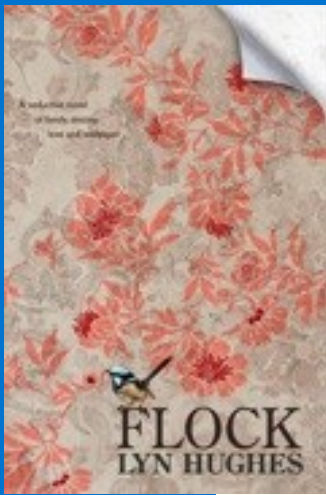


Flock

Lyn Hughes



Book Summary

Flock

Lyn Hughes, 2011

HarperCollins Fourth Estate

364 pp

ISBN-13: 9780732291853

A seductive novel of family, destiny, love and wallpaper. They met on a train. They fell in love. They got married. They lived happily ever after. Or not. Francis Sprigge and Lilian Powys, two strangers escaping their past, move to the Blue Mountains together, following their dreams of creativity and love. But as Francis pursues his gift for designing exquisite wallpaper, Lilian finds that the ordinary life she craves remains frustratingly beyond reach. Despite her adoring husband and spirited young daughter Adelaide, Lilian cannot outrun her demons, and cracks soon appear in the family's harmonious veneer. Nearly thirty years later, Addie Sprigge returns to her childhood haunts to lead a small team of conservators in the restoration of a historic mansion. But as they peel back the layers of wallpaper and begin to uncover the secrets of the house, the past resurfaces in unexpected ways. Addie learns much more about herself, and her parents, than she ever could have anticipated. *Flock* is the captivating story of talented and passionate people and the ghosts they must lay to rest, as well as a ravishing exploration of the nature of love - and wallpaper.

(from the publisher)

Sometimes you have to leave behind what you most love . . .

Sydney, 1950. Following a chance encounter at Central Station, Francis Sprigge and Lilian Powys, two strangers escaping their past, fall in love and move to the Blue Mountains to follow their dream of a creative life. But as Francis immerses himself in his newfound passion for designing exquisite wallpaper, Lilian finds that the life she has always craved is inexplicably beyond her reach, despite her loving husband and their young daughter, Addie. However hard she tries to come to terms with the past, she ends up with more questions than answers, and cracks begin to appear in the family's harmonious veneer, with startling repercussions.

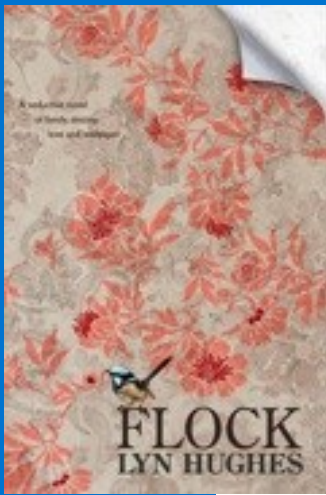
Nearly thirty years later, Addie returns to the Blue Mountains to lead a small group of conservators in the restoration of a historic house to its nineteenth-century glory. But as they peel back the layers of wallpaper and begin to uncover the secrets of the house, all four find the past resurfacing in unexpected ways. Addie learns much more about herself, Francis and Lilian than she ever could have anticipated.

Flock is a powerful story of talented and passionate people and the ghosts they must lay to rest, as well as a ravishing exploration of the nature of love.

(from the author's webpage)

Flock

Lyn Hughes



Author Background

- Birth—1952
- Where—Usk, South Wales, UK
- Currently—lives in Sydney and the Blue Mountains.

Born in Wales in 1952, Lyn spent eighteen years in South Africa before settling in Australia in 1982. Her first two novels were *The Factory* (1990) - shortlisted for the National Book Council's New Writing Award - and *One Way Mirrors* (1993). Lyn's third novel, *The Bright House* (Random House, 2000), is set in South Africa and Britain. Lyn's fourth novel, *Flock* is set in Australia and was released in March 2011.

Lyn divides her time between Sydney and the Blue Mountains.

