

The Red Witch – Book Club Notes

Summary

Nathan Hobby evokes the ghost of Katharine Susannah Prichard (1883–1969) with reverence, research and warmth in his comprehensive biography, *The Red Witch*. The first half of the book chronicles Prichard's childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, during which time she wrote, travelled and rebelled. The latter half focuses on her political life and literary achievements, experienced alongside matrimony, motherhood, war and widowhood.

From the publication of Prichard's award-winning debut novel, *The Pioneers*, to the building of her infamous workroom, Hobby's perceptive insights illuminate the depths of his research, in which archival records carry invisible but significant weight. Linking Prichard's literary successes and communist leanings with her unconventional personal life, Hobby paints a detailed portrait of this beloved Australian author; heavy with connection and laced with contrast.

Following in the tradition of art imitating Prichard's life – and vice-versa – Hobby de-fictionalises the controversial figure who spent so many decades fictionalising herself.

About the Author

Nathan Hobby is a Perth author, librarian and honorary research fellow at the University of Western Australia. His novel *The Fur* won the TAG Hungerford Award and was published by Fremantle Press in 2004. He blogs at nathanhobby.com.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Which quintessentially Australian aspects of Prichard's writing best embody her own cultural context, and does this overlap emphasise the autobiographical elements present in much of her fiction?
- 2) Do you think inspiration drawn from Bernard O'Dowd's *The Poet Militant* (page 73) impacted themes of sex and political reform in Prichard's own writing?
- 3) In Prichard's novel *Working Bullocks* (page 185), could Mark Smith's disappointment in Red Burke reflect Prichard's feelings towards Hugo's compromised ideals, or might the dynamic represent an embodied political commentary? Could it be both? Neither? Why or why not?
- 4) Prichard's play *The Burglar* (page 74) includes a scene in which a soliloquy to a burglar is said to express Prichard's personal sentiments. Would you consider these comments (on the unrespectability of respectable society) to be reasonable assertions? If so, is Sally's soliloquy still relevant, or has Australian society improved over time?
- 5) When *The Bulletin* serialised Prichard's award-winning novel *Coonardoo* in 1928, many readers complained about the depiction – as opposed to the literal existence – of the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women. How does this issue, and its subtextual hypocrisy, relate to Prichard's conception of writing as a means of revealing life's problems?
- 6) Was Prichard's *Coonardoo*-era emphasis on benevolence towards (rather than liberation of) Indigenous people aligned with her anti-fascist views?
- 7) Can you think of any specific examples by which Prichard's work would have been considered progressive by her contemporaries and yet problematic by the standards of today? Does this distinction matter? Why or why not?

- 8) Prichard visited Moscow in the 1930s in order to witness the utopian ideals of communism first-hand. By the early 1940s, anti-communist attitudes had begun to spread throughout Australia. The Communist Party of Australia, which Prichard co-founded, was eventually declared illegal. How did these events influence Prichard's later work?
- 9) How did social realism control the public expression of political alignment in the time of Prichard's visit to Moscow (page 260), and how does post-war social realism compare with twenty-first century incarnations of media censorship and cancel culture?
- 10) To Prichard, socialism stood for 'justice, light, reason, love, and honesty; capitalism for greed, for war, for oppression of the weak, overworking and underpaying of men, women and children,' (page 160). She considered ignorance and greed to be the main defenders of capitalism. How do you think these views were reflected in her writing? Did Prichard's conception of communism alter over time?
- 11) In a review of Prichard's novel *The Roaring Nineties*, Joan Williams referred to the author as a 'Marxist interpreting history with clarity and vision' (page 311), whereas a *Bulletin* review of *Golden Miles* describes Prichard as being a 'propagandist' (page 317). Do either of these descriptions seem more (or less) accurate to you in terms of Prichard's motivation, the quality of her prose and the perceptions of her readers? If so, which one, and why?
- 12) In Hobby's Afterword, he describes visiting Prichard's former home (now the KSP Writer's Centre) to see Louise Helfgott's *Potchnagoola* creatively resurrect Prichard through the medium of theatre. *The Red Witch* essentially achieves the same end, framing captured memories in the service of painting a portrait. In your opinion, would Prichard herself approve of this artistic immortality?

If you liked this book, you may also like:

Wild Weeds and Windflowers: The Life and Letters of Katharine Susannah Prichard by Ric Throssell (Allen & Unwin)

Elizabeth Macarthur's Letters by Kate Grenville (Text Publishing)

The Magnificent Life of Miss May Holman by Lekkie Hopkins (Fremantle Press)

Outback Pioneers: Great Achievers of the Australian Bush by Evan McHugh (Penguin Australia)

Miss Muriel Matters by Robert Wainwright (Allen & Unwin Australia)

The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from origins to illegality by Stuart Macintyre (Allen & Unwin)

Miles Franklin: A Short Biography by Jill Roe (HarperCollins Publishing)

A Fortunate Life by A. B. Facey (Fremantle Press)

Spies and Sparrows: ASIO and the Cold War by Phillip Deery (Melbourne University Publishing)

Intimate Strangers by Katharine Susannah Prichard (Collins/Angus & Robertson)