

'An enthralling novel
of passion, literature
and power.'

DOMINIQUE WILSON

The Queen's Apprenticeship

TRACY RYAN

READING GROUP NOTES

Contents: About the book [1] About the author [1] Previous works - Fiction [2]
Previous works - Poetry [4] For discussion [6] Suggested reading [8]

About the book

Two women from different worlds in Renaissance France cross paths in a way that changes both their lives.

One is Marguerite de Navarre, a King's sister. Powerful, privileged and widely admired, Marguerite must nonetheless marry where she is told to, regardless of her feelings, and – despite the thrilling new ideas of religious reform causing upheaval in France – must toe the line for the good of her brother's kingdom. Ever a risk-taker, she does what she can to protect her reformist friends. But she has always loved to write, and when disaster strikes in her personal life, she picks up her pen – but some of what she writes will get her into trouble.

The other is a cast out, itinerant child who longs to be a printer like her late father. Jehane goes dressed as a male by the name of Josse, at first for safety's sake and then by choice, fending off the risks of being alone, unprotected and born female, poor but trying to live in freedom. Eventually Josse joins a group of printers and publishers in Paris. Despite her suspicion of men, she comes to idolise one among them. But can they be 'true friends', and can she share her whole self with him?

Long before #MeToo, women were telling their 'unspeakable' stories, and these two, both rich and poor, are no exception. They come together in the most unexpected of ways. In *The Queen's Apprenticeship* one of our very best writers brings to fully realised and magnificent life a world of drama and intrigue.

'An enthralling novel of passion, literature and power, bringing to life the story of Marguerite de Navarre - an ardent defender of the arts - and in doing so also giving voice to those who were often disregarded in the dramas of the time.' Dominique Wilson, author of *Orphan Rock* and *The Yellow Papers*

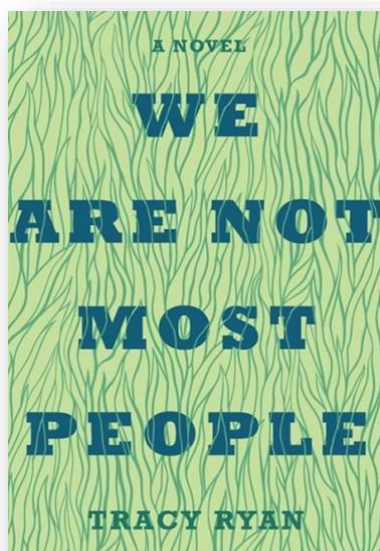
About the author

Tracy Ryan was born in Western Australia and grew up there as part of a large family. She has taught literature, creative writing and film at various universities in Australia and in England, and worked as a bookseller, editor and translator. She has also lived in Ohio in the USA. She currently teaches fiction writing at the University of Tübingen, Germany.

Tracy's poetry has won many awards. Her most recent collection is *The Water Bearer* (Fremantle Press 2018), and she is the author of five critically acclaimed novels. *Claustrophobia*, her fourth novel was published by Transit Lounge in 2014 and by Newton Compton Editori as *Una vita tranquilla* in 2015. It was shortlisted for the 2016 Western Australian Premier's Awards. Tracy speaks German, French and Italian as well as English. *The Queen's Apprenticeship* is the first in a series of three novels focussed on the Queens of the Navarre.

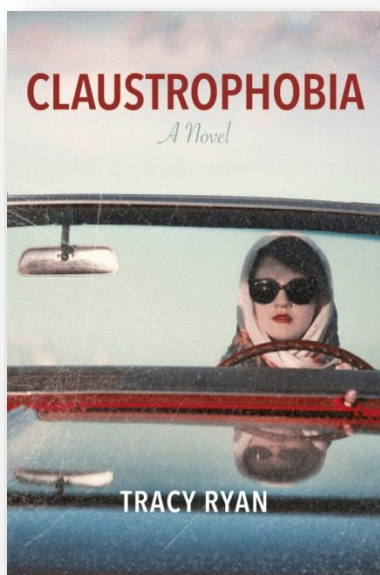
Tracy Ryan was the Western Australian Premier's Book Awards Fellowship Winner in June 2023 for a novel in progress focussed on the life of Mathilde Mauté, the wife of Paul Verlaine.

