

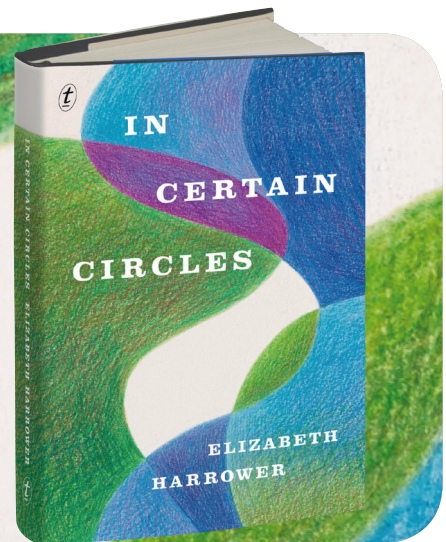
In Certain Circles

Elizabeth Harrower

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Fiction, Hardback



Praise for Elizabeth Harrower

'Harrower can pierce your heart.' Michael Dirda, *Washington Post*

'A scandalously overlooked writer.' Michelle de Kretser

'Utterly hypnotic.' Eimear McBride, *Irish Times*

'She is brilliant on power, isolation and class.' Ramona Koval

About Elizabeth Harrower

Elizabeth Harrower was born in Sydney in 1928. After leaving school she worked as a clerk and studied psychology.

In 1951 Harrower moved to London. Her first novel, *Down in the City*, was published in 1957, and was followed by *The Long Prospect* a year later. In 1959 she returned to Sydney and in 1960 published *The Catherine Wheel*, her only novel not set in Australia. *The Watch Tower* appeared in 1966.

Her work is austere, intelligent, ruthless in its perceptions about men and women. She was admired by many of her contemporaries, including Patrick White and Christina Stead, and is without doubt among the most important writers of the postwar period in Australia.

Elizabeth Harrower lives in Sydney.

A reader's introduction to *In Certain Circles*

Love and marriage are at the centre of this novel but it is the antithesis of a romance. Rather, relationships—whether those between lovers, spouses or familial—are shown as complex, ambivalent and sometimes cruel, rarely based on mutual understanding. *In Certain Circles* mercilessly dissects its characters, exposing their failings and analysing their behaviour and motivations. As well as its intensely personal focus, the novel looks more broadly at some of the class, cultural and political issues of its time, particularly as they affect women.

Zoe and Russell Howard seem blessed, the golden children of a Sydney socialite couple. Stephen and Anna Quayle are orphans who were brought up by their aunt, a mentally ill tyrant, and their uncle, a weak man who is unable to resist his wife's controlling ways.

After Russell and Stephen meet on a train, the siblings' lives become entwined. Stephen and Zoe eventually marry, but Stephen is cold and difficult, and the marriage is emotionally abusive. Russell is married to Lily, his sweetheart from before the war, but he and Anna sustain a secret love for many years.

The novel ostensibly has Zoe as its central character, however the reader is also given insight into Anna's inner life, not just through the narrator but also through diary entries and, at the novel's climax, her suicide note. Anna is more than a foil to Zoe (and Stephen); she is an important character in her own right. Our access to Russell and Stephen is primarily mediated through the women.

At the end of the novel, the women and Russell escape their unhappiness. But, for all the opportunities this offers, there is a sense of time lost, and of damage done. How optimistic can the reader be about the future of these scarred characters?

Questions for discussion

1. What 'circles' is the title referring to?
2. Why is Zoe immediately attracted to a man who is dismissive of her, who does not exalt her as everyone else does?
3. Is Russell damaged? Do you blame him for the damage he does to others?
4. Why don't we ever meet Joseph directly even though he was Zoe's lover during a significant period of her life?
5. Despite sharing the same childhoods, Stephen and Anna act and feel very differently to one another? Why?
6. Anna reflects in her diary that she doesn't want to be Zoe, and that 'All that has happened feels necessary. I

can't picture it different. I would not want to be someone else' (77). Is Anna unique in this among the characters?

7. Early on, when she is getting to know Stephen, Zoe thinks, 'Something in him took her from the pink marshmallow castle of her life to a high cliff over the ocean in the real world' (43). Is this an accurate reflection of Stephen's transformation of Zoe's life? Is Zoe in the real world when she marries Stephen? After she marries him, she reflects that 'she had turned into this new thing—a suppliant, but a suppliant with a purpose: all to be well with Stephen. She had fallen through him into the universe, into her real self' (129). What is Zoe's real self?

8. Imagining describing her relationship with Stephen to a hypnotherapist, Zoe says, 'But I'm the guilty party...I let it happen. Let the words be said, and listened. Agreed to be devalued to the point where I'm of less consequence than anyone in the world' (152). Is Zoe at fault for the situation she finds herself in?

9. To what extent is Stephen at fault for his behaviour?

10. Does the novel paint an irredeemably negative picture of marriage? Do you think Russell and Anna going to be 'extremely happy', as Lily declares they will be?

11. Anna suggests that something between her experience and Zoe's would be best for preparing for life. 'Some life with great variety...with some rigour

and real encounters. Whatever they might be. More connections with the varieties of reality' (165). She then shrugs 'with self-derision', but does she mean it? Can you define an 'ideal preparation for life'?

12. Talk about the importance of work to the characters and how they view its importance (a view that changes for most of them over the course of the novel).

13. In the car with Russell, Anna 'felt her skeleton waver secretly, as though it were seaweed pressed about by movements of deepest seas, invisible on the glittering surface' (133). Discuss Harrower's descriptions of her characters' experiences of emotion.

14. *In Certain Circles* explicitly grapples with feminist themes. Talk about Harrower's portrayal of both women and of feminist ideas.

15. Zoe jokes with Stephen about the 'national inferiority complex' (127). In such a psychological novel, how important are broader political issues like the cultural cringe?

16. This novel was written in 1971, but was only published in 2014. Is it as relevant now as it was when it was written? Or, indeed, are we able to appreciate it more now?