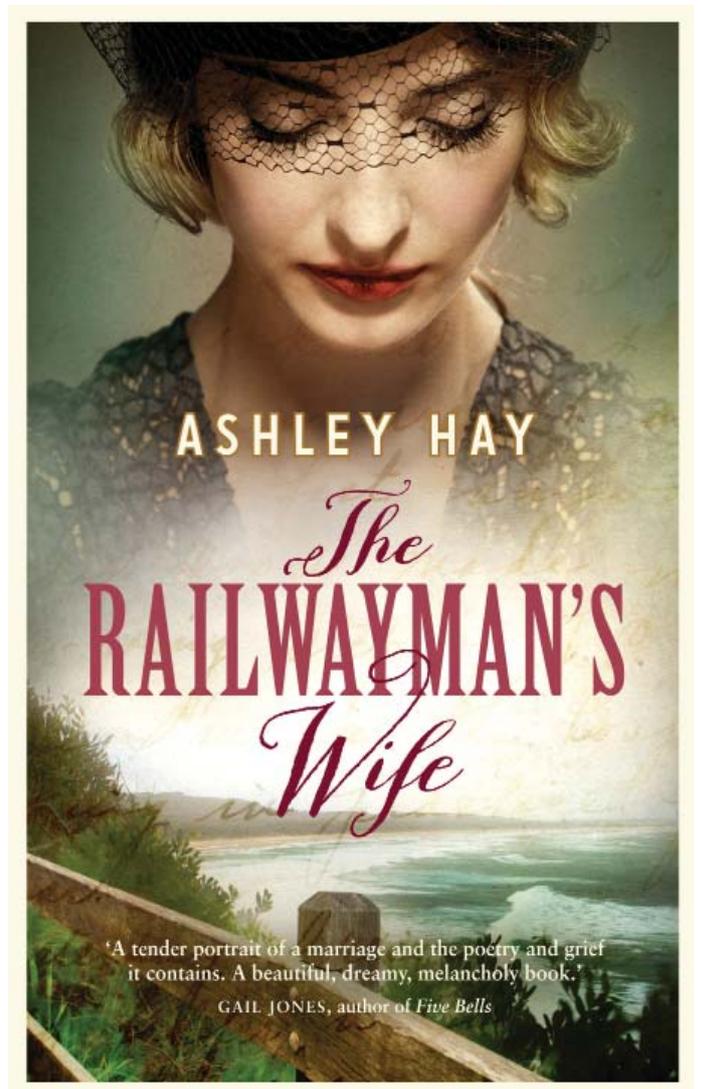


ALLEN & UNWIN



# READING GROUP NOTES

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## About the book

In a small town on the land's edge, in the strange space at a war's end, a widow, a poet and a doctor each try to find their own peace, and their own new story.

In Thirroul, in 1948, people chase their dreams through the books in the railway's library. Anikka Lachlan searches for solace after her life is fractured by a single random act. Roy McKinnon, who found poetry in the mess of war, has lost his words and his hope. Frank Draper is trapped by the guilt of those his treatment and care failed on their first day of freedom. All three struggle with the same question: how now to be alive.

Written in clear, shining prose and with an eloquent understanding of the human heart, *The Railwayman's Wife* explores the power of beginnings and endings, and how hard it can be sometimes to tell them apart. It's a story of life, loss and what comes after; of connection and separation, longing and acceptance. Most of all, it celebrates love in all its forms, and the beauty of discovering that loving someone can be as extraordinary as being loved yourself.

A story that will break your heart with hope.

## About the author

Ashley Hay is the author of five previous books including *Gum, Museum* (with visual artist Robyn Stacey) and *The Body in the Clouds* - her first novel, which was shortlisted for a number of prizes including categories in the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the New South Wales and West Australian Premier's Awards, and longlisted for the 2011 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

A former literary editor of *The Bulletin*, she contributes to a number of publications including *The Monthly*, *Australian Geographic*, and *The Australian*, and her essays and short stories have appeared in volumes including *Brothers and Sisters* (2009), various issues of the *Griffith Review*, *Best Australian Essays* (2003), *Best Australian Short Stories* (2012), and *Best Australian Science Writing* (2012).

