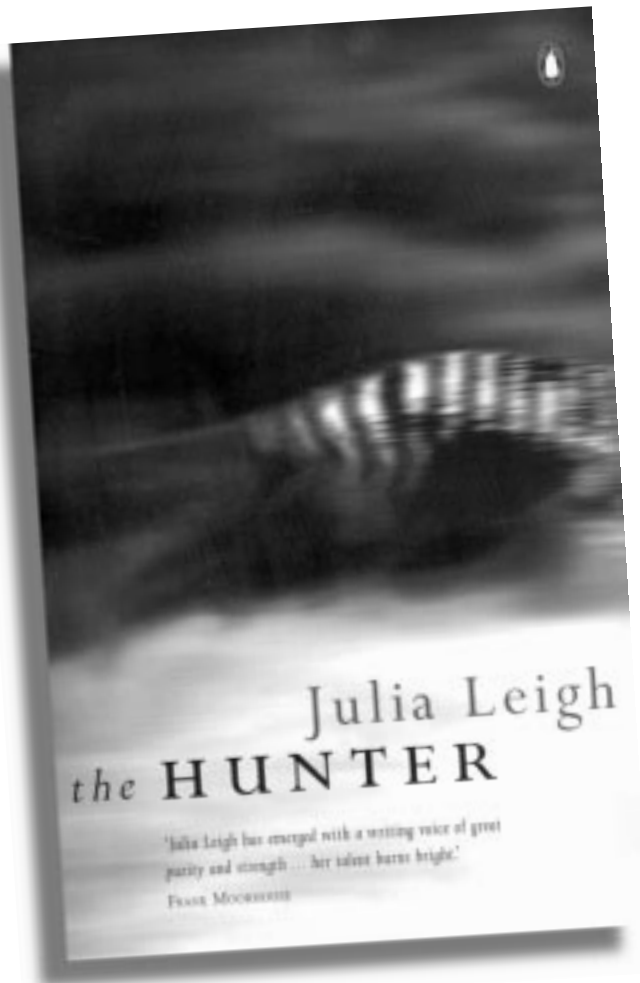


# PENGUIN NOTES

for

# READING GROUPS

---



JULIA  
LEIGH

---

THE HUNTER





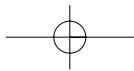
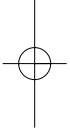
## CONTENTS

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
*THE HUNTER*

ABOUT JULIA LEIGH



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HUNTER

'And what rough beast, its hour come at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?'

*'The Second Coming' W. B. Yeats*

**M**, the main character of *The Hunter*, is a 'mystery man' searching for the mythical thylacine, the Tasmanian tiger. Assuming a false identity, that of Martin David, Naturalist, he presents an everyman figure, pursuant of unknown objectives. A biotechnology corporation has employed him to find the animal for its own hidden purposes, and he has arranged to board with the Armstrongs, a family who live on the edge of the Central Plateau, a vast wilderness area in Tasmania. When he arrives, he finds the family bereaved by the recent disappearance of the father, Jarrah, a scientist, up on the plateau. Jarrah's wife, Lucy, is grief-stricken and leaves her children, Sass and Bike, unsupervised, as she spends most of her time in her room in a drug-induced stupor. M will use the Armstrong house as the base camp for his frequent trips into the wilderness, and he must rely on the children to raise the alarm should he disappear on one of his journeys.

**T**he interplay between the various 'missing' and 'mystery' beings in the novel is cemented by the spectre of the lost Jarrah Armstrong, for whom M becomes a sort of 'substitute'. Fundamentally, though, M is the antithesis of Jarrah, for where Jarrah's science is about preservation, M's is about destruction; where Jarrah loved his family,

M's feelings towards them remain obtuse. M is not naturally comfortable in a family situation, and for him the role of substitute is just that, a role. It is as if a part of M is missing – the part which feels compassion, or real love.

**T**he legendary tiger is 'missing' too. Its elusiveness has made the tiger an iconic figure: the town is named Tiger Town, there is a Tiger Creek, the local butcher has on display a stuffed thylacine pup. It also raises the question of the tiger's presumed extinction: is this a tragedy or a necessity? M has a dream in which he is pursued like the animal he is searching for; he is a figure who embodies the dichotomy which the tiger represents. About to commit what many would consider a monstrous act; he is also dangerously attractive. The 'last' tiger's plight raises complex questions – is survival always a preferred option? Is extinction necessarily bad? No answers to these questions are offered – they are simply raised in an effort to highlight the uncertainties implicit in existence.

