

Blue Skies

Helen Hodgman

ISBN 978-1-921758-13-3

RRP AUS \$29.95, NZ \$35.00

Fiction, Trade Paperback



Praise

'A memorable novella—sensuous, strange, prickly as a sea-urchin.' **Nicholas Shakespeare**

'A strange and memorable novel, rich in short circuits, cross currents, half themes. A potent voice, then and now.' **Eva Hornung**

'A small and scarily unforgettable classic.' Peter Conrad

'A born writer with a style and élan which are all her own.' **Auberon Waugh**

'This novel still has a masterpiece's power to thrill and discomfort. Text's rerelease of this classic is a brilliant move.' **Sunday Tasmanian**

About Helen Hodgman

Helen Hodgman is the author of the novels *Jack and Jill* (1978; winner of the Somerset Maugham Award), *Broken Words* (1988; winner of the Christina Stead Prize), *Passing Remarks* (1996), *Waiting for Matindi* (1998) and *The Bad Policeman* (2001). *Blue Skies* was first published in 1976.

A reader's introduction to *Blue Skies*

Blue Skies is set in Hobart in an unnamed time that the book's pedigree suggests is somewhere in the early '70s. The core of this story is familiar to many of us. A young woman, thrust unexpectedly into motherhood, suburbia and married life, struggles with the loneliness of days spent alone but for a baby she feels no connection to. From there the book deviates from convention. There is a sense of foreboding through the narrative that sweeps you up and keeps you enthralled. *Blue Skies* wraps around you like a comforting but heavy darkness, and Hodgman's writing charismatically draws you willingly to places and thoughts you are not sure you want to experience.

We feel we need to connect with the narrator, to help her through her lonely days, but she gives herself no name and in fact rarely refers to her baby as anything

but 'James's daughter' or 'the baby'. She keeps us at arm's length, and yet invites us into the confronting oasis of her Tuesdays and Thursdays. These days are her escape from all that is dragging her under. Tuesdays she spends with restaurateur Jonathan and Thursdays are for Ben, an artist and the husband of her closest friend.

Woven through the story is her obsessive interest in the neighbour next door, who has moved from Melbourne. Through the venetian blinds she watches the woman tend a tortured, unsuccessful lawn, and is disturbed by this attempt to tame nature. Frustrations about her marriage, her new life as a mother and her troubled affairs seem to find expression in the incessant drone of the electric mower outside her window.

Questions for discussion

1. The novel opens with the narrator watching her new neighbour oversee the builders as they steal away the uninterrupted view to the beach. The neighbour's house goes up; the woman, who introduces herself as Olive but 'call me Ollie', moves in and begins her ceaseless abuse of the previously untrammelled land, a desperate attempt to cultivate a lush lawn. Throughout the narrative we keep returning to our protagonist watching Ollie and her lawn. She seems to view each glide of the woman's electric mower over the tortured grass as a personal affront. What is behind these feelings? What does Ollie represent to our narrator?
2. What does *Blue Skies* say about the nature of the relationship between mother and baby? As outsiders looking in, can we truly know or understand another's feelings about motherhood?
3. She watches everyone—the other mothers at the beach, the woman next door with her obsessive ministrations of her lawn—seemingly without any interest in connecting with any of them. She speaks scathingly of their habits and pursuits, but does she ultimately wish she could share their comfortable rapport?

4. She introduces us to her story by telling us of the weekend they visited her future in-laws to tell them of their pending grandchild. It is clear that the pregnancy was unplanned and, as she takes herself to the nearby beach alone, she likens her situation to being 'like the poor dumb female turtle' who had 'just laid a load of eggs in great distress and difficulty and hadn't a hope of making it back to the sea, but, exhausted, was going to die'. Are these the standard apprehensions of a woman unexpectedly facing motherhood, or an early sign of a woman in need of help?
5. Near the beginning of the novel she tells us of a burgeoning collection of rubbish in her carport. Things reach crisis proportions when the doors begin to bulge outwards and the garbage begins to stink. It becomes obvious that the problem will not go away and, terrified her secret will be exposed, she calls in industrial cleaners to clear the mess up. What does her approach to this problem tell us about her? Is this a microcosm of all her problems?
6. Secrets and lies or an open, fluid approach to the moral complexities of relationships: are the characters aware of the nature of their relationships? Can this kind of shared, intertwined, interchanging version of love actually work?
7. For much of the novel, the prescription for a possible medical remedy to what ails her lies unused in a vase on the mantelpiece. Why does it take so long for her to take the medication? Given the end result, was it a solution of sorts or was there something else she needed?
8. Perhaps she was unsuited to the role of at-home mother, a suburban housewife, or was she simply unprepared or not adequately supported? Does our society facilitate or allow women to feel fulfilled in this role or have we evolved beyond this being 'enough'?
9. The men she runs to on Tuesday and Thursday have lives that vibrantly contrast with the solitary days as a young mother she spends away from them. Do they then provide a good respite from the mothering days she finds so challenging?
10. *Blue Skies* is described by critics as having 'a marvellous economy of words' and as being 'a small and scarily unforgettable classic', and the author is said to 'rarely waste a word'. Is the book short and sweet, or too brief to adequately explore the complexities of the tale?
11. It is commonplace for novels to find new lives on our screens. Would this story translate well to film? How important is the book's setting to the story, and would this have a bearing on a film version?
12. How does a book like this sit in our current world of closing bookshops and an increasing reliance on blockbuster, follow-on titles? Can forgotten or neglected classics become new hits?