About the Book

Small Acts of Disappearance describes the author’s affliction with an eating disorder which begins in university, and escalates into life-threatening anorexia over the next ten years. Fiona Wright is a highly regarded poet and critic, and her account of her illness is informed by a keen sense of its contradictions and deceptions, and by an awareness of the empowering effects of hunger, which is unsparing in its consideration of the author’s motives and actions. The essays offer perspectives on the eating disorder at different stages in Wright’s life: at university, where she finds herself in a radically different social world to the one she grew up in, in Sri Lanka as a fledgling journalist, in Germany as a young writer, in her hospital treatments back in Sydney. They combine travel writing, memoir and literary discussions of how writers like Christina Stead, Carmel Bird, Tim Winton, John Berryman and Louise Glück deal with anorexia and addiction; together with accounts of family life, the observation of detail and the humour which is so compelling in Wright’s poetry.

About the Author

Fiona Wright’s poetry book Knuckled (published by Giramondo in 2011) won the Dame Mary Gilmore Award for a first collection. Her poems and essays have been published in the Australian, Meanjin, Island, Overland, The Lifted Brow, Seizure and HEAT.

‘These are essays of startling intelligence and honesty, brilliant meditations on hunger in all its forms and the complex nature of creative desire.’ Ceridwen Doved

‘...more meditation than memoir: coolly observant, surprising in scope, and so fluidly ordered that its essays feel chronological even when they’re not....in its mixture of rawness and insight, Small Acts of Disappearance is a rare thing: a critical inquiry with a heartbeat.’ Saturday Paper

‘So supple and broad are these essays – ranging through biology, history, travel, politics and literature – that they’re not neatly classifiable as disease-memoirs. Instead, each essay works as a kind of poetic autoethnography, moving between inexplicable realities of the self and those of the world-at-large; between life’s surfaces and interiors.’ Katherine Wilson Sydney Morning Herald
Reading Group Notes
Small Acts of Disappearance, Fiona Wright

Fiona Wright on writing Small Acts of Disappearance

I think Small Acts of Disappearance may be an unusual book. That each of the essays within it has its own kind of approach towards the illness at the heart of the collection, and that while they are, inevitably, each about this illness, they’re always equally about something else as well – travel, literature, the history of medicine, the way we use narrative and metaphor within our lives. I like this because it is so similar to my experience of illness itself: it’s always present, always humming along, however quietly, beneath the noise of everyday life; it’s always a part, but not the totality, of any experience.

I wrote these essays over a four-year period, beginning shortly after my first admission in a day hospital for treatment for anorexia nervosa, a condition I’d only recently been able to recognise within myself, despite having lived with its symptoms for at least half a decade by that time. I started writing this book, that is, when the rug of my own delusion had been swiftly pulled out from under my feet, and it began very much as an attempt to understand exactly what had happened, and where and how I might stand instead.

But I realised very early that I am still fascinated by hunger, both because of what it offers those of us who fall under its spell (security, inviolability, sensuality, success) and because it is so contradictory an impulse – something that offers us control, but denies us agency in our own lives, that protects us from harm by bringing us ever closer to death, that makes our bodies more prominent even as it offers us the chance to disappear. This book is about these contradictions, about how it is that hunger can enchant us, and what it means to try and come back from being under its thrall.
Reading Group Notes
Small Acts of Disappearance, Fiona Wright

Discussion Questions

1. Small Acts of Disappearance doesn’t fit neatly into any genre, it’s not what is often called ‘sick-lit’, nor is it a memoir or an academic book. How would you describe the book to those who haven’t read it yet?

2. How did your thoughts about Wright’s illness change over the course of reading the book? Did you have preconceptions about anorexia before you started reading that changed or did the book confirm ideas that you already held?

3. What role do the essays on Australian literature play in the book? How does Wright’s discussion of these novels reframe your understanding of disordered eating? Has her interpretation of books like Cloudstreet brought your attention to similar patterns in other characters’ behaviour?

4. How did you feel reading the essays that dealt with Wright’s time in treatment? What do you think the ethics are of writing about those sessions?

5. In Small Acts of Disappearance, Wright’s family, friends, even lovers are often mentioned. Did reading the book prompt you reinterpret the behaviour of people that you know? Would it have an impact on the way that you respond to someone with disordered eating?

6. The relationship between hunger and creativity is one of the key themes that Wright teases out over the course of book. What did you think of the connections that she draws between her hunger and the creative process?

7. In this collection of essays, are there hints of Wright’s work as an award-winning poet? If so, in what ways is her skill as a poet revealed?

8. What possibilities do you think the essay form opens up in non-fiction writing? What effect does the essay form have on the way that you read the book and the way that you engaged with its content?