(author's website)

Ten Terrifying Questions

(from the Booktopia Blog)

1. To begin with why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself – where were you born? Raised? Schooled?

I was born in Usk, in South Wales, in 1952. Aspiring to a better life, my working-class parents emigrated to Australia when I was four, then to South Africa when I was twelve. We settled in Bellville, a notoriously conservative, pro-apartheid suburb of Cape Town, close to my father's work. I grew to loathe that place—the racist neighbours, the bigoted, revisionist teachers at my high school, the small cruelties I witnessed almost every day in the street—as only an adolescent can. I eventually left school at 16 for a job as a junior clerk in a factory. I moved back to Wales for a time, then returned to Cape Town and by 21 was married and had had my first child. I moved to Sydney with my Australian husband in 1982, the year I turned thirty.

2. What did you want to be when you were twelve, eighteen and thirty? And why?

When I was twelve, I wanted to be braver. I remember, on my way home from school one day, seeing a Coloured boy thrown off a bus reserved for whites. My bus. I was horrified... but didn't protest, didn't say a word. It was thirty years before I eventually wrote about it, in my third novel, *The Bright House*.

When I was eighteen, I wanted to be free, not just of racism but of all isms. I suppose I aspired to be like the characters that eventually appeared in my books, fearless, uncompromising. Like Deirdrie, a character in my first novel, *The Factory*, who far from sinking into a sea of poverty, violence, intolerance, stays afloat with wit and bravado.

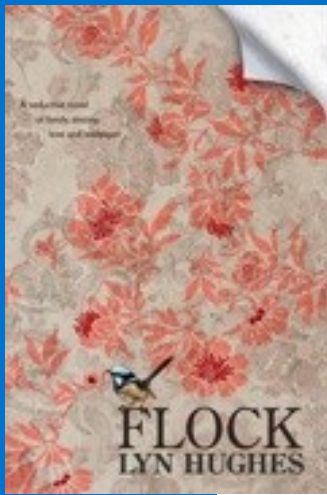
At thirty, I desperately wanted to write. I finally plucked up the courage to join a writing class at the Willoughby Arts Workshop, where the late poet, Dorothy Porter, happened to be teaching part-time. She freed up all sorts of things for me—not just my marriage, but my mind. She introduced me to poetry, to William Carlos Williams, Cavafy, Plath, Dickinson, Auden. She taught me how to read.

3. What strongly held belief did you have at eighteen that you do not have now?

That anger can change things. When I'm more aware now that anger's a closed circuit. And that it takes a lot of courage to break it. To let people in, to allow yourself to say: I'm unhappy, I'm frightened. We're all on the same shaky piece of ground. Writing's particularly terrifying, because you're so exposed.

Flock

Lyn Hughes



Author Background (continued)

4. What were three works of art – book or painting or piece of music, etc – you can now say, had a great effect on you and influenced your own development as a writer?

First, the 1960s film of the Royal Ballet with Fonteyn dancing *Swan Lake* which my mother took me to see in a Newport cinema when I was eight—I was transfixed. Then Dickens—fearless, furious, sad, silly, sentimental—he still makes me laugh—such a terrific storyteller. And Francis Bacon. Two years ago, I saw an exhibition of his paintings at the Tate Modern—room after room of mucky, glorious self-revelation. Exquisitely beautiful and ugly, both. I suppose all three exemplify what I most value and admire in any art-form, including writing—courage, clarity, sincerity, passion.

5. Considering the innumerable artistic avenues open to you, why did you choose to write a novel?

I didn't. I was far too intimidated, awed, to even think the word 'novel'. I wrote *The Factory*, in small manageable bites. One story after another. Until the characters came sufficiently alive to tell their own stories. It began to dawn on me that writing is merely putting down what you can—what you can at the time. What's inside you at that particular moment, on that particular day. And that sometimes it's really good. And sometimes it's pedestrian. And sometimes it's just plain crap. It's like life. It is life. Breathing, beating, messy life. Writing's no more or less elevated or noble than cooking, gardening or doing the dishes. Besides, I found the long haul of novel-writing really suited my pedantic, pernickety nature.

