

House of Longing

TARA CALABY



About the book

Charlotte has always known she is different. Where other young women see their destiny in marriage and motherhood, the reclusive Charlotte wants only to work with her father in his stationery business; perhaps even run it herself one day. Then Flora Dalton bursts through the shop door and into Charlotte's life—and a new world of baffling desires and possibilities seems to open up to her.

But Melbourne society of the 1890s is not built to embrace unorthodoxy. When tragedy strikes and Charlotte is unmoored by grief, she finds herself admitted to Kew Lunatic Asylum 'for her own safety'.

There she learns that women enter the big white house on the hill for many reasons, not all of them to do with lunacy. That her capacity for love, loyalty and friendship is greater than she had ever understood. And that it will take all of these things—along with an unexpected talent for guile—to extract herself from the care of men and make her way back to her heart's desires.

A compulsively readable historical romance, *House of Longing* combines an effortless instinct for narrative with impeccable research, lightly worn. *House of Longing* is the debut of a major talent.

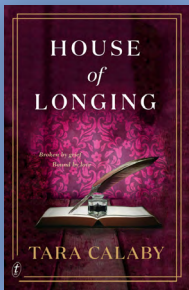
About the author

Tara Calaby lives in Gippsland with her wife and far too many books. She is currently a PhD candidate at La Trobe University, researching the social worlds of women in Victorian lunatic asylums. In

her free time, she enjoys playing video games, attempting to learn Danish, and patting other people's dogs. *House of Longing* is her debut novel.

Discussion questions

1. In the institution, Kate tells Charlotte not to 'trouble [herself] with fairness' (p137). None of her life so far has been fair really, and in some ways her time in the ward merely reveals to Charlotte the depths of unfairness experienced by other women. Discuss the way that this changes her outlook going forward and leads to her actions at the very end of the book.
2. In one way or another Charlotte and all the women in the book are at the whim of men. Discuss where they are able to find freedom from this (if at all) and consider this in contrast to the lives of women today. What's changed?
3. Discuss the setting of the book and the way that asylums were used to curtail women's freedom and emotions. Consider this against Flora's life of privilege and control – what does freedom mean in each of these contexts? Who has more of it and why?
4. 'You could never feel cast adrift as she did,' Charlotte thinks (p144) 'when you had a career to anchor you'. What freedoms does a career offer Charlotte? Does this hold true for all the women in the novel?
5. Early in the novel, Flora says to Charlotte 'I wish...', leaving the sentence unfinished. Charlotte replies 'I wish too.' (p82). What do you think each of them wish in this moment?



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Why are they unable to voice it? Do they ever get what they want?

6. How does the novel explore themes of power and control through gender and class?
7. What happens in the asylum that allows Charlotte to see a future for herself again?
8. Charlotte 'had been taught to pity those in poor circumstances, not to respect or uplift them, and she had lived most of her life assuming that women who were destitute or infamous were that way largely by choice.' Would Charlotte have ever reconsidered this position without experiencing for herself the realities of class and gender segregation and an accompanying lack of agency?
9. Why does Charlotte feel particularly compelled to help Mary? Compare this to the way that Miss Collins' treatment of Mary shifts from friendliness to prejudice after realising that Mary doesn't feel 'ashamed and penitent' (p242). Does Mary need to be saved?
10. What do you think the novel says about grief – where it comes from, and the way we bear it?