

READING NOTES

EVEN THE DEEPEST SECRETS RISE TO THE SURFACE . . .

THE SURVIVORS

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BLURB

Kieran Elliot's life changed forever on the day a reckless mistake led to devastating consequences.

The guilt that still haunts him resurfaces during a visit to the small coastal community he once called home.

Kieran's parents are struggling in a town where fortunes are forged by the sea. Between them all is his absent brother, Finn.

When a body is discovered on the beach, long-held secrets threaten to emerge. A sunken wreck, a missing girl, and questions that have never washed away.

THE AUTHOR

Jane Harper is the author of the international bestsellers *The Dry*, *Force of Nature* and *The Lost Man*. Her books are published in forty territories worldwide, and *The Dry* has been adapted into a major motion picture starring Eric Bana. Jane has won numerous top awards including the Australian Book Industry Awards Book of the Year, the Australian Indie Awards Book of the Year, the CWA Gold Dagger Award for Best Crime Novel, and the British Book Awards Crime and Thriller Book of the Year. Jane worked as a print journalist for thirteen years both in Australia and the UK, and now lives in Melbourne with her husband and two children.



PLOT SUMMARY

Kieran Elliott returns to his childhood home with his girlfriend and three-month-old daughter to help his parents pack for a permanent move to the city. His father, Brian, has early-onset dementia and now needs fulltime care; his mother, Verity, is depressed and stressed. It is a tense time: the small Tasmanian coastal town of Evelyn Bay has been Brian and Verity's home for decades, and it is the place in which Kieran's older brother, Finn, lost his life in an accident twelve years previous – an accident in which Kieran played a part.

Shockingly, the morning after their arrival, a young woman is found dead on the beach. She has drowned – there are signs of foul play. The local police sergeant is joined by detectives from Hobart to investigate the case.

In the course of their investigation, questions are inevitably raised about another girl last seen on a beach in Evelyn Bay: fourteen-year-old local Gabby Birch, who disappeared during the same storm in which Finn and his business partner Toby were killed. Although Gabby's backpack washed up on the beach a few days later, her body has never been found.

Despite being deeply reluctant to revisit the events of the storm that nearly caused Kieran's own death and which have scarred him ever since, Kieran is drawn into the new investigation, along with his childhood friends Ash, Sean and Olivia, Gabby's older sister. The investigation stirs up old guilt, jealousy, rage and grief throughout the community, and accusations and grievances that have been long buried find their way to the surface.

Then new evidence comes to light that suggests things did not unfold as everyone believes during the storm. As the pieces of the puzzle fall into place for Kieran, he realises the answers to both mysteries are much closer to home than he ever suspected . . .

THEMES

THE REPERCUSSIONS OF PAST TRAUMA

1. The book is named after the sculpture called 'The Survivors' that stands sentry at the caves in Evelyn Bay, and which is almost a character in its own right. Discuss the meaning and significance of the title and the sculpture in the context of the book and its characters.
2. *[Sean] wasn't quite the same person he'd been in the time Kieran now simply thought of as before, but none of them were. Mia, Ash, Olivia, Olivia's mother, Kieran's own parents. Liam. Kieran himself, obviously. No-one had come through the storm unscathed.* (Page 23)

After the storm, Kieran accepted that he was partly to blame for the deaths of his brother and Toby. How do you think this influenced the way he lived his life from that point on? How do the events of the novel change this, and what effect might that have on Kieran's future?



3. The doctor advises Kieran, *'Do not let yourself get sideswiped by this, all right? There's going to be a lot to deal with emotionally, so be prepared. You need some sort of release that's not going to end up with you dead or miserable or in jail. So take me seriously when I say this: find something positive that helps.'* (Page 43)

Why do you think Kieran is more successful than some of the other characters at living with the trauma he experienced? What are some of the ways in which the other characters try to cope, and how successful are they?

4. *How would Kieran measure up against the nightmare of his own child lost? He thought about Trish, and Bronte's parents, and – his heart clenched in a familiar way – Brian and Verity. He could feel the flutter of Audrey's pulse. He didn't know how any of them got through a single day. He couldn't bring himself to imagine what it took.* (Pages 314-315)

How has meeting Mia and becoming a parent changed Kieran's perception of his parents and Trish Birch?

5. Kieran's relationship with his parents was irrevocably changed after his brother's death. How has Brian's dementia wrought further changes, both positive and negative?

6. How has Olivia's life been affected by the loss of her sister Gabby in the storm?

7. Liam Gilroy says to Kieran, *'You kind of ruined my life, you know?'* (Page 158) How have Liam's father's death and the circumstances in which it occurred shaped the man Liam has become?

TOXIC MASCULINITY

The idea of what makes a 'good Aussie bloke' is one of the themes in this novel. In death, Finn and Toby are remembered as 'top blokes' and any evidence to the contrary is firmly denied. In the year of the storm, when they're eighteen, Kieran and Ash are not even aware of the ways in which their behaviour, particularly towards women, might be harmful. Sean is different, and there is distance between the three friends as a result.

