

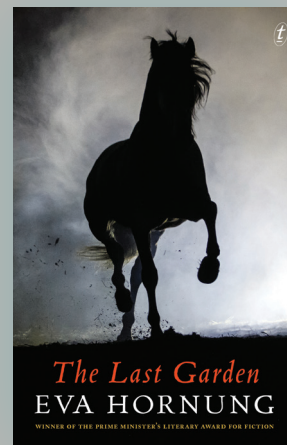
The Last Garden



Eva Hornung

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FICTION, TRADE PAPERBACK

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Praise for Eva Hornung and *The Last Garden*

'Hornung writes with extraordinary force and insight...an amazing feat of imaginative power.' *Canberra Times*

'Astonishing...A strange, sombre, sobering triumph.' *Sydney Morning Herald*

'There's human violence and the strength of animals... just gripping.' *Australian*

'Vivid, visceral and disconcerting. The descriptions of animals are intensely empathetic, and the book raises fundamental and confronting questions about how our animal and our human selves can or should co-exist.' *Books + Publishing*

About Eva Hornung

Eva Hornung was born in Bendigo and now lives in rural South Australia. Formerly published as Eva Sallis, Hornung is an award-winning writer of literary fiction and criticism: her first novel, *Hiam*, won the Australian/Vogel Literary Award in 1997 and the Nita May Dobbie Award in 1999. *The Marsh Birds* won the Asher Literary Award 2005 and was shortlisted for numerous awards including the Age Book of the Year 2005, the NSW Premier's Literary Award and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Eva Hornung's highly acclaimed *Dog Boy* was shortlisted for numerous prizes and won the Prime Minister's Literary Award in 2010.

A reader's introduction to *The Last Garden*

A novel about humans and animals and the connections and disconnections between them; about faith and belief and what they mean to different people; about community and exile and the varying forms in which they come, *The Last Garden* exerts an uncanny power.

In a Germanic settlement in Australia, a small community waits for the Messiah to be born amongst them. The founding pastor of the sect predicted the saviour's imminent coming in his Book of Seasons, and his flock retains its faith, despite the pastor's death. The new pastor, his son, is less able to hold onto certainty—not just about his father's words, but about almost everything in his world—and his flock is less certain about his authority than they were about his father's.

But of course, *The Last Garden* centres on Benedict, the grieving boy who found the bodies of parents after his father slaughtered many of their animals, murdered his wife, and then killed himself.

Unable to face the memories that reside in the house, Benedict retreats to the barn and lives there for a year, gradually behaving more like the animals he lives among, and then gradually coming back to human society. The novel traces his state of mind through turmoil and peace, through the rhythms of the days of an entire year, through a full cycle of the seasons.

Pastor Helfgott was faced with a choice when Benedict started to live in the barn: should he insist that Benedict remain surrounded by community and required to act 'normally' or should he allow Benedict to isolate himself as he so desperately wants? He chose the latter, but visits him enough to ensure some form of human contact. Throughout, he constantly questions his choice.

God and the devil come in several forms in *The Last Garden*. So does humanity, and perhaps this is what the novel finally grapples with: how can humans live—with each other, with animals, and alone?

Questions for discussion

1. In the first weeks living in the barn, Benedict 'had no mind in the usual sense' (p.70). What kind of mind does he have? Does Benedict go 'mad'? Or

- does he gain a clearer view of the world through his experience?
2. How do the animals help Benedict? Do they heal him? What do they show him? Does his time living with them harm him in any way?
 3. Does Benedict become less human in any way? Or is his becoming more animalistic a way of showing another dimension of humanity?
 4. The flock at Wahrheit has little experience in hardship in its later years—is hardship good for people? Does Benedict experience hardship in a way the other characters don't?
 5. One of the reasons Benedict moves to the barn is so he doesn't have to face his memories. He then deliberately tries to avoid doing anything that might bring back memories until the close of the novel. Talk about the way memories can both harm and comfort.
 6. Benedict chooses a particularly hard path to tread when it comes to his grief. Are there good, or even just better, ways to grieve? What do you think of the way Benedict grieves?
 7. What does the *The Last Garden* have to say about the concepts of good and evil?
 8. Discuss the ways the novel plays with biblical references, and the parallels between *The Last Garden* and bible stories. Pastor Helfgott eventually sees *The Book of Seasons* as inadequate—what are we to make of it?
 9. Why do you think Eva Hornung has chosen to set this novel in a sect? And why is it set in 'New-World' Australia, with its back-to-front seasons?
 10. What does the novel say about the way humans do, can or should live together? Wahrheit is founded as a kind of utopia—is it more utopian or dystopian than any other community?
 11. Is Benedict an angel, a pagan, a devil, a saviour, none of these, or all of these?
 12. Is Benedict brought back to society by Helene? By something or someone else? Or was his return to his humanness inevitable?
 13. Discuss the red fox. Is it a symbol, a symptom, a character as in a fable, or something else entirely? Does this change as the novel goes on? What do you make of the fox's end?
 14. Do you think that Pastor Helfgott made the right choice? How would things have been different if the pastor and community had refused to let Benedict isolate himself? What do you make of the role Pastor Helfgott makes for himself in relation to Benedict?
 15. How similar and different are the ways in which Benedict and Pastor Helfgott come to understand the world? How does each character change?
 16. Discuss the idea of innocence, especially in light of your answers to the previous question. Does Benedict lose his innocence? Does Pastor Helfgott?
 17. Do the animals play a part in the book in their own right, or only in relation to Benedict?
 18. How important in the novel is the cycle of seasons? Does the cycle suggest renewal or repetition?