

ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

She hears her own thick voice deep inside her ears when she says, 'I need to know where I am.' The man stands there, tall and narrow, hand still on the doorknob, surprised. He says, almost in sympathy, 'Oh, sweetie. You need to know what you are.'

Two women awoken from a drugged sleep to find themselves imprisoned in a broken-down property in the middle of nowhere. Strangers to each other, they have no idea where they are or how they came to be there with eight other girls, forced to wear strange uniforms, their heads shaved, guarded by two inept yet vicious armed jailers and a 'nurse'. The girls all have something in common, but what is it? What crime has brought them here from the city? Who is the mysterious security company responsible for this desolate place with its brutal rules, its total isolation from the contemporary world?

Doing hard labour under a sweltering sun, the prisoners soon learn what links them: in each girl's past is a sexual scandal with a powerful man. They pray for rescue - but when the food starts running out it becomes clear that the jailers have also become the jailed. The girls can only rescue themselves...

The Natural Way of Things is a gripping, starkly imaginative exploration of contemporary misogyny and corporate control, and of what it means to hunt and be hunted. Most of all, it is the story of two friends, their sisterly love and courage.

With extraordinary echoes of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Lord of the Flies*, *The Natural Way of Things* is a compulsively readable, scarifying and deeply moving contemporary novel. It confirms Charlotte Wood's position as one of our most thoughtful, provocative and fearless truth-tellers, as she unflinchingly reveals us and our world to ourselves.

About the author

Charlotte Wood is the author of five novels and a book of non-fiction, and editor of *The Writer's Room Interviews* magazine. Her last novel, *Animal People*, won the People's Choice medal in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and was longlisted for the Miles Franklin. Her books have been shortlisted for many prizes including the Miles Franklin and the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction. *The Australian* has described her as "one of our finest and most chameleonic writers". She lives in Sydney.

Reviews

'It's rare to pick up a novel and from the opening pages be not only gripped by the story on the page but also by the keenness of the intelligence and audacity of the imagination at work ... one hell of a novel by one of our most original and provocative writers!' - Stephen Romei, *The Weekend Australian*

'A work that will haunt the reader with its poetry and the stark truths buried within Wood's brilliant exploration of a toxic culture in extremis.' - Portia Lindsay, *The Australian*

"A unique and hypnotising work ... an unforgettable story. Wood is a gifted and inventive writer whose characters shock and surprise. Five stars." - Anastasia Gonis, *Good Reading* magazine

'As a man, to read it is as unsettling as receiving one piece of bad news after another. It is confronting. Yet anyone who reads it, man or woman, is going to be left with a sense that a long-hidden truth has been revealed to them. *The Natural Way of Things* is a brave, brilliant book. I would defy anyone to read it and not come out a changed person.' - Malcolm Knox, author of *The Wonder Lover*

'A fully imagined dystopian parable, vivid, insightful, the voices of young women echoing through the gum trees...'- Joan London, author of *The Golden Age*

'As allegory, as a novel, as vision and as art it is stunning.' - Christos Tsiolkas, author of *Barracuda*

'This is a stunning exploration of ambiguities - of power, of morality, of judgment. With a fearless clarity, Wood's elegantly spare and brutal prose dissects humanity, hatreds, our ambivalent capacities for friendship and betrayal, and the powerful appearance - always - of moments of grace and great beauty. The book's ending undid me through the shape of the world it reveals as much as its revisions of escape and survival. It will not leave you easily; it took my breath away.' - Ashley Hay, author of *The Railwayman's Wife*

For discussion

- ☞ 'You need to know what you are' (p.18). Consider this statement by Boncer. 'What' are these girls – to society, the media, the guards, their families and partners? And how do these conflicting perceptions ultimately shape the girls' sense of self?
- ☞ Compare and discuss your interpretations of 'Hardings International'. Who or what do they represent? And why do they want these girls removed from society?
- ☞ In what ways do you think gender impacted your reading of the book? If you have men and women in your reading group, discuss the different ways you related and reacted to the characters and events in the novel.
- ☞ Consider the developing relationship between Yolanda and Verla. What brings them together and, ultimately, sets them apart?
- ☞ Discuss the ways the book addresses issues surrounding the female body. How do the girls view their bodies? In what ways are they sites of both power and oppression?
- ☞ 'Animal blood and guts, the moon and the season. It was beyond her named self, beyond girl, or female. Beyond human, even.' (p. 193) What power and promise does the animal world increasingly hold for Yolanda? How does going back to a primitive state enable her understand herself and her world?

For discussion (cont...)

- ☞ Consider the conflicting representations of violence throughout the book. How does it challenge the boundaries between human and animal nature? Male and female? Power and oppression?
- ☞ Throughout the book, Wood creates a powerful tension between death and survival. Why do some characters die while others endure?
- ☞ What does the white horse symbolise for Verla?
- ☞ 'In *The Natural Ways of Things*, Wood creates a dystopian world through which we may better understand our own.' Discuss this statement.
- ☞ What is your interpretation of the final scene? Where are the girls going? And what kind of world are they leaving behind?

Suggested further reading

The Children – Charlotte Wood

Animal People – Charlotte Wood

Bad Behaviour – Rebecca Starford

The Handmaid's Tale – Margaret Atwood

The Lord of the Flies – William Golding

Heat and Light – Ellen van Neerven