced hurtle through lust, obsession, and stultifying patterns of dependency and self-delusion. Written in a low-key, ironic style, Ryan borrows from tropes of crime fiction, in particular the novels of Patricia Highsmith, as well as the double-crossing figure of the femme fatale, to tell the story of Pen, a seemingly ordinary and slightly bored woman from the Perth hills.'*

Rose Lucas, *Australian Book Review*

## Previous works – Fiction [cont.]



*'Ryan's grasp of psychology is acute and her characterisations relentless and compelling.'*  
Rhyll McMaster, *Island*

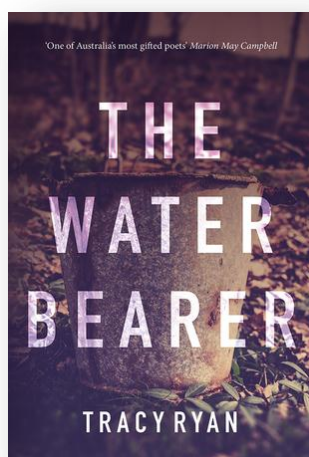


*'Tracy Ryan has ... an amazing insight into the core of the human interior with all its fears and possibilities.'*  
Susan Holmes, *Overland*

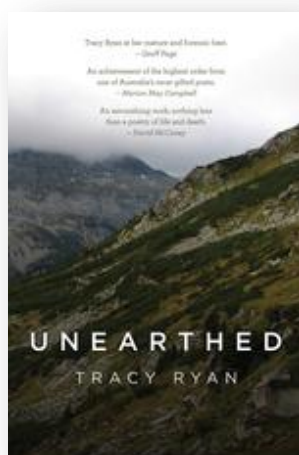


*'The book is an intertextual feast that can only gain depth the wider a pool of knowledge you have to draw from. This is a very personal book too, and it spoke to me so forcefully the first time I read it that it changed my reading patterns ... Vamp spoke to me in a manner so deep and so earnest that I read and re-read it countless times ... This book was a door opener.'*  
jilders50books

## Previous works – Poetry [selected]



*'Tracy Ryan is an award-winning poet whose latest collection, her ninth, is intelligent, challenging and deeply thought-provoking. Set across two hemispheres, Ryan's themes are many: relationship with the land, with others, with the body, with ideas, with religion, and most of all with water – the beauty of it and the lack of it. Her language is elegant, spare, and deeply considered, a highly crafted mix of poetic and simple, of direct and elusive. These poems will withstand many readings, and will stay with you long after the pages are closed.'* Writing WA, Jan 2018



*'The elegies and elegiac poems of Unearthed expose how death renders life precious and tragic. Because of death, life – lives – demands recognition. All grief settles "as the earth settles on an old and unmarked grave" (60), but for Ryan even a dead fox is "something / I have to remember, make room for" (83). The dead – or the living – require the respect of our attention, as does this humane and remarkable book.'* Maria Takolander, Cordite

*'Margaret Atwood once said, "A divorce is like an amputation; you survive, but there's less of you." I've always imagined this to be true, but my friend Tracy Ryan's collection of poetry, Unearthed, depicts divorce not as an amputation but a haunting. In the first section of the collection, "Karlsruhe", a series of connected poems follow a narrative of remembering. After fighting vivid dreams for two years, the narrator looks up her former husband only to discover he died two years ago. "You came like news on ships in former times / or like the stars' far light, already out." (We know instantly when the famous die; but it is the unfamous people we were once close to who stop existing without us knowing, and that is a difficult thing.) The haunting, of course, is intensified.'* <https://nathanhobby.com>

*'... ineffably moving, but also often witty and celebratory.'* The West Australian

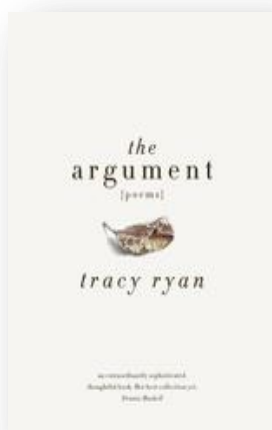
*'Tracy Ryan's Unearthed offers a sequence of poignant elegiac poems ...'* Weekend Australian

