

SARAH ARMSTRONG

His Other House

Does love
mean always
telling the
truth?

BOOK CLUB SELECTION

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HIS OTHER HOUSE

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HIS OTHER HOUSE



He was dismayed how readily he took to lying. He'd always thought of it as a decisive abandonment of the truth. Instead, he realised, it was simply a matter of one word slipping into the place of another.

Dr Quinn Davidson and his wife Marianna have endured years of unsuccessful IVF and several miscarriages, and Quinn can't face another painful attempt to conceive. Marianna is desperate to be a mother and their marriage is feeling the strain. At a small-town practice a few hours from their home, Quinn meets Rachel, the daughter of one of his patients. Drawn to each other, it's not long before they find themselves in a passionate affair and Quinn realises he must choose between the two women. Then Marianna announces a surprise natural conception, news that will change the course of all their lives.

Set in the lush Australian subtropics, this taut emotional drama poses questions about moral courage and accountability, and asks whether love means always telling the truth.

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A LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER

Hello,

His Other House (Macmillan) is Sarah Armstrong's first novel in a decade. Her first novel *Salt Rain* was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2005.

His Other House follows the story of Dr Quinn Davidson, his wife Marianna who is desperate to conceive after several miscarriages, and Rachel, a neighbour Quinn meets in the small country town where he performs locum work. Quinn regards himself as a good man, but the loss of so many pregnancies takes a toll on his marriage to Marianna. Soon he finds himself in a passionate affair with Rachel. He decides to end his marriage and leave Marianna for Rachel, but before he is able to do so, he receives news that causes him to have serious doubts that this is the right thing to do. What Quinn chooses to do next was a complete surprise and kept me hooked till the very end.

I loved *His Other House*, because it provoked me intellectually and emotionally, and prompted me to interrogate my own moral code. Would I be Marianna, Quinn or Rachel in this scenario – all of whom exhibit very human failings when challenged by how to act morally when following their passion seems to involve behaving badly.

I felt this was a book that would inspire passionate debate among book clubs, it certainly has among the members of my book club who have read an ARC! It sits nicely alongside Jodi Picoult, Anita Shreve and Hannah Richell in the moral dilemma that it poses to the reader; but Sarah's writing is so accomplished that I think you'll agree that we may well have a new master of this genre on our hands!

I do hope you get as much out of *His Other House* as I have.

With best wishes,

Alex Craig

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A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

SARAH ARMSTRONG

Hello,

I wanted to share with you a little bit of background about *His Other House*, and how I got to be writing about such a topic.

A few years ago I read a newspaper article about a man in Wollongong, near Sydney, who had been juggling two families at the same time (and who was found out!). I'd heard, over the years, of other men who'd done something similar and it made me wonder how these men got themselves into such a situation: did they plan it? Or was it something that just happened which they then found too hard to extricate themselves from?

I also wondered how they justified it to themselves and how they managed things so they weren't found out (at least for a while).

Once I started work on the story – and mentioned to friends what I was writing – I was astounded by how many people knew of such a scenario. I'd say that eight times out of ten that I mentioned it, I'd be told of another 'man with two families' scenario.

In *His Other House* I wanted to explore how a 'good man' could do such a thing, so I tried to make Quinn a likeable character, even if he does something terrible, even if he fails to muster his moral courage and be honest with his wife.

While writing, I ended up thinking a lot about honesty and transparency in relationships and the extent to which we hide parts of ourselves from the person we are supposedly closest to in the world. It was more than a little personally confronting at times, it must be said, and I made a decision to be more honest and vulnerable in my own relationship (not – I hasten to add – that I have anything as dire as Quinn to confess).

There's part of me in each of the characters, even Quinn, but perhaps most of me in Marianna (and it was slightly unnerving when some early readers said they liked her the least). I, too, endured IVF treatment and two heartbreaking miscarriages and, like Marianna, was pretty much obsessed with having a baby. Luckily, Alan and I were successful with IVF and our beautiful daughter Amelia was born in 2010.

I hope you enjoy *His Other House*, and I want to thank you in advance for your support. I especially hope that if you do select *His Other House* for your book club that an interesting and lively discussion ensues!

Warm regards,

Sarah Armstrong

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PLOT SUMMARY

Part One

Dr Quinn Davidson is a specialist doctor based in Brisbane. He is married to Marianna, who he met at university, and for the last four years they have been trying to conceive a child. Together they have undergone extensive IVF treatment and suffered four heartbreaking miscarriages, the most recent when they had entered the second trimester and had happily begun to prepare the family home.

When Quinn visits their friend Bill in the small country town of Corimbi, over the border in New South Wales, he meets local GP Jim Stanton who invites him to work in town a couple of days a week. He welcomes the idea, secretly desperate to find some respite from Marianna's despair and the pressure to keep trying for a baby.

