

A Week in the Life of Cassandra Aberline

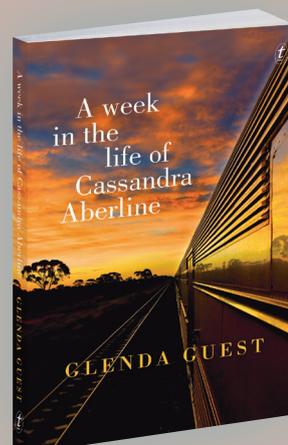


Glenda Guest

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Praise for Glenda Guest and *A Week in the Life of Cassandra Aberline*

'This book will echo in your memory.'
Herald Sun, on *Siddon Rock*

'Delights and shocks with its spiritual energy and refreshingly original voice.'
Courier-Mail, on *Siddon Rock*

'The book shows how magic, fantasy and creativity can burst out in the most apparently mundane of lives and places...Here is a writer whose talent is as magical as her genre.'
Sydney Morning Herald, on *Siddon Rock*

About Glenda Guest

Glenda Guest grew up in the wheat belt of Western Australia and now lives in Merimbula, New South Wales. Her first novel, *Siddon Rock*, won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book in 2010.

A Reader's Introduction to *A Week in the Life of Cassandra Aberline*

I should like to understand myself properly before it is too late...

Midway through the novel, Cassandra Aberline recalls this line from Sartre's existentialist classic *Nausea*, neatly expressing the impulse that animates this beautifully structured and engrossing story of memory, guilt and loss.

Recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and in fear of the loss of memory and control it promises, Cassie resolves to interrogate the life she left behind forty-five years earlier, when she fled her childhood home in rural WA to live in Sydney. Recreating that long rail journey, Cassie now takes the Indian Pacific westward across the

country, using the time to explore in her mind the places and events of her youth: her complicated family life, her self-discovery in Sydney, her passion for Shakespeare and the stage, and her relationship with the Blanchard family, especially the twins Coe and Dion.

Author Glenda Guest skilfully combines a number of classical dramatic themes in this captivating novel – and these are perhaps hinted at in the novel's character names, such as Cassandra, the princess of Troy whose prophecies were destined never to be believed. The unique ambiguities of twinhood, a theme beloved of Greek and Roman dramatists (as well as Shakespeare in *The Comedy of Errors*), are explored in wonderful depth in the novel, although here they are deployed for tragic rather than comic ends.

The problematic nature of identity sits at the core of this novel. Are we the people we think we are? If our experiences create us, and our memory of those experiences sustains us, then what is left when memory disintegrates? Can we ever really know ourselves? And what of those around us?

Questions for discussion

1. *A Week in the Life of Cassandra Aberline* depicts a journey into the past, figuratively but in a sense also literally. Why do you think the author chose a rail journey as the frame for her story?
2. After reading the novel, which twin do you believe survived the war in Vietnam and returned to marry Helen Aberline? Is there doubt in your mind? If so, why?
3. Cassie decides early in the book that 'memory cannot exist outside life, nor life outside memory, and memory itself is a pot of facts, impressions, and imaginings churning together into a rich and strange soup, and who knows what is true or not'

- (page 27). Do you agree, or do you feel there is such a thing as objective truth?
4. On page 100 Cassie thinks of 'the dam wall she has so carefully built between [her] early life and this one'. Why is she now breaking that dam wall down?
 5. What do Cassie's encounters with her fellow passenger Jack reveal about her? Why does she decide to share her secrets with him?
 6. People respond to loss and the grief it brings in different ways. How do the various characters in this novel handle the traumas they encounter?
 7. Cassie tells her acting students: 'That's what good actors do – work from the details to create a believable persona, to make the watcher believe the character on the stage is true' (page 188). What ironies are there in the fact that Cassie is an actor, expert at inhabiting the lives of others?
 8. We get to know Helen largely through Cassie's memories of their childhood and youth at Home Ground. When Helen meets Cassie for dinner towards the end of the book, did your perceptions of her change? If so, did this affect your sympathy for her as a character?
 9. Cassie is certain that the twin who returns from Vietnam is Coe, and that he then chooses to take the place of his dead brother, Dion. Why would Coe do this? Is there a single reason, or more than one?
 10. After Cassie had an abortion as a young woman, she 'promised herself she would always be in charge of her life'. In what other ways does Cassie's drive for self-determination reveal itself throughout the novel?
 11. The crucial scene of the book comes when Cassie and Coe/Dion make an agreement in the kitchen at Omorfi Thea (pages 183–84). But Cassie's memory of the moment is unreliable: did the surviving twin entice her to leave by offering money, or did she blackmail him? What do you think actually happened? And does it matter which memory is truthful and which is not?
 12. Occasionally in the novel an observational voice appears, commenting on the characters, their feelings and their actions. (For example, on page 195: 'Oh, Cassie, how will you answer that?') Is this the author addressing her creations? Is it Cassie speaking to herself? Or something/someone else again?
 13. 'Do you know that by the time you were forty you didn't have a cell in your body that hadn't been renewed?' Jack asks Cassie (page 162). He believes that the person you are today 'is not the one you were at eighteen or twenty' and that it is 'only our memory that ties us to those young selves'. Is Jack correct, or is there more to it than this?
 14. Why does Cassie decide not to visit Coe/Dion in the book's final pages? Is it purely because she had promised him she would never return? What other reason might she have?
 15. Mary Blanchard, we learn on page 202, always believed, like Cassie, that it was Coe who had survived and returned from Vietnam. Why do you think she remained silent and let events take their course?
 16. 'Desire does not recognise time,' Jack writes on the card he gives Cassie when they part. Do you think she agrees with him? Do you agree?
 17. In Cassie's plan on page 13, she sets herself a goal: to 'coolly examine the events leading to [her] decision to leave, and work out if she had been wrong'. By the book's close, has she discovered what she wanted to know?