6. Please tell us about your latest novel...

It's called *Flock* and takes as its background the world of wallpaper. It tells the story of four young conservators, curators and historians who come together to restore an historic house in the Blue Mountains and gradually find themselves restored. It's also a love story—well, two love stories, actually, separated by a generation. The novel ranges freely between the French Revolution, Victorian England and the Blue Mountains in the 1960s and 80s, as it explores the joys and difficulties of living a creative life. It's my first novel set in Australia and, in essence, a story of wallpaper and family and the sticky, far from ephemeral nature of both.

7. What do you hope people take away with them after reading your work?

Hope. Joy. Laughter. Curiosity. Good stuff. Because I do deal with some tough stuff, I don't [resile](#) from it. In fact, when I'm writing, it sometimes feels like I'm taking an elevator down into the very basement of myself, a place full of shadows and dark corners. And that all I have are words, to cut through the murk. Then again, I really don't see much point in writing, unless you're going to try and illuminate something. So I hope my readers feel the way I do when I read a writer that hasn't stinted—that I've done my honest best.

8. Whom do you most admire in the realm of writing and why?

The poets. Because it's impossible to write poetry. And yet they try. And so often become unhinged, in the process. Like they've stared into the face of God. Blinded, poor pitiful things: Sexton. Plath. Neruda. Rimbaud. Ginsberg. Syzmborska. And the writers, usually, but not always, a fair bit saner—Murakami. Coetzee. Austen. Woolf. White. The fearless A M Homes—a recent, happy, discovery.

9. Many artists set themselves very ambitious goals. What are yours?

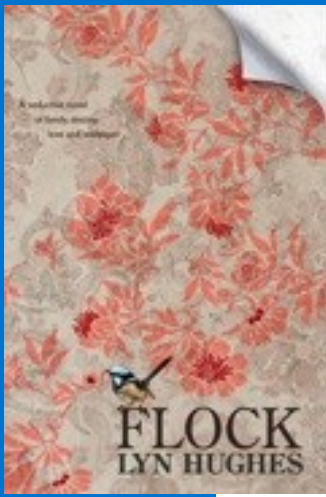
Ambitious? Try ludicrous. Try ridiculously unattainable. To make people laugh, cry, think, feel, wonder. And want more. That's all. Probably enough for a couple of lifetimes.

10. What advice do you give aspiring writers?

Keep your bum on the seat. Bum on seat. Three little words. And the only way to learn to write is to write. And write. And write. And never be satisfied. Satisfaction's death. In just about everything, when you really come to think about it.

Flock

Lyn Hughes



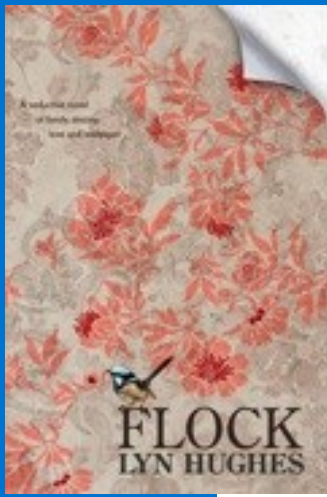
Discussion Questions

1. Flock takes as its background the world of wallpaper. What can wallpaper tell us about ourselves and our world? What other works of fiction shine a light on familiar, everyday subjects? Nearly everyone has a wallpaper story-have you?
2. Francis Sprigge moves to the Blue Mountains to escape the city and to further his aims as an artist. Is this a valid reason for cutting oneself off from society? Do artists need to distance themselves from the cut and thrust of everyday life or can they (should they?) embed themselves within society - ie as observers, or even as agent provocateurs? Why do so many artists feel the need to retreat?
3. It could be said that Lilian abandons her only child when she leaves the fifteen-year old Addie with her father, Francis. What are the moral implications of leaving a child/young adult in order to escape an unfulfilling relationship? Is it best to stay in a relationship, for the sake of the child/children? Whose emotional wellbeing has prior claim? Child? Parent? What results from Lilian's decision to leave Francis?
4. Flock interleaves fact with fiction. Contemporary threads are woven into historical ones. Does this imaginative brew work? Is such a merger a valid approach to novel-writing? Does it enrich or confuse the reader? Stimulate curiosity or divert from the central narrative?
5. What light does Flock shed on the often complex relationship between mothers and daughters?
6. At the heart of Flock, lies the idea of abandonment. Particularly in the case of the thrice-abandoned Lilian. How do we turn our losses to good account? Is it possible to truly overcome early disappointments and setbacks? Does art, craft, the life of the mind encourage personal and/or spiritual growth?
7. Is designing wallpaper as easy as it might appear? Why not take up pen, pencil and paper and find out! Why not take up pen, pencil and paper and find out!