**T**he tiger also represents the 'beast within' us all. As M becomes more obsessed with his quest, he assumes the nature of his quarry. 'He slowly smears the paste all over himself, boots included, until he is not quite human, a strange but not entirely unfamiliar beast. Now the beast slouches toward the valley ...' (p. 30) M's joy in the hunt for the tiger is primeval: 'he scrambles on all fours like a cat'. (p. 14) When he learns that tragedy has befallen the Armstrong family his response is pure animal: 'He can dislocate his jaw and fill the universe with a

stone-grey roar.' (p. 135) M absolves himself of personal responsibility in a terribly dispassionate way; he prefers not to know whether the 'genetic matter' he is procuring will be used for destruction or salvation. 'Inbred thylacine, dodo, moa, mammoth. . . mutations all, this was now the stuff that dreams – and wars – were made of.' (p. 50)

**M** is a prowling loner though he is strangely enticing. He is skillfully able to focus on the here and now: 'the hunter's greatest weapon: a sense of immediacy, a complete understanding of why space is time. I am here, he thinks, I am right here, right now!' (p. 117) Despite achieving this level of awareness up on the plateau, back at the house he refuses emotional contact and distrusts women and children. His overall point of view is infused with a deep-seated but subtly presented misogyny. It is interesting to note that the act of hunting itself is a classically male preserve. When M meets the Armstrongs he makes immediate assumptions about them, based on his own experience: 'They were spies, children, little murderers. And adults, he remembers, were the enemy.' (p. 7) He fears Sass's jealousy (p. 19), seeing her as a predator and her brother, Bike, as her prey. His feelings for Bike are ambivalent; in a way he seems to identify with the boy, perhaps harking back to his own lonely childhood.

**T**he novel ponders over the complexity of motivation and intent. Who are the guilty or the culpable? Is M guilty of a heinous crime or is he simply doing his job? Are the actions of these corporations any worse than the interventions of the university researchers who

purport to having idealistic motives? Even the seemingly unloving M reveals a suppressed and desperate need for love.

**A** variety of myths and fairy tale motifs are played upon in exploring these themes. M's job is presented as a refracted Quest: 'Has he been sent as some kind of test? ... a fool's mission?' (p. 19) Though he is wracked with a knightly self-doubt – 'This time it seems he will fail' (p. 121) – he has far more obscure objectives in view, and the quest is never presented as a gallant one – he is a hunter but no sort of hero.

**T**he motif of the Sleeping Princess is used to describe the grieving Lucy, drugged to the eyeballs, 'attended' by her protective children who keep them all fed, and keep the wolf from the door – until they invite 'him' (M) into their home: 'The portal is so low he has to stoop. Once inside, it's clear there has been a coup.' (p. 7) Sass creates a fantasy in order to escape from the tragic gloom which has settled on their home, and M's first impressions of Lucy are in these terms: 'Sleeping Beauty has risen . . . a lieutenant-child on either flank . . . behind her is a poster of a unicorn'. (p 18) M is not only on a search mission – he's on a rescue one as well. His employers want him to rescue the genetic matter; the family wants him to rescue their father, or take his place; Lucy has a muddled hope that he will rescue her. But M isn't interested in rescuing the quarry; only in completing the job successfully.

**O**ther fairy tale themes are suggested, too, such as lost children: 'suddenly he'd be in a glaring, bustling, giant's world, where nobody cared about him' (p. 99); and the forest: 'childhood fears of mean dark forests, of Hansel and Gretel and psychokillers'. (p. 119) M travels into a mythical forest environment inhabited by creatures of the night. It's a frightening place where one loses one's way, but where he can also find refuge: 'Nothing can get at him, now he is safe.' (p. 102)

**T**he idea of 'wilderness' is central to the novel, and the winter landscape, with its silent and deadly stealth, is thematically evocative. At one stage, the snow covers everything – 'The missing man, he wonders, was it snowing when he'd lost himself? Did the white world claim him as one of its own?' (p. 100) – and it is symbolic of sleep and death: 'there's a man who would have heard sleep's sweet call ... How soft, so soft, it must have been, that final embrace.' (p. 53) The horror when landmarks and signposts are obscured is vividly conveyed. However, this 'Sweet, sweet sleep' (p. 113) is also presented as a period of 'long waiting' – the eskimos' concept of patience and endurance. The idea of sleep healing us, or of it bringing a revelation, is thus suggested too. We may dream for centuries, and then be roused by a 'waking dream' – a moment of deep significance – the 'numinous' which the undercurrents of myth in our psyche tell us to prepare for.