Previous works – Fiction



Ryan's writing is never less than compelling. As you progress through the novel and get to know Terry and Kurt better, you empathise with both of them even when they have their differences. And while you may become more cynical about certain aspects of organised religion, you gain a better understanding of human nature, and perhaps – just perhaps – become a bit better informed about the lives of others and a little more tolerant of those considered 'different'. This is what great fiction can accomplish, and it is what Ryan has achieved with this indelible novel. Erich Mayer, Arts Hub

Tracy Ryan has produced a quietly beautiful narrative that has many things to say about the world, both large and small. An experienced novelist and poet, Ryan is able to strip away the extraneous matter, leaving only those words, details and actions that serve the story. Brooke Dunnell, Westerly Magazine



Shortlisted for The Western Australian Premier's Literary Awards 2016

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

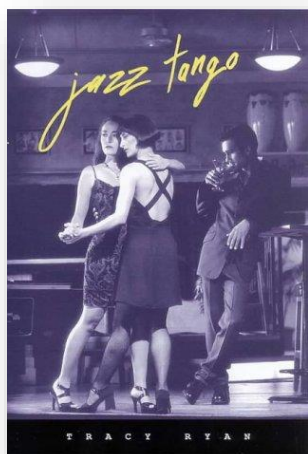
'Claustrophobia is a gripping domestic noir. It's convincing in the motivations of the characters and the deadpan sense of Perth that works through the narrative, and it's chilling in the way place and character combine to make the city and its people uncanny.'
Daniel Juckes, Westerly

'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*

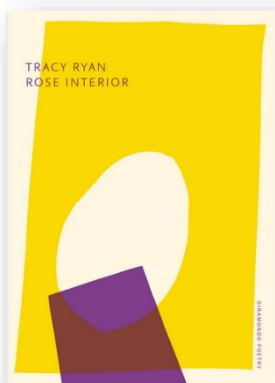


'Tracy Ryan has ... an amazing insight into the core of the human interior with all its fears and possibilities.'
Susan Holmes, *Overland*



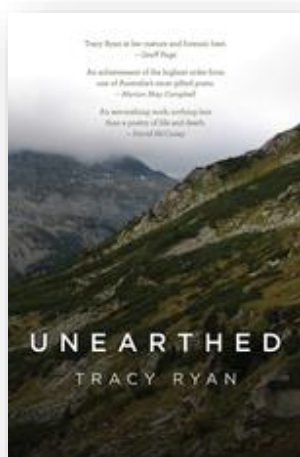
'The book is an intertextual feast that can only gain depth the wider a pool of knowledge you have to draw from. This is a very personal book too, and it spoke to me so forcefully the first time I read it that it changed my reading patterns ... Vamp spoke to me in a manner so deep and so earnest that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

Previous works – Poetry [selected]

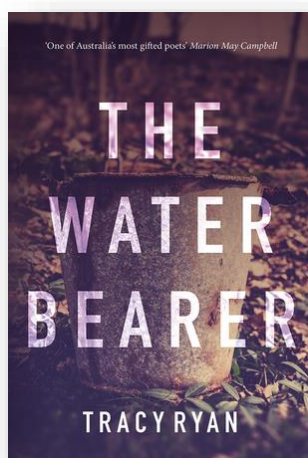


'Powerfully intimate and neo-sublime, the poems in Rose Interior are transformative explorations of inner space...Read this book for everything it yields – a whole, exquisite world. Cassandra Atherton

'Ryan is a brilliant interrogator of the unperceived: her poems are alert to semblances, echoes and inversions that others "wouldn't look twice at", making contiguous what might otherwise remain disconnected.'
Sarah Holland-Batt

