



# Bereft

## Chris Womersley

### Author Background

- Birth— Melbourne, 1968
- Raised— Melbourne, Victoria
- Currently—lives in Sydney

Chris Womersley was born in Melbourne in 1968, where he lived for many years. He trained as a radio journalist and has travelled extensively to such places as India, South-East Asia, South America, North America, and West Africa. He currently works at Fairfax online in Sydney as a sub-editor. Chris has been writing for most of his life and has studied creative writing at Melbourne's RMIT. His short story 'The Shed' was published in *Granta New Writing 14* and reprinted in *Best Australian Stories 2006*. He won the Josephine Ulrick Literature Prize for short story in 2007. *The Low Road*, his first novel, was shortlisted for the 2006 Victorian Premier's Award for an unpublished manuscript and won the Ned Kelly Award for Best First Book in 2008.

### Ten Terrifying Questions

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

I was born in Melbourne in 1968, and have lived in that city for most of my life, aside from periods travelling overseas and living in Sydney and the UK. I went to a few schools, but ended up at Melbourne High School where I did my HSC.

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

At 12 I wanted to be an archaeologist because I liked the idea of hanging out in Egypt. At 18 I wanted to be a rock star because I liked the idea of hanging out in mansions in the south of France. At 30 I wanted to be a writer because there seemed there was little else I could actually do.

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

When I was 18 I tended – as many of us do at that age – to view the world in rather black-and-white terms. Since then I have learnt that the world is actually more complex and harder to pin down, which is necessary for a novelist, because it helps me create more interesting characters and stories.

**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?**

I vividly recall seeing the Sergio Leone film *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, which had a great effect on me as a 12-year-old or so. *Wuthering Heights* was also a great influence, a story of intense love and violence. I also loved The US band *The Velvet Underground*, who produced music that was by turns beautiful and terrifying. It's often said *The Velvet Underground* only sold 1000 copies of their first album in 1968, but every person who bought it was inspired to start their own band.

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

The novel still strikes me as the most involved art-form we have, the narrative form that can still go deeper and take people further than any other.

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

*Bereft* is set in the immediate aftermath of World War One during the Spanish Influenza pandemic. A returned soldier named Quinn Walker returns to a country town in rural NSW where he meets a young girl he comes to believe is the ghost of his murdered sister. *Bereft* is about loss and longing, the way families and communities deal with grief. It is a ghost story and a love story.

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

I want readers to be compelled by the hook of the narrative, moved by the emotion of the story and intrigued by the possibilities of longing people back to life.

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

That's very hard to narrow down. I admire Joyce Carol Oates' productivity and her ability to write in whatever genre the story needs to be told, without fear or favour.

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

Each time I set out to write a novel, I try to write something that has never been written before. I usually try and write the novel that I would like to read but hasn't yet been written.

**10. What advice do you give aspiring writers?**

Read everything you can get your hands on, write a lot and persevere.

(from the Booktopia Blog)



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### Book Summary

#### ***Bereft***

*Chris Womersley, 2010*

*Scribe Publications*

*264 pp.*

*ISBN-13: 9781921844027*

It is 1919. The Great War has ended, but the Spanish flu epidemic is raging through Australia. Schools are closed, state borders are guarded by armed men, and train travel is severely restricted. There are rumours it is the end of the world. In the NSW town of Flint, Quinn Walker returns to the home he fled ten years earlier when he was accused of an unspeakable crime. Aware that his father and uncle would surely hang him, Quinn hides in the hills surrounding Flint. There, he meets a mysterious young girl called Sadie Fox, who encourages him to seek justice — and seems to know more about the crime than she should.

A searing gothic novel of love, longing and justice, *Bereft* is about the suffering endured by those who go to war and those who are forever left behind.

*Winner ABIA Literary Fiction Book of the Year*

*Winner of Indie Award for Best Novel*

*Shortlisted for The Age Book of the Year*

*Shortlisted for 2011 Miles Franklin Award*

*Shortlisted for ASL Gold Medal for Literature*

*Shortlisted for Ned Kelly Award for Fiction*

*Shortlisted for CWA Gold Dagger*

*Longlisted for Dublin IMPAC Award*



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### Reviews

Chris Womersley has written a narrative that grips like a dingo's jaws, but at the same time gives us those glimpses into human motivation, that particular gift of evoking atmosphere, which characterise the most satisfying literature. The descriptions of the Australian bush, the physicality of its earth and wild life, have a precise and transporting intensity. So do the details of the small community, its impoverished lifestyle and rough, minimal possessions. But the real brilliance of the book lies in the character of Quinn and his slow emergence from the state of fear inflicted in the trenches, until he has the courage to face the aggressor. It is a journey towards maturity until eventually he must grapple with the bogeyman of childhood. This is a distinguishable novel.'