matched to the moment's needs. 'He does not like it, this imprecision, he does not like it at all.' (p. 8) His buried cache of coffee to celebrate the end of the job is one of his barren attempts to give his life meaning. He has an almost childlike, obsessive belief that 'control' will keep him safe. Even M's acts of supposed kindness derive from self-interest – for example, he takes Bike home when the boy follows him only to avoid distraction. The unexpected tragedy which befalls the family demonstrates to him, again, the need to steel oneself against the hand of fate, whilst at the same time showing that one can never really be prepared. His reaction is entirely personal; he feels 'forsaken'. He doesn't sympathise with their suffering; expresses no intention to help them. His instinct as a hunter is self-preservation: 'Up there change was graceful: the moon waxed and waned . . . Not like a man's life, thinks M, if a man's life were an island it would be uninhabitable.' (p. 139) To survive in this wasteland he has learned to slough off unnecessary detritus. And so he concludes that his brief period of affection for the family was 'a monumental lapse in judgement'. (p. 147)

**M** is both representative of humanity in the late twentieth century, and of primeval man: 'he is – once more, once more, ever more – the natural man' (p. 114) – an ironical statement which, like the rest of the book, questions what it is to be 'natural'. His task is determined not by faith or love, but by a rigid individual determination to isolate himself in pursuit of a single impersonal goal. The language used to describe his actions often sounds devotional – he recites a 'mantra' and is a mercenary, pledging allegiance to a

corporation's will. But biotechnology is not his religion: 'devotion to the hunt' (p. 115) is his only principle.

**M** is the absolute product of the cult of individuality – the isolated man in the wilderness – the hunter. And yet, there is a conflicting sense that M may be the 'proto-man', an 'everyman', on the brink of an experience which will make him human. M comforts himself when he loses his tenuous grip on some sort of emotional attachment by believing that it will make him stronger. 'What he sees now is that he has been tested, steeled, and seduced, and that his true purpose is . . . to be a hunter, to harvest the tiger.' (p. 148) M's protestations are flimsy, though, for he constantly resorts to universal mythical metaphors to explain the uncertainties; to translate the aching emptiness in his heart. His great tragedy is his incapacity to find within himself the necessary words to describe 'the beautiful terribleness of the deed' (p. 164), when he finally achieves it. This is a dark tale about the need for vigilance; to constantly strive for connectedness in our lives. Maybe M is not the lost soul he appears to be. Maybe there is hope for him yet.

## ABOUT JULIA LEIGH

**T**his is Julia Leigh's first novel, to be published also in the United Kingdom and Italy. Julia was born in 1970, graduated from arts/law at Sydney University, and has taken a variety of part-time jobs. When researching this book she spent time off-track in the Walls of Jerusalem National Park, Tasmania.

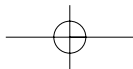


**J**ulia says: 'I've tried to create a sense of what it's like to be out in the wilderness, where things are as they are. Hunting, it has been said, was the experience of the here and now which first gave rise to the possibility of religious or spiritual feelings. The very first signs of human ceremony came when hunters carefully arranged the bones of cave-bears they had killed, hundreds of thousands of years ago, deep in a cave in Switzerland.

**H**owever, religion or irreligion aside, I was also interested in how we develop intimacy and compassion. For some it comes easily, for others this is not the case. But even those we generally consider monstrous, even they at some point have their dreams and hopes. This is not a happy tale, in this world goodness is not rewarded, and just deserts are not delivered.'

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is M genuinely fond of Lucy, Sass and Bike? Or is he simply toying with the idea of having a family?
2. Is M capable of true feeling?
3. Does the book offer any guidelines to survival? What sort of world are we offering 'survivors'? Which of the characters are survivors?
4. If M is no hero, then is there a heroine in this novel?





5. At times M seems to feel a strange connection to the boy, Bike. What is the nature of this connection?

6. What are M's attitudes to women?

7. What do you think of Lucy, the mother? Is she a sympathetic or a selfish character?

8. The book considers topics such as human nature's need for spiritual beliefs, the loss of certainty or faith, and the issue of bio-ethics. What does it have to say about these concepts?

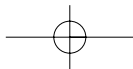
9. What role does myth play in M's life?

10. Tasmanian 'issues' such as its violent history of settlement and the geographical isolation of its terrain are extremely evocative in the novel's thematic geography. Read and compare with another novel set in this landscape, for example Richard Flanagan's *Death of a River Guide*.

11. '... the inadequacy of language, leads him down a slippery slope, until he is almost persuaded never to talk again. Like some kind of monk.' (p. 160 ) Can we ever truly convey our emotions through language?

12. 'Luck is for the unlucky, for those who lack precision.' (p. 35) Do you agree?

13. Is M a tragic figure or an unforgivable one?



*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**

**TREADING ON DREAMS Kristin Williamson**

**CLOSED FOR WINTER Georgia Blain**

**MARIA'S WAR Amy Witting**

**TASTING SALT Stephanie Dowrick**

**CANDELO Georgia Blain**

**THE GOLDEN DRESS Marion Halligan**

