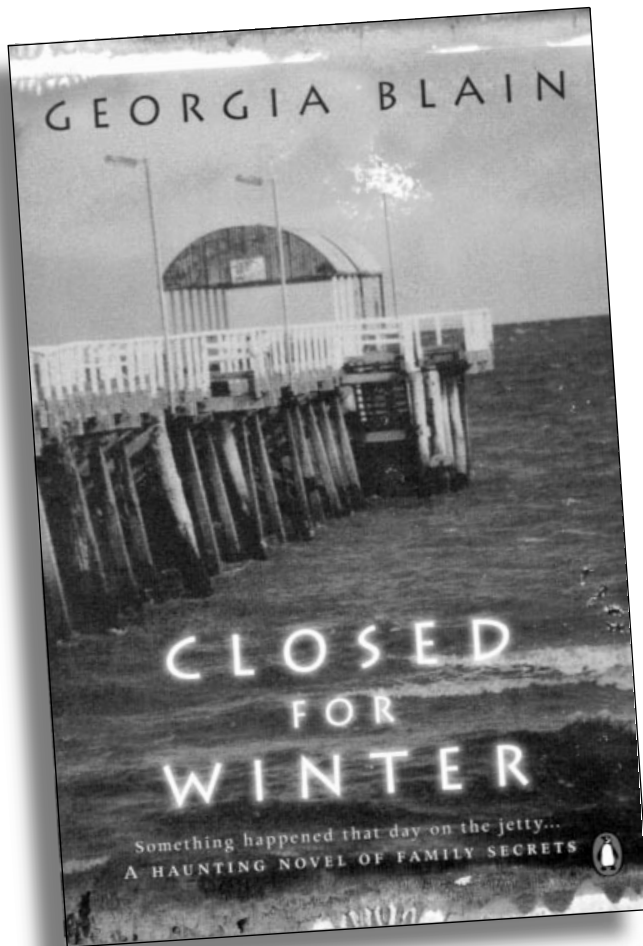


PENGUIN NOTES
for
READING GROUPS



GEORGIA
BLAIN

CLOSED FOR
WINTER





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AN INTRODUCTION TO CLOSED FOR WINTER

‘There was no moment when it happened.’ (p. 121) The hardest losses to accept are those which remain a mystery. Elise and her mother, Dorothy, have been locked in a terrible state of bereavement since twelve-year-old Frances disappeared twenty years ago. Neither has been able to come to terms with a ‘vanishing’ they did not witness. Even the possibility that Frances is alive somewhere is a haunting and tortuous thought. All Elise has left of her sister is a dog-eared photograph which she harbours guiltily – a photograph wrested from their friend and neighbour, John Mills, and which seems to indicate that he too has secrets which he is not telling. Elise has gone over and over the events of Frances’s last day until she feels ‘*I do not know what I remember any more.*’ (p. 162) The last person to admit having seen her, when they parted at the jetty, Elise feels responsible for the fact that she does not have the key to unlock the secret of Frances’s disappearance.

The novel on one level is a novel of emotion, yet it is also a mystery. It is full of stray possible clues to Frances’s death. For example, the photos that John Mills took secretly of Frances, his enigmatic statements – ‘*I wish I could have done more*’ (p. 127) – and his search for ‘*A way of finding peace.*’ (p. 182) There are any number of possible suspects: John’s son, Will, who followed Frances ‘*everywhere*’ (p. 71), or any one of the other boys – ‘*Him*’, the ‘*bad*’ boy whom Frances



liked, and whom Elise saw on that day with another girl. Or perhaps Jim Hunt, the kiosk owner, whom Frances called a 'bloody perve' (p. 192). Even Dorothy's story seems to make the police sceptical. Maybe she saw more on the beach that night than she is telling? And why did Frances say of her father, when he died, 'I wanted him dead' (p. 142)? Even Elise's story may be faulty. Maybe emotional trauma has caused her to block out something she saw? The fact that we read it as a mystery is also an indication of how difficult it is for anyone to accept an unresolved situation. We want, like Elise, to know what happened.

The mystery is enhanced by an implied sense of sexual unease throughout the novel. There are whispers of clandestine encounters under the jetty between local teenagers, and between Dorothy and her husband when they first met; unsavoury characters like the kiosk man; there is no male/female relationship which is described with uncomplicated enjoyment. Elise's encounters, for example, are more a question of endurance and a sense of inadequacy than pleasure. It seems that Frances's legacy to her has been to associate sex with danger. So that the sex she chooses is inevitably fraught with distaste.