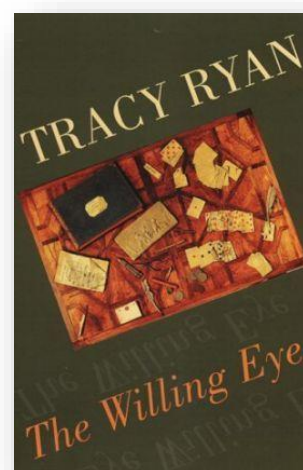
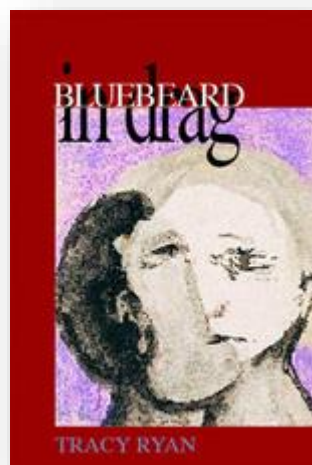
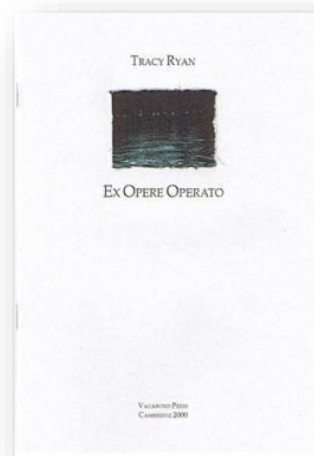
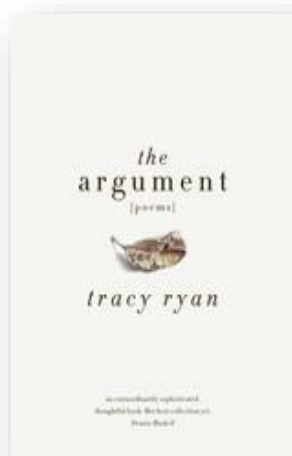


'The elegies and elegiac poems of Unearthed expose how death renders life precious and tragic. Because of death, life – lives – demands recognition. All grief settles "as the earth settles on an old and unmarked grave" (60), but for Ryan even a dead fox is "something / I have to remember, make room for"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



'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

Previous works – Poetry [selected, cont.]



For discussion

- Did you consider the excerpts from Marguerite of Navarre's *Heptaméron* at the beginning of the book before beginning the story? Do you feel they influenced how you then read this story?
- Jehane's story is told in the first-person point of view, while Marguerite's is told in the third person. What benefits or disadvantages do you think each point of view has? How do these dual narratives reflect on each other?
- When Jehane/Josse says 'My story is real: only you may judge whether it is also true' [p1], what did she mean?
- Do you think it fair that women like the widow Pernette [p3], and later Madame Arnould [p192] are allowed to continue their husbands' work, but single women cannot do men's work? Does something similar happen nowadays?
- When Thibault cuts Jehane's hair, she states 'I had been stripped of my honour' [p14]. What did she mean by that?
- Ever since she was a young girl, Marguerite believed she had influence on her brother François. Is she correct? How does her pride in this belief manifest itself throughout the story?
- Why is Louise so certain that it's God's will François becomes king of France? Is this conviction a result of her faith, her upbringing, or something else?
- Discuss the role of Triboulet, the court jester, and that of the poet Clément Marot at court. What advantages did they have, and what did they risk?
- There are excerpts from Louise of Savoy's *Journal* throughout this book. What effect do they have on the story?
- Bonnivet [and François] both explained their [rejected] advances to Marguerite by saying they were testing to see if she was 'a good woman'. Though Marguerite does not accept these explanations, when thinking of Bonnivet, she still 'did not really want people to think ill of him.' [p43]. Why would she think that? And do women still keep quiet in order to protect the reputation of men in their lives?
- How does Marguerite's opinion of her brother differ from her opinion of men in general?
- When Madame La Grande comforts those at Anne of Brittany's funeral, Marguerite thinks 'Each woman close to power was frozen in her own sphere – there was no real trust' [p50]. What did she mean by that?
- 'A court painter knew he would be punished if he produced an ugly portrait ... They showed you as they were paid to.' [p52] Discuss the effect of this through the ages. Is it any different to the photoshopped images of stars and social media influencers in today's society?
- Apart from wanting her son king, Louise also believed she was destined for greatness. How does her belief in her destiny manifest itself throughout the story? Are there any moments where her belief overwhelms her judgment?
- Why do you think the Parlement was so against printing the scriptures in translation? How can doing so be heresy?