1. What are some of the behaviours described in the novel that lend weight to the idea of a culture of toxic masculinity in Australian society?

2. The opening of Chapter 11 (page 95) describes all the ways in which Finn Elliott was *'the real deal'*. Later, we see some examples of behaviour that paint Finn in a less flattering light. However, many of these more questionable behaviours are excused, or even celebrated. What do you think this says about the idea of masculinity in our society?

3. *[Olivia had] been around a lot, but not with them. Because while Kieran and Ash had a strong preference for the holiday-happy girls who stayed at sea view cabins or the caravan park before disappearing back to the mainland two weeks later, Olivia and her friends had a strong preference for guys who were nothing like Kieran and Ash.* (Page 76)



What are some examples shown in the book of ways in which women are affected by or victims of the sort of behaviour Finn, Toby, Kieran and Ash engage in, especially as teenagers and young men?

4. Kieran, Finn, Ash and Sean are all what many people might call ‘nice guys’ or ‘top blokes’: are they really?

5. *Because it must have been good fun, Kieran thought, otherwise why did they do it every weekend? But it was interesting looking back how the good fun had sometimes felt a lot like hard work. Like the time Finn had congratulated Ash for successfully talking some girl into taking him back to her accommodation. On hearing this, Kieran had rolled up his sleeves, gone to a party at the caravan park that very night and determinedly cast off his virginity in such a joylessly transactional exercise that the best bit had been being able to tell Ash and Finn it had happened.* (Page 209)

Kieran’s admission that some of the behaviours he took part in were not even fun speaks to the strength and predominance of this culture in our society. Why do you think that is?

SMALL TOWN COMMUNITIES

1. *In a place like Evelyn Bay, people knew each other’s business.* (Page 7)

What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of living in a small community? How do these play out in the novel?

2. George Barlin says of Evelyn Bay, *‘Places like this, they need to be tight-knit to work. Once the trust is broken, they’re stuffed. Whether people see it or not, the writing’s on the wall.’* (Page 326)

What do you think he means? Do you think this is true?

SOCIAL MEDIA

1. *A few [people] had uploaded a tiny thumbnail profile photo, but most hadn’t bothered, lurking instead behind the default anonymous grey silhouette. Most had adopted a pseudonym but Kieran recognised some of the names.* (Page 160)

What are some of the effects of the outpourings on the social media site EBOCH on Bronte’s murder investigation?

2. How is the ability to be anonymous on the site helpful or unhelpful?



CHARACTERS

KIERAN ELLIOTT

1. Mia says of the storm, *'I'm not for a minute saying that [what happened to Finn] was a good thing, of course not. But you're right. It did change your life, but I'm not sure it was in the way you sometimes think it was . . . Honestly, Kieran, I think it made you a better person. Kinder, definitely. More aware of other people, more conscious of your actions.'* (Page 331)

Do you think Mia is right? What was it about the events of the storm that prompted a change in Kieran? How did he continue to change in its aftermath?

SEAN GILROY

1. Did you suspect at any point that Sean might have been involved in either (or both) of the deaths of Bronte and Gabby? Why or why not, do you think?

2. *But looking at the letters now, still legible more than a decade after they'd been made into the rock face, Kieran couldn't believe he had been such a dickhead. He couldn't remember how he'd convinced himself this was a good idea, or even an acceptable one.* (Page 148)

At the time, Sean had tried to talk his friends out of writing their names in the rock, *'with predictable results'*. Sean paid a social price for his non-conformity. What were some of the ways Sean was different from Kieran and Ash growing up? How was he kept on the outer?

3. Why do you think Sean feels so angry, humiliated and frightened when his attempt to kiss Gabby is rejected?

4. What effect has the secret of Gabby Birch's death had on Sean's life since the storm, do you think?

ASH MCDONALD

1. Ash and Kieran were once very close, but have grown into quite different men. Why, do you think? How have their experiences differed, and what effect has this had on them?

2. Do you think Ash's relationship with Olivia will survive? Why or why not?



SETTING

1. The small Tasmanian coastal town of Evelyn Bay is the central setting of the novel. How does this setting inform our ideas about the people who live there and the events that take place there? How does the setting itself impact the events of the novel?
2. The treacherous caves in Evelyn Bay are the location for several major events in this book. It is near here that Finn and Toby died and where Kieran survived, it is where Kieran and Olivia met in secret and where the boys scratched their names into the rock, and it is where Gabby Birch was left to die. It is also the location of the sculpture of 'The Survivors'. In what ways does the idea of the caves, and the risks and pleasures they offer, permeate the novel?

WRITING STYLE

1. Jane Harper has chosen to tell this story in the third person past tense, almost entirely from Kieran's point of view. What is the effect of this? How does it shape the reader's understanding of Kieran himself, as well as of the other characters in the novel?
2. The novel begins with a prologue from an omniscient viewpoint that describes a scene between an anonymous man and woman. Why do you think the author chose to open the book with this scene? What is the effect of this prologue, and how could it be seen to be misleading? What does this suggest to us about the assumptions we make?