The Night Guest

by Fiona McFarlane



About the Book

A mesmerizing first novel about trust, dependence and fear, from a major new writer

Ruth is widowed, her sons are grown, and she lives in an isolated beach house outside of town. Her routines are few and small. One day a stranger arrives at her door, looking as if she has been blown in from the sea. This woman --- Frida --- claims to be a care worker sent by the government. Ruth lets her in.

Now that Frida is in her house, is Ruth right to fear the tiger she hears on the prowl at night, far from its jungle habitat? Why do memories of childhood in Fiji press upon her with increasing urgency? How far can she trust this mysterious woman, Frida, who seems to carry with her her own troubled past? And how far can Ruth trust herself?

THE NIGHT GUEST, Fiona McFarlane?s hypnotic first novel, is no simple tale of a crime committed and a mystery solved. This is a tale that soars above its own suspense to tell us, with exceptional grace and beauty, about ageing, love, trust, dependence, and fear; about processes of colonization; and about things (and people) in places they shouldn?t be. Here is a new writer who comes to us fully formed, working wonders with language, renewing our faith in the power of fiction to describe the mysterious workings of our minds.

Discussion Guide

1. In what ways do Ruth?s memories keep her company? In what ways do these same recollections mislead her?

2. What were your first impressions of Frida and George? How did your opinion of them shift throughout the novel?

3. When Ruth and Frida clash, what strategies do they use to try to get what they want? What motivates them? What are their greatest vulnerabilities?

4. Discuss Ruth?s relationship with her son Jeffrey. In what ways do they both behave childishly sometimes? At what point do sons and daughters have the right to start parenting their elderly moms and dads?

5. Like Ruth, Harry had a missionary childhood. What else did they share? What were the joys and shortcomings of their marriage? How might it have compared to a marriage with Richard?

6. Frida is surprised by Ruth?s career in elocution. How does Ruth?s love of language enhance her experience of the world? How do class and ancestry, including the ability to ?speak posh,? come into play in the novel?

7. What does the tiger mean to Ruth at various turning points in *The Night Guest*? What role does she give the other cats in her life? What makes the felines appropriate to her story?

8. Discuss Ruth?s experience as a meditation on the aging process. How does she balance her loneliness with her wish for privacy? How does she reconcile her fierce independence with her fears and her frailty, which make her dependent on others?

9. What does the novel illustrate about the process by which trust is gained? Who is the shrewdest character? Who is the most naïve?

10. How is Ruth?s identity shaped by the places she has lived? What is the impact of her years in Fiji? And how is she affected by the isolated landscape of her final home?

11. In the end, Ellen considers Jeffrey and Phillip to be irresponsible. Do you agree? Who will be obligated to look after you in your final years?

12. Just as Ruth gets to reconnect with Richard, is there a chapter from your past that you would like to have a chance to reopen?

Author Bio

Fiona McFarlane is the author of THE NIGHT GUEST; THE HIGH PLACES, which won the International Dylan Thomas Prize; THE SUN WALKS DOWN; and HIGHWAY THIRTEEN. Her short fiction has been published in *The New Yorker* and *Zoetrope: All-Story*. She teaches at the University of California, Berkeley.

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