#### ***The Independent (UK)***

Chris Womersley's *Bereft*, his second novel after 2008's award-winning *The Low Road*, is a rich, gripping tale of love, loss, conflict and salvation. The prologue states that in 1912, during a storm in the 'fly-speck town of Flint', New South Wales, a teenage boy was found holding a knife next to his sister's battered body. He fled the scene.

The novel then begins with this long-thought-dead young man, Quinn, contemplating life and death after his time in the trenches in the Great War, on a ship bound back home. Remnants of the war include a large scar across his face, and fits of coughing from gas exposure; but deeper scars lie from Quinn's past, and he is returning to confront them. In the town of Flint, he is known as 'the murderer', so he cannot show his face—but he sets out to at least unburden his sick mother. He befriends a tough orphan girl, Sadie, who has strange abilities, a calming presence, and issues to resolve that are related to his own.

Womersley's descriptions of this western plains town, its inhabitants and outsiders, plus the flashbacks to the war and to London, are fresh, rich and emotionally charged. The main characters, though their plotlines are not incredibly complex, are compelling, and even fascinating. There is an added layer of mood in both the setting and characters—gothic, magical—which makes the book a delight to consume, and makes the reader appreciate why the resolution (which could come sooner, really) is dangled, tantalisingly, through chapters of character development and skillful (but never thick) description, so that when it comes—when that moment finally comes—the reader's reaction may be similar to mine, and that was to go 'oh ... cool!' By then you have such a complete picture of Quinn, his state and his surrounds that it is like watching the final satisfying moments of a richly coloured and well-directed film.

This book is thoroughly enjoyable, compelling, moving, warm and completely memorable. I had that very rare experience of wanting to read it again, almost immediately. This book crosses the lines of popular fiction, literary fiction and mystery. It could be recommended to fans of Kate Grenville (though I think Womersley's a more interesting writer), Tim Winton, Matthew Condon, Craig Silvey, Peter Carey, Peter Temple, Alex Miller and more.

#### ***Bookseller+Publisher***

A startling novel leads the reader into dark, uncomfortable places, writes Jennifer Levasseur. Late in Chris Womersley's award-winning debut, *The Low Road*, a desperate man on the run wonders when the chase will end. "He could perhaps even last for some months. But he would eventually exhaust any supplies and have to start all over again,"



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Womersley, an *Age* journalist, writes. "Always the same fears — of running out, of finding himself bereft, of being abandoned to himself alone."

*The Low Road*, winner of the Ned Kelly award for best first book, examines the anguish of lives gone hopelessly wrong, of men pushed beyond what they felt were the limits of their capabilities. *Bereft*, Womersley's new novel, is a strong, more compelling follow-up that explores some similar themes but urges them to new depths.

Beautifully written and conceived, *Bereft* pushes at the borders of literary fiction and thriller, spinning a horrific incident in one man's life into a page-turning reflection on grief and guilt, on the nature of storytelling and its inevitable joys and shortcomings, on what we have to believe in order to survive.

In a small New South Wales town nearly deserted after the gold rush, 16-year-old Quinn Walker's life shatters with the rape and murder of his beloved little sister, Sarah. Found at the scene with a knife in hand and covered in blood, Quinn is the obvious suspect. When he flees, no one doubts his guilt.

Ten years later, he returns from the Great War, disfigured and suffering the effects of gas, compelled to avenge Sarah's death. Set during the influenza epidemic of 1919, a time of lost innocence, families destroyed by war, and rumour of the end of the world, *Bereft* finds itself at a strange and new juncture when suddenly no one can be trusted, no one is who they once were.

Under cover in the hills overlooking the town, Quinn meets a young orphan girl who is also hiding, awaiting her brother's return from the war. From their first meeting, it is clear that 12-year-old Sadie is savvier than he, more adept at survival and that she knows much more about him and his family than anyone should, including details of the murder and murderer.

