

WRITING __ WA.

LOVE TO

READ LOCAL

The Children's House, Alice Nelson (Random House)

Summary

This story follows the lives of three interconnected families over a mostly 3-year period in New York. A young Rwandan refugee and her mute child drift towards the kindness shown to them by Marina, a writer living in a large house in Harlem. Meanwhile, Marina's husband Jacob and his son Ben are in the middle of their own crisis and their extended family attempt to draw everyone into their circle of care. This new novel from the 2006 T.A.G. Hungerford winner contains layers of cultural conflict against a backdrop of white privilege and education. It is a lyrical, sad and hopeful story about how families survive when memory and lived experience combine to tear them apart.

About the author

Alice Nelson lives in Perth, works as a freelance journalist and teaches creative writing. Her first novel, *The Last Sky*, was shortlisted for The Australian/Vogel's Literary Award, won the T.A.G. Hungerford Award (2006) and was shortlisted for the Australian Society of Authors' Barbara Jefferis Award. In 2009 she was named one of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Best Young Australian Novelists. Her 2015 book, *After This: Survivors of the Holocaust Speak*, is a collection of fourteen narratives by Australian Holocaust survivors. Alice's short fiction, essays and reviews have appeared in publications such as *The Sydney Review of Books*, *The Asia Literary Review*, and *Southerly*. She has completed writing residencies at Varuna in New South Wales, Cape Cod in America and Languedoc in France. Alice has lived and worked in Harlem, in the house where *The Children's House*, her second novel, is set.

Questions for discussion

- This novel is set in the years 1997–2000, and most of the action is set in New York with flashbacks to a life in a kibbutz in Israel. What are your thoughts about this structure?
- The writer navigates big cultural issues with a light touch. She describes the streets of the Upper East Side being full of “dark-skinned nannies pushing blond children in strollers”. What do you think the author is saying about white privilege?
- How does the writer evoke the Rwandan genocide through the figures of Constance and her son Gabriel? How do both these characters deal with trauma?
- Marina and her husband Jacob have a tender relationship that hints at the trauma they have both faced. How is their trauma different to that of Constance and Gabriel?
- How do you read the character of Ben and his withdrawal from the comfortable and loving life his father and Marina have provided for him? Do you feel sympathy for his lack of gratitude?
- Discuss the various mothers – Gizela, Rose, Leni, Marina and Constance – in the novel and how their experiences of dysfunctional upbringings and trauma affect the way they behave as mothers and carers of children. What parallels and contrasts are there between these characters? How do the children cope with an absence of maternal love?
- The title of the novel refers to the communal method of raising children in Israeli kibbutzim. Children lived in the children’s house and only had contact with their parents for a short time each day. What impact has this practice had on various characters in the novel?
- Displacement and the search for a sense of belonging are key themes in this novel. Discuss the range of ways – both successful and unsuccessful – in which different characters navigate this.
- What do you think is the main message of this story? Is it that human beings are inherently fragile, or that families can stay together even if parents fail and children cannot forgive? Is it about the importance of empathy, the value of kindness, or something else altogether?

If you liked this book, you may also like...

The Historian’s Daughter, Rashida Murphy, (UWA Publishing)

The Wounded Sinner, Gus Henderson, (Magabala Books)

Drawing Sybylla, Odette Kelada, (UWA Publishing)

Leaving Elvis and other stories, Michelle Michau-Crawford, (UWA Publishing)