*'Once again, Ryan reveals herself as poet with both a clear sense of tradition – and a contemporary understanding of Ezra Pound's old injunction to "Make it new!"'* Geoff Page

*'An astonishing work; nothing less than a poetry of life and death.'* David McCooey

*'Ryan's moving and profound work suggests, as William Faulkner famously observed, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."'* Four stars. Books+Publishing

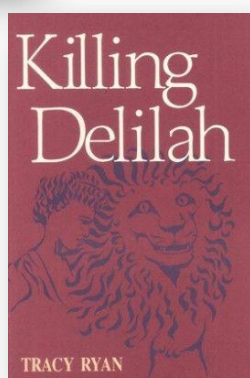
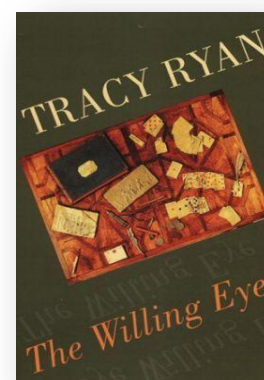
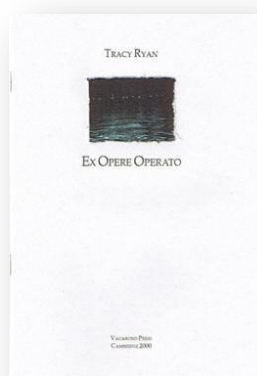
## Previous works – Poetry [selected, cont.]



*'The language of The Argument is taut, whittled down, spare... This is poetry richly grounded in the real, yet alive to its fluctuating uncertainty.'*  
Andrew Taylor



*'On a first reading, the accomplished poetry of Tracy Ryan seems spiky, colloquial, earthy and enjoyable. But the more subtle accomplishments of the poetry lie in wait on a second reading: the musicality, the careful crafting, an honouring of the traditions of poetry, the rhythms and experiences of the everyday and the bodily... Alliterative, demotic, formally playful, morally serious, the poetry of Scar Revision is craft and presence finely balanced.'*  
Lyn McCredden, Australian Book Review



## For discussion

- Consider the title – *We Are Not Most People* – did your interpretation of its meaning change as you progressed through this novel?
- Terry's story is written in the first person, whilst Kurt's is written in the third person. What effect does this have on the narrative? Which technique do you prefer? Discuss.
- 'Monsieur Stocker' once hinted to Terry that the other kids might like her better if she tried to get a few answers wrong now and then. Was this a fair suggestion? Do you think Terry's unpopularity stemmed from her intelligence, or from something else entirely? Discuss.
- Consider Kurt's parent's reaction to the fish he brought home. What do you think was the real reason they did not want to eat it?
- Compare and contrast Kurt's and Terry's attitudes to religion, and their reasons for joining their respective religious orders. Discuss.
- Consider the dole officer's attitude to Terry's education. Was he correct in thinking the subjects she studied gave her 'useless skills'? From what you know of subjects currently being offered to high school students – how 'useful' are they in the 'real world'.
- Compare Kurt's reaction to what the boys did to him 'up the hillside', with Leo's reaction. Whose did you find either surprising? Why? Discuss.
- Consider the book Pater Bruno gave Augustin to explain the homosexual practices of the priests, which Augustin then lent Kurt. Is Kurt correct in thinking that '*You could not have both your Weggli and your fiver; you could not have your cake as a Christian and eat it too as a pagan.*'? Are Pater Bruno and Augustin hypocrites? Discuss.
- How much self-awareness do you think Kurt really has? How accurate is it?
- Do you think Kurt's helplessness is genuine? Why/why not?
- If Kurt hadn't been expelled from the Missionshaus, do you think he would have ever left the priesthood? Why/why not?
- Compare and contrast Kurt's and Liesl's personalities.
- Consider the way Kurt behaves towards women throughout the book. What does this tell you about the way he really sees women? Discuss.
- Consider Kurt's sexual relationship with Liesl. Does he really believe Liesl to be '*too perfect, too fragile for his blundering*', and that he '*must treat her with care and respect*' if he didn't want to lose her, or are these just excuses for other issues that he does not want to admit? Discuss.
- Do you think Liesl is right to push Kurt into jobs he does not really want, once in Australia? Why/why not?