Living part-time at Bill's house in Corimbi, Quinn meets Rachel. She is a successful TV producer and the daughter of Bill's elderly neighbour, Emily, who is Quinn's patient. One evening, they run into each other at the local pool, beginning a secret ritual of breaking into the pool at night to free-dive together. Deeply attracted to one another and eager for a distraction from their grief (Quinn from the miscarriages, Rachel from the impending death of her mother and the childhood drowning of her eight-year-old brother), their desire develops into an intimate romance. One day, Quinn lies to Marianna so that he can stay with Rachel by her dying mother's bedside. That night, Emily passes away and their bond is solidified: Quinn will leave Marianna and move to Corimbi to be with Rachel.

When Quinn drives back to Brisbane to end his marriage, Marianna hands him a positive pregnancy test, sending him reeling.

Part Two

Part Two is set five years after Part One, and opens with Quinn at home in Corimbi with Rachel and their young son, Ned, suggesting that Quinn has ended his marriage to be with Rachel. However, we soon discover that he never did leave Marianna. Unable to abandon a pregnant Marianna and somewhat cruelly assuming she would likely miscarry again, he had decided to wait it out. In the meantime, Rachel announced her own pregnancy, and Quinn began a dual life. When the daughter he fathered to Marianna (Adie) and his son with Rachel (Ned) were born, a mere fortnight apart, he fell in love with both babies and couldn't bear to leave either of them. He continued his secretive double life, with no end in sight.

Rachel, increasingly frustrated with Quinn's inability to commit fully to her and Ned, begins to open up to people around Corimbi about their secret. Following a particularly candid ladies' night, Rachel drives home tipsy and crashes Quinn's car. Injured and upset, she walks home and confronts Quinn with a veiled threat to expose their secret once and for all. Seeing no other option, Quinn finally confesses to Marianna.

With the truth finally revealed, all their lives are thrown into turmoil and Quinn may lose more than he ever imagined.

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THEMES

LOVE AND HONESTY

His Other House asks the question: does love mean always telling the truth? The protagonist, Dr Quinn Davidson, claims to love two women, but is honest with only one of them. Do you think this is a result of circumstances, or do you believe his love for Rachel is more genuine than his apparent love for Marianna?

- Is absolute honesty necessary in a loving relationship? Or are small omissions and white lies acceptable?
- If a person is attracted to someone outside their relationship, should this be confessed? What about a kiss? A one-night stand?

When Quinn was a child, his mother had an extra-marital affair. Unlike Quinn, however, she never hid the affair from her husband, Evan. She was frank and honest with him, and they remained married until her early death. As Evan explains to his son, 'You don't get that we still loved each other... And she was honest with me. Always honest. From the first moment she was attracted to him, she told me. I always knew what was going on.' (p243)

Quinn's father does, however, express regrets about not asking his wife to end her affair. He says to Quinn, 'I wanted your mother to stay. It sounds crazy but I didn't think I could live without her so I was prepared to sell myself short. I betrayed myself as much as she betrayed me. And I'm sorry because it wasn't good for you and Tom.' (p301)

- Did Quinn's mother act with integrity by being honest, or did she take advantage of Evan's neediness? Do you think her openness was ultimately better for her family than Quinn's secrecy? Or was the damage different, but no less significant?
- After their fourth miscarriage, Quinn wants to stop trying for a child and asks Marianna for a break. Considering that Marianna is desperate to conceive and time is of the essence, do you think it is fair of him to ask for a break when he really wants to never try again? If he is frank with her, might it set their lives on a completely different course, one not tainted by the deceit that follows?

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THEMES

MORALITY

Quinn had always believed himself to be a good man: "He understood now that he had imagined himself a good man, if not some kind of quintessentially good man. As if his morals were a fixed point, some place from which to measure others." (p132)

When Quinn is first attracted to Rachel, he knows that to act on his desires would be wrong and vows to fight the temptation. But he soon discovers, as does Rachel, that "...desire iron(s) out morality" (p126) and he begins a sexual relationship with Rachel, ultimately pursuing a secret relationship with her.

Throughout the novel, Quinn is torn between mustering moral courage and justifying moral cowardice. He convinces himself that by leading a double life, he is making the best of a messy, unmanageable situation and accepts accountability only when he is forced to do so. Even amid the fallout of his confession, he challenges his wife about when he should have told her: 'At which point, Marianna? You seem to assume there was some perfectly clear moment for me to tell you, some morally unequivocal point in time —'. (p320)

His father Evan suggests that there was never one perfect opportunity to confess: 'There were hundreds if not thousands of moments you might have told her, Quinn. You let all of them slide by, not just one.' (p346)

- Do you believe there is a particular moment he should tell Marianna about Rachel?