The title **Closed for Winter** refers to the fact that the novel takes place during winter when the jetty is closed, but it also reflects Elise's emotional state. The novel traces her emotional journey from a scarred and damaged individual to a person with some strength and confidence in herself. She is the classic good child – often neglected since all the



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attention goes to the one who is bad, and *'the only way I would get to go would be if I was not noticed'* (p. 169). She has habitually imagined others as *'having it all'* but comes to accept that everyone, and Frances most of all, put on faces to hide insecurity. Though the novel is about Dorothy and Elise's terrible grief, it also shows that minor characters, like Marissa, Jocelyn and Martin, each demonstrate techniques they have developed to cope with inadequacies they feel within themselves.

Martin, Elise's live-in lover for several years, is an unsympathetic character who seems to need a partner only to create some sense of his own self-worth. His actions and conversations are characterised by pretentiousness and by the sort of arrogant self-assurance which always denotes insecurity. Elise never seems really happy with him, but his suffocating confidence is a way of blotting out the things she cannot bear to remember. *'A small circle of comfort and I had thought that it would be enough'* (p. 68). Having met him at work where she manages a theatre box office and he is financial controller, Elise was inveigled into a relationship which seemed to offer protection. Her long years living in Martin's mother's house, though, have never made her secure. She lives there like a visitor, putting no stamp on house or garden, with only a box of belongings to her name. Gradually their ill-suitedness becomes obvious but each resists admitting it. Elise's shyness and the reserve which Martin found initially attractive eventually frustrates him immensely. His desire to control things eventually frustrates her too. Nevertheless she clings to him like a last piece of wreckage in a turbulent sea – not because she values him, but because she sees him as



the only available form of rescue. Her pleas when Martin expresses his desire to break up are patently self-revealing – ‘Don’t Leave me Here’ (p. 143). The word ‘here’ is the real essence of her feelings. He keeps her away from Dorothy. He protects her and helps her to resist the pull back to the house and the place where Frances was. ‘She is at one end and he is at the other, and they both pull at me. I am trapped between the two...’ (p. 95).

Frances is portrayed as a child who wields great power over those around her. She calculatedly creates a persona for herself, though even eight-year-old Elise knows that most of what she seems to be is contrived - that she secretly practises her attributes so that they ‘*will seem effortless... and not something she has had to work on.*’ (p.24) The local myth is that she is a bad influence, a slut who is not to be trusted – a reputation which no twelve-year-old should conceivably deserve. Around her hangs a miasma of sexual tension, partly gleaned from her mother’s eccentric reminiscences about their dead, much beloved father and partly from eavesdropping and hanging out with the boys on the jetty. When she goes, there is much whispering of clichéd phrases like ‘*she was asking for it*’. Elise has spent her life wondering whether this is true. Did Frances really want to leave them? Did she bring about her own demise?

Dorothy is a deranged, obsessive personality. Her grief over the early loss of her husband has been translated into a litany of stories which are so full of holes that even her children doubt their veracity. Her manic reminiscences about



her own beauty seem to camouflage some early unsatisfactory experiences. As Elise knows well, Dorothy is not a woman who has any friends, save for the retired family doctor, John Mills. Her search for clues to Frances's whereabouts has become the purpose in her life. She makes endless books of clippings from newspapers and writes endless letters of sympathy to parents who have been similarly bereaved.

When Dorothy has a fall, Elise is forced to move home, and concurrently breaks up with Martin. Her choice now is simple – to stay in Dorothy's grip, or to try to forge a new life without the protection of lover or mother. But before she makes this decision she must also confront John Mills and ask him the question which has been troubling her for years. When she begins to make the garden in Dorothy's yard, it is as if she is making it from the detritus of their lives, *'like shedding skin,'* (p. 183) or protective armour which she has been wearing all her life. John Mills' mosaic is similarly a thing which he is fashioning as a way of celebrating life and the power of creation. The novel reveals a lyrical, slow progress towards a ritual healing. It is written in a teasing fashion which shifts from the present to the past in a manner that unsettles and entices the reader into a web of personal intrigue. The jetty where Frances disappeared is a strong central metaphor for a place of both danger and escape – necessitating the act of faith which is involved in letting go of the past and making that leap into an unknown but enticing future.



ABOUT GEORGIA BLAIN

This is a first novel for Georgia Blain, who was born in 1964. Both former occupations – lawyer and journalist – have equipped her well for the writing of a book which queries the nature of facts and the tenuous nature of the terrain between truth and story-telling.

Her experience working with artists is reflected in the characters she creates: most of the major characters work in areas relating to the arts, or, like Dorothy and John, have artistic interests. Elise works in a theatre box office, but is the only one who is not doing it simply to supplement the practice of an art form. Georgia captures Elise's yearning for a means to express herself (for example, Elise sees all the plays performed by her theatre company, and agrees to sit naked for one of Jocelyn's portraits) in a novel which is quietly very perceptive in its analysis of the frustrations suffered by those who feel that their talents have few outlets. Dorothy's sad reminiscences about her talents as a dancer and John's garden mosaic in memory of his beloved wife's beauty are two expressions of this human yearning for artistic beauty.

