

# Picnic at Hanging Rock

Joan Lindsay

ISBN 9781922268310

FICTION, B-FORMAT PAPERBACK

[www.textpublishing.com.au/book-clubs](http://www.textpublishing.com.au/book-clubs)



## PRaise for *Picnic at Hanging Rock*

'In the seemingly limitless pantheon of gone-girl literature, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* might take the prize for best setting...It's a proto-*Virgin Suicides*, dreamy and haunting, animated by a sense of slightly sickening erotic mystery.'

NEW YORKER

'Deliciously horrific.'

OBSERVER

## ABOUT JOAN LINDSAY

Joan Lindsay was born in Melbourne in 1896. Originally trained as a visual artist, she turned to writing after her marriage to Sir Daryl Lindsay in 1922. Her first novel, *Through Darkest Ponderay* (1936), was a parody of popular travel books. Her second, *Time without Clocks*, wasn't published until nearly thirty years later; her most famous, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, was released in 1967 and made into a film in 1975. She died in 1984.

## A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO *PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK*

Reading Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is a rite of passage for many Australian readers. While most will have encountered their local landscape, fewer will be familiar with it as depicted here: beautiful and otherworldly, tinged with menace. A haunted country.

First published in 1967, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is pervaded by a sense of dream-like mystery that renders it timeless; indeed, time—our understanding of it, its relation to place, concepts of linear and abstract time—is at the heart of the novel. Where did the three girls and their teacher from Appleyard College go when they disappeared—or is that the wrong question?

For all the novel's timelessness, the contemporary reader cannot encounter *Picnic at Hanging Rock* outside of their own context. Issues that might not have been part of the collective discourse at the time of the novel's publication might, for those reading through a contemporary lens, be glaring in their omission. What does the absence of an Indigenous perspective in the novel signify to a contemporary audience? What does this novel tell us about the history of class and privilege in Australian society? To what extent did—and do—women have agency over their destinies? Or are these the wrong questions—should we be reading the novel simply as a powerful, enduring mystery?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Reading this novel half a century after its first publication, what omissions do you notice? What do these omissions suggest about Australian society, in the 1960s and today?
2. True-crime books and podcasts are very popular. What draws people to these stories? Is it as simple as curiosity about an unsolved mystery?
3. There has been endless debate since the publication of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* about whether the story is based on fact. Why do you think Lindsay chose to present the novel as a historical account?
4. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is an example of Australian Gothic literature; several books—such as Felicity McLean's *The Van Apfel Girls Are Gone* (2019) and Ursula Dubosarsky's *The Golden Day* (2011)—were inspired by it. Why do you think this book has transfixed readers and writers for more than fifty years?
5. Indigenous Australians were given the right to vote in 1962. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was published in

1967. How would the inclusion of Indigenous people and history change Lindsay's novel? What new ideas would be brought to the forefront?

6. The girls at Appleyard College are accorded esteem in line with their parents' wealth and status. Mrs Appleyard wishes that the dull Edith or orphaned Sara had been the ones to vanish rather than the heiress Irma or beautiful Miranda. Can you recall a missing-persons case that received greater publicity due to the social status of the victim? What are the implications of this?
7. One of the eyewitnesses to the girls' disappearance initially forgets that it was four girls who travelled up the rock, not three. 'What made you forget there were four of 'em, do you think?' asks the detective (p.67). It is implied that the witness forgets Edith because she is less attractive than the other girls. Are women today disadvantaged by their physical appearance? Are they forgotten or erased on the basis of looks?
8. 'In each other's presence, neither young man was conscious of his shortcomings, if such they were.' (p.81) The friendship between Michael Fitzhubert and Albert Crundall is one of particular affinity and intimacy; recent adaptations of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* are heavy with gay subtext. What facets of meaning are opened up through a queer reading of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*?
9. For many readers, their first encounter with the story of the *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is watching Peter Weir's much-lauded 1975 adaptation. It has also been adapted for TV, theatre and radio. What about the story lends itself well to adaptation to the screen? What do you think is better rendered on the page?
10. In a chapter excised before publication, it is suggested that Miranda, Marion and Miss Greta McCraw travel in time through a crevice in the rock. Why do you think this chapter was cut? Would you prefer the mystery was resolved, or is the ending better for being ambiguous?

[Click here](#) to listen to Text editor, Alaina Gougoulis, and Miles Franklin shortlisted author Romy Ash discuss *Picnic at Hanging Rock* for 2SER.