(from the publisher)

Flock

Lyn Hughes



Reviews

The write stuff: Mt Victoria author Lyn Hughes' new book, *Flock*, is set in the upper Blue Mountains. Lyn Hughes wrote three hard-hitting novels in the 90s exploring the injustices of the apartheid era in South Africa, but her new book called *Flock* is set a lot closer to home.

The Mt Victoria resident penned a tale where chapters alternate between events taking place in a Shipley Plateau home in the 1950s and a fictional historic mansion in Mt Victoria in the mid 1980s.

There are many references to buildings and bushwalks in Lithgow, Wentworth Falls, Blackheath and Hartley and even the local council, roadworks on the highway and the Blue Mountains Gazette gets a mention.

With a central theme of wallpaper - which required many years of painstaking research in France, the UK and New York to write about in the way intended - *Flock* explores the troubled relationship between a creative couple who moved to the Blue Mountains and the secrets about their past that become revealed to their daughter three decades later.

"This book is very different to anything I've written about so far," Lyn said.

"I've lived in this area for 20 years now and I wanted to write about something I was passionate about so the result is a true Blue Mountains book."

In *Flock*, a team of four young conservators have the task of restoring a mansion and as layers of wallpaper are carefully analysed, documented and removed, the secrets of the house are uncovered and the group learns more about themselves and their own pasts.

"The only think I knew about wallpaper was I had a personal connection with it, as my father was very into it and we always had wallpaper around when I was growing up. What I've found is it can become an interesting metaphor for stripping layers back to reveal hidden meanings and memories.

"I knew of the saying 'if only the walls could talk' so I thought why not wallpaper too. The oldest surviving wallpaper was made in 1509 and it's interesting that wallpaper is now becoming fashionable again. It's always been important in people's lives and it has such a rich history."

Flock was launched on March 19 at Hat Hill Gallery in Blackheath by Dr Katrina Schlunke from the University of Technology Sydney's cultural studies department.

Blue Mountains Gazette

WALLPAPER as a metaphor for life and identity? Seems unpromising? Well, yes. Which is a shame because this central tenet of Lyn Hughes's fourth novel (published after an 11-year hiatus) is the main flaw in what is otherwise a well realised book. Perhaps Hughes wanted something to differentiate her novel from others with familiar themes.

Alternate chapters tell the story of Francis and Lillian, he an architect turned wallpaper designer, she an orphan turned housewife turned potter. They meet in 1950, set up home in the Blue Mountains and have a daughter, Adelaide. They love each other deeply, but their marriage is not destined for a happily-ever-after ending.

The interleaving chapters are set in 1986, just before Australia's Bicentennial. An adult Addie, now an expert wallpaper conservator, is back in the Blue Mountains to work on a project to restore an old home. With her are three others: her research assistant, Richard, still reflecting on the end of his relationship with Dominic; Will, good natured but struggling with his childhood; and Sylvie, an attractive French academic and immediate love interest for Addie. For each of the four, their work on the house and their own separate academic projects become a channel to think about their own lives.

The strongly defined characters are the novel's greatest strength. But wallpaper ... Yes, it's interesting and little thought about, and yes, there are layers of it that can be peeled back. Somehow though, it's a bit of a stretch for it to stand for so much.

The Age