The setting in the novel is powerfully evoked and is drawn from Georgia's own experience of having lived part of her young adulthood in Adelaide, and in a beach-side suburb there, Grange Beach. She says that the place had a strong impact on her, mainly because of its bleakness. There are some wonderfully atmospheric descriptions of the coastal setting, beautifully visualised in the haunting cover photograph.

Georgia is currently writing a second novel.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The novel deals with that tricky territory called memory. *'How can you understand one day without understanding the day before and the day before that one?' (p. 6)* Trying to tell a story about a past event is always a futile exercise since *'You can't just take bits'* (p. 151). So any memory is coloured by the things we don't know. Are Elise's memories hers, or just a mixture of stories she has heard and which have come to be 'true' via their telling?

2. Elise is haunted by the past from which she has spent her life escaping but *'the place from which I have tried to escape is now the place to which I am tempted to flee'* (p. 58) Is the past inescapable?

3. Dorothy has trouble with facts. Hearing her recalling the events which took place on the day Frances disappeared (p. 147) is a shock for Elise since she has never heard Dorothy tell anything but stories. (Is this a clue? Maybe even this is a story?) *'There are stories and there are truths, but the two can become so tangled it is impossible to know which is which.'* (p. 99) Is Dorothy aware that she lies? Is the truth too hard for her to bear?

4. *'I do not want him. But I do not want him to leave me.'* (p. 30) What is it that Elise wants from Martin, and is it what she gets?



5. *'I hadn't told him because I wanted him to solve it. I had told him because I wanted him to understand. I wanted him to know.'* (p. 36) Is Elise being honest with herself here? Hasn't she spent her life trying to solve it? Is she angry with herself as much as with Martin?

6. *'So I do not rely on anything. Nothing is solid. I keep my life as self-contained as I can, a capsule ... that will not burst open, not leak, not break.'* (p. 107) *'And I have it ... He does not love me.'* (p. 67) Elise relentlessly drives Martin to admit his loss of affection for her. Do people most in need of love also strive to destroy it?

7. *'I watch and I learn because I want to be like that. To look like I don't care.'* (p. 24) Has Elise managed as an adult to be like her lost sister, Frances – to look like she doesn't care?

8. *'I never really saw her until I was forced to see her through the eyes of someone else'* (p. 17). Do we become blind to the real natures of those closest to us? Discuss.

9. Both Dorothy and Elise respond to their grief by compulsive behaviour. Dorothy cuts clippings from papers and writes letters; Elise cleans (pp. 64–5) and attempts to keep her life 'tidy' – that is, devoid of real emotion. Elise says that they are *'reverse sides of the same coin.'* (p. 41) *'You see, I am like Dorothy. I do not cry. I do not know how.'* (p. 142) How like Dorothy is Elise really? Is she exaggerating their sameness?



10. Frances *'was a person to whom something would happen.'* (p. 91) Are some people more prone to adventure or accident than others by virtue of their natures? Could Elise have disappeared just as easily on that day?

11. This novel is partly about child psychology and the influence which parents can have on their child's development. Is adulthood a process of wresting oneself from our parents' clutches? Discuss.

12. *'Jocelyn is always having affairs with actors ... It never lasts. When she is feeling good, she tells me it is because she gets bored, but when she is depressed, she tells me she is lonely.'* (p. 44) How much are the characters in this novel motivated by a fear of loneliness?

13. The jetty is one powerful symbol in the book. Other features of the setting are similarly very evocative. For example, *'There is one road and it stretches, straight and wide, no bends, no deviations, only the occasional slight rise to alleviate the monotonous miles.'* (p. 7) This sort of description relates to the theme of Elise travelling on a road which fruitlessly runs from Dorothy to Martin and back again. Her journey needs to take another route, away from both of them. What other such imagery did you identify in the book?

*Reading Notes are available for the
following titles*

A STRANGER HERE Gillian Bouras

DIGGING Sara Dowse

THE BEHOLDER Julian Davies

DEATH OF A RIVER GUIDE Richard Flanagan

THE ROOMS IN MY MOTHER'S HOUSE Olga Lorenzo

I FOR ISOBEL Amy Witting

IT'S RAINING IN MANGO Thea Astley

WHAT I HAVE WRITTEN John Scott

THE MULTIPLE EFFECTS OF RAINSHADOW Thea Astley

THE ORCHARD THIEVES Elizabeth Jolley

THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY Henry James

LITTLE WHITE SECRETS Catherine Jinks

NONE TO ACCOMPANY ME Nadine Gordimer

THE BEHOLDER Julian Davies

JOHNNO David Malouf

CLOUDSTREET Tim Winton