## For discussion [continued]

- Why do you think Kurt is so against having children? Later, when you learned he'd had a vasectomy, did you think it wrong for him to have done so? Discuss.
- Terry's mother believes Terry is joining the Carmelites to run away from life. Do you agree with her? Why/why not?
- How did you interpret Terry's time with the Carmelites? Did you think she really tried to follow the rules and regulations of the order?
- How do Kurt's, Liesl's and Terry's personalities and actions determine their chances of happiness? Do you think any of them are capable of being truly happy? Discuss.
- Did you interpret Terry's skin condition, when a novice, as a physical demonstration of her uncertainty and psychological state, or simply as a coincidence?
- After leaving their respective religious orders, both Kurt and Terry felt totally free from all aspects of religion. Terry, for example, states: *'When I ditched the idea of the convent, I ditched the whole lot. There might be a God, or there might not. Who knew? But he wasn't calling me anymore – if he ever had.'* Why do you think this is? Is faith – or the lack of it - directly proportional to the level of knowledge one has about the workings of a particular religion? Discuss.
- Kurt often does something because Liesl pushes him to – ie: painting, sitting for the education department's exam and so on. Later, when divorced, he still does things for her, even getting into more debt for her sake. Do you think he really believes *'It was hard for migrants ... Even if you divorced, you still had to look out for each other'*, or do you think he does as she asks because he still loved her?
- Discuss the symbolism of the crumbling paintings.
- Compare and contrast Liesl's and Terry's personalities. How different or similar are they, deep down? Discuss.
- Why do you think Liesl keep expecting Kurt to do things for her? Does she genuinely need help, does she still love him, is she manipulating him, or can she not let go? Discuss.
- Even though, after his experience with Marine, Kurt knows sex need not be painful for a woman, he still cannot have sex with Terry. Do you think he truly believes the issue is with the breaking a hymen, and that, should Terry get a doctor to break it, *'Afterwards, it wouldn't be such a big thing'*, or do you think he's in denial about a bigger problem? Discuss.
- At the beginning of the chapter titled 'Intermission', Ryan begins with *'Reader, in the winter of our third year of marriage...'* This literary device, called authorial intrusion, is when an author directly addresses the reader. Why did Ryan use this device at this particular point? What effect does it have on the narrative? Discuss.
- Consider the Epilogue. Was it the ending you expected? Why/why not? If not, how would you have wanted it to end?
- Re-consider the Prologue. Did knowing Terry would end up in the UK influence how you interpreted her story? Would you have foreseen this outcome for her, if there had been no Prologue? Discuss.



## Suggested reading

*Crimes of the Father* – Thomas Keneally [Random House Australia, 2016]

*Black Rock White City* – A.S. Patrić [Transit Lounge, 2015]3

*The Edge of Sadness* – Edwin O'Connor [Little Brown & Co., 1961]

*Lolita* – Vladimir Nabokov [Olympia Press, 1955]

*Fates and Furies* – Lauren Groff [Riverhead Books, 2015]

*The Convent* – Maureen McCarthy [Allen & Unwin, 2015 (YA)]

*The Karamazov Brothers* – Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ignat Avsey (Trans) [Oxford World's Classics, 2008 (1880)]

*Jane Eyre* – Charlotte Brontë [Penguin Classics, 2012 (1847)]

*We Are Not Most People*

Tracy Ryan

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