She lives in Brisbane.

## Reviews & Quotes

'Ashley Hay's beautiful romance of grief and love set in the escarpment landscape that once enchanted D.H. Lawrence will come to speak for the south coast in the same way that Delia Falconer's *The Service of Clouds* speaks for the Blue Mountains. Everything about this novel – sudden loss, unexpected love, misdirected hope and desire, as well as the mysterious power of the written word and the candescence of the coastal landscape itself – is expressed with a profound understanding of every nuance of emotion. An extended meditation on 'the limitless surprise of being here', to quote from the poem that is central to the story, *The Railwayman's Wife* illuminates the deepest places of the human heart.' - Debra Adelaide, author of *The Household Guide to Dying*

'This is a heart-crunching novel about reading and writing, dreaming and hoping, loving and taking flight. It's been a while since I felt so deeply affected by a novel...' - Paula Grunseit, *Books + Publishing* (awarded a 5 star rating)

'A tender portrait of a marriage and the poetry and grief it contains. A beautiful, dreamy, melancholy book' - Gail Jones, author of *The Five Bells*

## For discussion

- ☞ In Paula Grunseit's review of *The Railwayman's Wife*, she states 'Many rhythms form the soundtrack to this story – the sounds of the ocean, the words of great poets and writers, the changing views in a kaleidoscope, and the constant presence of trains.' Discuss Grunseit's comment – how do these sounds and sights punctuate the novel, and bracket the major events within?
- ☞ Consider the following quote: '...Mac raised his cup and paused – the smallest toast – that was marriage, he thought, remaking yourself in someone else's image. And who knew where the truth of it began or would end?' *The Railwayman's Wife*, p. 169. Do you agree with Mac's interpretation of marriage?
- ☞ In response to Isabel's question about where Mac is after death, along with fallen soldiers, Annika states: 'It's probably like your kaleidoscope: you look at one piece of space, and every tiny twist or turn multiplies that into somewhere new – somewhere different. More than enough room for everyone's version of everyone to fit in somewhere, to be doing different things we all think they ought to be doing.' *The Railwayman's Wife*, p. 175. Discuss Annika's thoughts and feelings when confronted with information and anecdotes about Mac after his death.
- ☞ Both Mac and Roy think of Annika as angel. Why do you think this is so?
- ☞ What do you make of the conversation between Dr Frank Draper and Annika in the library, on their first meeting? (pp. 99 – 102)
- ☞ Consider Roy's poem, 'Lost World' (the poem appears in its entirety pp. 208 – 210). Do you think it is a nexus between the world he has seen torn apart by war, and what he has found in Thirroul?
- ☞ Annika carries *Kangaroo* 'like a literary Baedeker' (page 21), using it to identify places around Thirroul. Discuss the comfort she gains from using literature as a guide.
- ☞ Discuss the effects of the war on Roy McKinnon and Dr Frank Draper.

## Suggested Reading

### Novels:

*Kangaroo* – D.H. Lawrence

*Jane Eyre* – Charlotte Brontë

*Foal's Bread* – Gillian Mears

*The Service of Clouds* – Delia Falconer

*In Falling Snow* – Mary-Rose MacColl

*Currawalli Street* – Christopher Morgan

*The Body in the Clouds* – Ashley Hay

### Poetry:

*Everyone Sang* – Siegfried Sassoon

*How Do I Love Thee?* – Elizabeth Barrett Browning

*On Being Asked for a War Poem* – W.B. Yeats

*Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven* – W.B. Yeats

*History of the Day* – Stephen Edgar

*'Over the Brazier* – Robert Graves