Quinn reflects on this and wonders where one finds moral clarity. "Were some people just born with it and lived a life guided by a clear moral code, however uncomfortable it might feel?" (p353)

- Do you think that moral clarity is an innate quality we are either born with or without? Or is it more like a muscle we each possess, and Quinn simply failed to exercise and strengthen his morality? Can people be described as morally righteous, or just their actions?
- Rachel sleeps with Bill while she and Quinn are in a relationship and raising a child together. Do you think this is a betrayal or a mere balancing of the scales?
- 'It's a terrible thing to think that you actually held your brother's life in your hands.' She cupped her hands. 'And that you . . . tipped him out.' (p141) Do you believe that that Rachel is as responsible as she feels for her younger brother's death? Do you share Rachel's view that she was old enough to look after her brother? 'Quinn had held her when they woke before dawn and she'd wanted to tell him that what she'd done was far worse than what he'd done.' (p276) Is she right to think that what she did was worse?
- Do you think Marianna's reaction when Quinn tells her the truth is justified? Does she have the right to take Adie away from Quinn? Does Rachel have the right to (effectively) take Ned away from Quinn? Should Quinn argue that their mothers' feelings do not give them the right to remove the children from him?

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CHARACTERS

QUINN

Quinn is a hard-working and competent doctor, as well as an attentive partner and father. He had struggled with his mother's unabashed adultery when he was growing up, feeling that she both betrayed and embarrassed the family, swearing never to forgive her for flaunting her affair. (p205) When faced with a similar dilemma, he chooses to hide his affair and his second family. It seems that he wants to provide a stable father figure and save his children from the shame that he experienced.

- Do you think Quinn leads his dual life for the sake of his two families – and especially the children – as he claims? Or was he motivated by selfishness and indecision?
- Does the fact that he is an attentive and loving father make you less critical of his choice to continue his double life?

MARIANNA

Marianna is preoccupied with her fertility and planning a family at the start of the novel. After the almost miraculous birth of Adie, she invests most of her time and energy into raising her daughter.

- Do you think Marianna missed the signs of Quinn's other life completely? Or did she wilfully turn a blind eye to her husband's strange behaviour and prolonged absences in order to preserve the family she had worked so hard to create?
- Would it have been better for Marianna if Quinn had told her as soon as he and Rachel kissed, even if it meant, as he said to her at the waterhole, 'Well, that would have been before you were pregnant with Adie. If I'd done that, we wouldn't have Adie'? (p320)

RACHEL

Rachel is Quinn's mistress. She pursues him romantically even though she knows he is married, later sleeping with Bill while committed to Quinn. She also carries guilt stemming from the death of her eight-year-old brother under her care when she was just twelve, and she loses her mother during the course of the novel.

- Do you think of Rachel as a sympathetic character? Do you believe she should be as accountable as Quinn for the affair and their double life? Or is she just as much a victim of Quinn's moral failings as his wife?

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SETTING

His Other House is set in the Australian subtropics, between the suburbs of Brisbane and the fictional New South Wales country town of Corimbi. Much of the story takes place at the cottage Rachel inherits on the outskirts of Corimbi, surrounded by hills and thick forest.

"If he could manage it, he left work early on the afternoons he was in Corimbi and as soon as he got home the three of them would set off for a walk through the bush; they got muddy and swam naked in the creek and kept Ned up too late playing made-up board games. Quinn liked himself more when he was at Rachel's; as if he were more like what he thought of as his real, uncomplicated self, the self he remembered being when he was about nine." (p193)

- The contrast between the neat, civilised setting of suburbia and the untamed country is representative of the difference between Quinn's strained marriage to Marianna and his easy relationship with Rachel. Do you think this provides commentary on the superficiality or materialism of contemporary suburban living? Would we all perhaps feel more our "real, uncomplicated" selves if we were more in touch with our environment?

WRITING STYLE

His Other House is written in third-person. The story is mostly told from Quinn's perspective, though some chapters are written from Marianna's or Rachel's points of view. The novel is also divided into two parts: Part One commences when Quinn first starts working in Corimbi and concludes when Marianna announces her pregnancy; Part Two takes place five years after Part One.

- The story starts from Rachel's perspective. How does this foreshadow her role in the story?
- How did the chronological leap from the end of Part One to the beginning of Part Two affect the narrative for you? Did it generate dramatic tension as you gradually found out what had happened in the intervening five years? Or did you want those missing years spelt out in more detail?
- The conclusion of the novel is quite open-ended. If there were a Part Three, taking place a further five years into the future, where do you think Quinn, Marianna, Rachel and the children would be?

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