

The Rain Heron

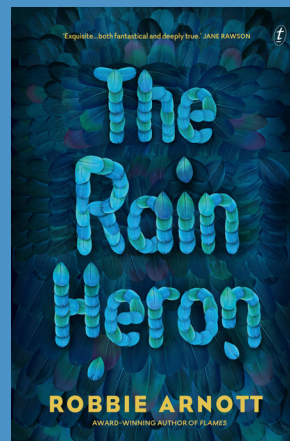


Robbie Arnott

ISBN 9781922268778

FICTION, TRADE PAPERBACK

www.textpublishing.com.au/book-clubs



PRaise FOR *THE RAIN HERON*

'Fantastical and deeply true.'

JANE RAWSON

'An intoxicating fable from an extraordinary imagination.'

ANNA SPARGO-RYAN

'Completely magnificent—a magical thing.'

ROBERT LUKINS

'A soaring feat of the imagination.'

BRAM PRESSER

'Exquisitely beautiful and terrifying, the likes of which I have never seen in Australian literature.'

JOCK SERONG

'This is a book full of heart—it's so richly imagined, inventive and beautifully written.'

J. P. POMARE

'A beautiful novel about love, violence and redemption.'

LAURA ELVERY

'Unlike anything I have ever read.'

RUTH GILLIGAN

ABOUT ROBBIE ARNOTT

Robbie Arnott was a 2019 *Sydney Morning Herald* Best Young Novelist and won the Margaret Scott Prize in the 2019 Tasmanian Premier's Literary Prizes. His widely acclaimed debut, *Flames* (2018), was shortlisted for a Victorian Premier's Literary Award, a New South Wales Premier's Literary Award, a Queensland Literary Award, the Readings Prize for New Australian Fiction and Not the Booker Prize. He lives in Hobart.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the first section of the novel is called Part 0, rather than Part 1? Is this short section a fable that long predates the action of the book, possibly an oral history or origin story, or could it be a recollection by one of the book's characters, or something else again?
2. Ren's interactions with Barlow and his son on the mountain suggest a post-capitalist return to a barter economy. But the trades they make are rarely equal; instead, the parties are offering each other kindness and safety. Does this make the mercenary Zoe Harker, with her cruel tactics to subjugate people and the environment, seem even more terrifying when she finally breaks the will of Ren, the peaceful hermit?
3. The shapeshifting translucent bird of the title is made of water; in Robbie Arnott's first novel, *Flames* (2018), a shapeshifting man is made of fire. What role do the elements play in *The Rain Heron*?
4. Zoe Harker says her leaders want the rain heron because 'Men want things. They hear about something and pretty soon they're convinced it belongs to them' (p. 166): what do you think motivates the generals to try to capture the rain heron?
5. Daniel says to Zoe Harker, 'What you've done for me—for the other men as well—you could hit us all, a couple of times a day for a few months at least, and we'd...' (p. 165). What, if anything, does *The Rain Heron* say about gender and gender roles, and about the relationship between gender and violence?
6. Ren mentions a son she fell out with after the coup, before she fled to live alone on the mountain. Is it possible that Alec, whom we meet in Part 4

and who talks to Zoe Harker about falling out disastrously with his mother, is that son? Discuss why this link might not have been made explicit in the text.

7. Is the Northerner in Part 2 a purely malign character? Is it possible that he did want to help the people of the port—that he knew the changes flowing from climate change and the faraway coup would soon radically alter their economy, and he could help them?
8. The first four sections of the novel are told in the third person. In the fifth and final section, Part 4, the point of view switches to first person: Zoe Harker is the narrator. Did you notice this switch, and did it affect your perspective of Zoe, who slowly becomes a more sympathetic character after she witnesses Alec's death and sets off to return the rain heron to its mountain home, instead of delivering it to her superiors? Are her years of cruelty mitigated by her later recognition of them, and to what extent is this influenced by our knowing that she herself suffered great trauma?
9. Were you surprised when Ren reappeared at the end of the novel—had you assumed that she died on the mountain? She has lost the ability to speak, yet her spirit seems undaunted. Zoe Harker, by contrast, lost an eye to the rain heron and has been profoundly affected by this. Discuss the portrayals of physical and mental strength in these characters: are they very different people or, as Ren implies, perhaps more similar than Zoe cares to realise?
10. *The Rain Heron* describes a world irrevocably altered by climate change—principally in Part 2, where the unnamed port city Zoe Harker grew up in loses the driver of its economy, farmed squid ink, and falls into disrepair. Later in the novel, though, Daniel the medic appears to find the region around his family farm in good order. Is this a story set against the backdrop of ecological catastrophe, or is the picture more complicated?
11. Robbie Arnott blends fable and magical realism, horror tale and road trip, cli-fi and lush landscape writing in an unexpected and very readable fashion. Do you see his style—literary and fantastical, action-driven and page-turning—as being influenced by eminent Australian authors such as Richard Flanagan and Peter Carey, or does *The Rain Heron* sit closer to works by, say, David Mitchell and Neil Gaiman? What, if anything, is particularly Australian about this novel?
12. What is the significance of colours in the novel: brown earth, blue bird, red eye-sockets, granite hills, black ink, rusty blood, pus-yellow wounds, green grass? Are there different colour palettes for each section of the novel?
13. The heron is presented as a creature of unparalleled splendour, a source of wonder; yet it is also capable of extreme violence. Does the novel seek to remind us of the essential non-humanness of nature, its beauty and its brutality? Equally, does the heron possess godlike characteristics, or might its powers have been misapprehended by humans?