For discussion [continued]

- Consider the sightings in the sky, the men who stole the Host's chalice turning to smoke, dreams of a mooncalf and a horned child with wings – all seen as presages. Also the SATOR square on the church wall. Discuss the role of the supernatural in 16th Century Europe.
- Marguerite often questions her religious teachings – for example, she asks how the same God could 'command Thou shalt not kill, and yet be a God of war?' [p95]. What role do faith and religion play during the 16th Century in Europe and England? Discuss the ways religion is used by the major players in this story, both in France and in England.
- Though Marguerite does her best to help when people appealed to her, she feels weak and useless [p104]. Is she? And if not, why would she think so?
- After Bonnivet attacked Marguerite in her bed, Madame de Châtillon tries to convince her *not* to tell her brother about it and seek retribution [p122]. She gives two reasons – one, that he will suffer more knowing he failed, and two, that people will not believe she didn't encourage him. Is she right in suggesting such a thing? Why/why not, and how does this link to the #MeToo movement?
- What did Francois mean when he said 'King was never far from fool' [p155]?
- Discuss Marguerite's attitude to her husband Charles of Alençon. Do you feel she gave him a chance, or was she against him from the beginning? Do you think he has reason to treat her as he does? How do her feelings for him differ from her feelings for Henri d'Albret, her second husband, and for the poet Clément Marot?
- When Marguerite's protégé Louis de Berquin is rearrested and her letters to her brother have no effect, Henri d'Albret tells Marguerite 'You see, Madame, you are not as all-powerful with your brother as you think.' [p220]. Just how much influence has she ever really have? Or is she just a pawn in the political games her mother and brother play?
- Though worlds apart, what similarities did you find between Jehane's and Marguerite's stories, and in particular regarding literature?
- Do you think Marin may have guessed Jehane's sex before the night she passed out at the tavern [p249]?
- Compare and contrast Jehane's feelings for Isotta to her feelings for Marin. Which do you think are more 'real'?
- Who do you think had more value at the time the story is set – women or children? Explain your answer, considering both the highborn and the lowborn.
- It's clear that men have a lot of power when it comes to shaping the women's destiny. But which female character did you think had the most control over her life?
- What did you think of the ending? Was Marguerite right in insisting Jehane make amends with her mother?
- *The Queen's Apprenticeship* is the first volume of a trilogy. Will you want to read the second book, which is about Jeanne d'Albret, Marguerite's daughter?

Suggested reading

The *Wolf Hall* trilogy [*Wolf Hall* (2009), *Bring up the Bodies* (2012), *The Mirror & the Light* (2020)] – Hilary Mantel [HarperCollins Australia]

The Marriage Portrait – Maggie O'Farrell [Headline Publishers, 2022]

A Place of Greater Safety – Hilary Mantel [HarperCollins Publishers 2007 (1992)]

Hamnet – Maggie O'Farrell [Headline Publishers, 2021]

In the Shadow of Queens: Tales from the Tudor Court – Alison Weir [Headline Publishers, 2022]

The Other Boleyn Girl – Philippa Gregory [HarperCollins, 2011]

The Confessions of Catherine de Medici – C.W. Gortner [Hodder Paperbacks, 2011]

The King's Witch – Tracy Borman [Hodder Paperbacks, 2019]

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95 Stephen St

Yarraville

Victoria 3013

Australia

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