Quinn and Sadie develop a cautious yet oddly passionate bond as they learn to suffice as each other's shadow substitute of missing person. Sadie becomes to him whatever he needs, protecting him from danger, supplying the oranges he's craved for years, pushing him to fulfil his vow. Is she a real little girl, grieving for her own lost family, her wants and desires as keen and true as his own? Or has he conjured her, this gutsy, bossy sprite, the same age as his dead sister, her name a near match?

Though Quinn has lived through the loss of his family, experienced the horrors of war and the label of murderer, in many ways he is still that teenager paralysed by the terrible vision of his sister's last moments. He has no hope of proving his innocence to the father and uncle, who vow to hang him, but he will never truly live until he atones for his failure.

*Bereft* leads the reader into dark, uncomfortable places but never abandons the promise of justice and redemption. Womersley's confident hand guides the reader through the tangled desires and misguided dreams of his orphans.

This is a moving, tender but fierce journey of a man ripped from his happy childhood by a gruesome crime, forged and deformed by war, and returned from the dead to face the evil that destroyed his world. A chaste love story of brother and sister, the novel examines the surprising ways in which we discard and rebuild family, how public notoriety (a medal or a slur) often says more about a society than about a person, how we comfort the bereaved, those left struggling and alone, of grief and second chances.

***The Age***





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### Discussion Questions

1. In the first part of the novel we get a pretty good look at the Quinn of today and, through his memories, the Quinn of before as well: what were your first thoughts on Quinn?
2. The author goes to great lengths to give us a picture of the Spanish flu epidemic of 1919. Did you already know about it? How well does the author describe it? This flu famously killed more people than the war. How do you think the historical context in which the novel is set affects the actions of the characters and the events of the narrative?
3. The author spends a lot of time revisiting Quinn's war experiences, via Quinn's memories, but also via the effects we now know as post-traumatic stress syndrome. Was this convincing? What did you learn about PTSS?
4. Without his father's knowledge Quinn visits his mother, who is suffering and near death from the flu. What did Quinn's visits with his mother tell you about their relationship?
5. How relevant is the fact that Sadie is the same age as Sarah was when murdered?
6. Trust between Quinn and Sadie is slow to develop: why? Do you like the way the author treats this relationship? How important a factor do you think their age difference is? Does it make the relationship they have more or less difficult to attain/retain?
7. When Quinn finds Sadie she is almost a feral child, wild and possibly mad; how reliable to you consider her perspective to be?
8. Why do you think Quinn chose to tell Sadie things that he has never told anyone else?
9. Is Sadie real?
10. What is the significance of Mary's telling her children the stories she told when they were small?
11. What is the significance of the blood oath that Sadie made Quinn take?
12. Quinn is caught in his mother's sick room as his father stands outside the window. His mother asks his father to tell her what happened on the day Sarah died. Quinn thinks this may be a trap—did you?
13. Quinn tells his mother about the years since he left, but he still refuses to tell her who killed Sarah. Why? What would you have done?
14. Quinn finally confesses to Sadie what happened the day Sarah died after she shows him the "souvenirs" that Robert has kept from his victims. Do you think he should have told her?
15. We know that Sadie did dabble in the occult, and when she takes Quinn to the cave of hands and sacrifices the lamb, this fact is made plain. Did you believe in Sadie as a practitioner?
16. While in the cemetery sweating in his boots Quinn tells Mrs. Porteous that yes, he did meet her husband in Egypt, and yes, he did talk about her. Was this merely a way to stall his uncle, or do you think he did it for her sake too?
17. Jim Gracie calls Quinn the angel of death and we're led to believe that he is remorseful for his past actions. He also says that Robert made him do those things. Do you believe his suicide was because he was sorry or because he would be caught and punished?
18. Was the murder of Robert Dalton necessary to the story, did it fit?
19. Bereft touches heavily on ideas of superstition and spiritualism and during the period it was common for people to visit spiritualists. Do you think that they could really provide closure?
20. Why do you think Quinn decided to run away when his sister was discovered? Would you have run?
21. How well do you think the author handles the sense of place in the novel? And how important do you think the sense of place is in relation to the narrative?
22. The novel deals quite heavily with existence on the margins of society. What do you think of the significance of the figure of the "outsider" in the book?
23. Does this book offer a dystopian vision?

**(from the Barnes and Noble bookclubs online discussion)**