

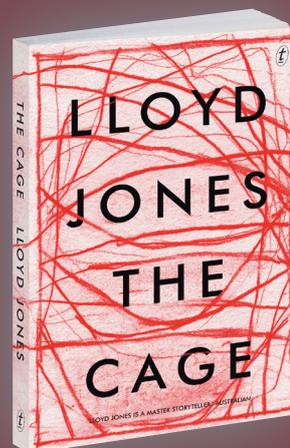
The Cage



Lloyd Jones

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FICTION, TRADE PAPERBACK

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Praise for Lloyd Jones and *The Cage*

'A dark fable of imprisonment.'

Sydney Morning Herald, What to Read in 2018

'It is a thought-provoking and affecting book for readers of literary fiction where the morally questionable appears very ordinary.'

Books + Publishing, FOUR STARS

'Lloyd Jones has plotted a fine and moving story with enormous compassion, emotional depth and tender insight into humanity.'

Sunday Telegraph on *Hand Me Down World*

'As compelling as a fairytale—beautiful, shocking and profound.'

Helen Garner on *Mister Pip*

About Lloyd Jones

Lloyd Jones has written novels, short stories and a memoir. He won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for his novel *Mister Pip*. His other books include *Hand Me Down World* and *A History of Silence*. Lloyd lives in Wellington, New Zealand.

A reader's introduction to *The Cage*

When two strangers arrive in a small town after an unexplained catastrophe, they are first treated as people to be welcomed, then objects of suspicion, and then not as people at all.

Why, ask the townspeople, won't the strangers explain what happened to them? Why won't they solve the mystery that they themselves represent? Why don't the strangers care about the townspeople who are trying to look after them? And, the townspeople quickly

extrapolate, why do these strangers want to harm them, these people who are only trying to do the right thing?

Trapped in a cage that is as a larger version of the sculpture they made to represent their experience, the strangers become increasingly dehumanised, even though, as they are desperate to remind a sightseeing visitor, 'we are just like you'.

The reason for their continued imprisonment (they did, after all, climb into the cage of their own volition) is never quite clear, though various explanations are half-voiced: to make them reveal what they know; for their own protection; because they are not human (who would live in such filth?). The strangers find themselves trapped not just by the physical structure of the cage but by the workings of the non-decisions made by an arbitrary Trust.

We are told the story through the perspective of a narrator known only by his nickname Sport. Tasked with observing the strangers without intervening, he feels a sympathy with them and struggles to understand the situation. Feeling impotent, he finds himself in a moral quandary, and does nothing to change anything.

The Cage is an allegory about many of the things wrong with today's world: the plight of refugees; our ability to turn people into the 'Other' and treat them with cruelty or indifference; and our propensity to turn the other way and ignore desperately unpleasant realities. It will provoke discussion both of the novel itself and of the world that it so explicitly reflects.

Questions for discussion

1. Why don't the strangers tell the townspeople their story (or their names)? Can't they or won't they?
2. Why don't we know the narrator's name? Does his nickname tell us anything about him?

3. The strangers tell the narrator he is not like 'them', (p. 93). Are they being truthful or hopeful or strategic when they say this to him? Why is the narrator so ambivalent about hearing this? Do you agree that he is different from the other townspeople and visitors?
4. 'At what point did I know what was going to happen? ... Why did I not do anything to prevent it?' What are the answers to these questions? Are there answers? Is the narrator more or less complicit than other characters? Do you have sympathy for him?
5. What do you think the Trustees actually intended? Were they convinced by their own rhetoric?
6. Are the townspeople, and especially the Trustees, malicious or indifferent towards the strangers? Does it matter whether their cruelty comes from malice or indifference?
7. Is the imprisonment of the strangers just an allegory, or is it a plausible scenario?
8. 'If the strangers truly cared, they would make more of an effort,' the narrator says. 'The observation won't go away, and takes us easily to the next thought. Why do they wish us harm?' (p. 103). How does this thought process happen? Is it recognisable?
9. The narrator asks: 'Why is it impossible for anyone to see that but for the cage they would be just like anyone else?' (p. 105). Why is it so easy to see people as Other?
10. The narrator tells us about a chase of the strangers through town. How does a mob mentality work? Have you ever found yourself in a mob like this?
11. What do you think of Jones' comparisons of people to sheep, especially in light of the use of 'sheeple' as an insult in Internet trolling? Who are the sheep? And what does the fact that Mole is temporarily freed to save the lives of sheep say?
12. The cage is meant to become 'a space for one and all to step inside where they could grasp for themselves that which mere words could not describe.' (p. 46). Does it, in some way, become that? Is the novel itself also designed to achieve such an aim? Does it?
13. What do you think of Dawn's decision to leave the hotel for as long as the strangers are caged? Does that decision make her more moral than other characters, especially the Trustees?
14. The strangers cannot or will not use words to explain what happened to them. Yet the narrator uses words to record what he observes. What does the book say about the power and limitations of words?
15. The narrator talks about patterns several times, including when the strangers first reveal their wire creation. Why are people so compelled to find patterns? How do we react when there are no patterns to be found? And what if there is a pattern, but we can't decipher its meaning?
16. What is the importance of land to this novel and its subject?
17. What insight does the flight above the land give the narrator?
18. When the narrator and the strangers fly over the land, the narrator feels fear that is bewildering because there is nothing to attach it to (p. 33). What is the nature of fear in *The Cage*? What about hope?
19. Mr Byrd asks, 'should we be doing this?' (p. 197). Why has no one asked this before? Why doesn't it change anything? Why isn't the question something that would cause the previously leading sheep to follow the new direction?
20. What is the answer to the narrator's question: 'What is the point of sympathy that does not produce a change of circumstances?' (p. 88).