

THE HOPE FAULT

TRACY FARR

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Hope Fault is a novel about extended family: about steps and exes and fairy godmothers; about parents and partners who are missing, and the people who replace them. Set in the fictional town of Cassetown, Geologue Bay, in the south-west of Australia, Iris and her extended family – her ex-husband with his new wife and baby; her son, her best friend's daughter – gather in their holiday house for a long weekend, to pack up the house now that it has been sold. In the course of this weekend, their connections will be affirmed, and their frailties and secrets revealed – to the reader at least, if not to each other.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tracy Farr grew up in Australia, and has lived in New Zealand for twenty years; she calls both places home. Her debut novel, *The Life and Loves of Lena Gaunt* (Fremantle Press, 2013), was longlisted for the 2014 Miles Franklin Literary Award, shortlisted in 2014 for the Western Australian Premier's Book Award and Barbara Jefferis Award, and published in the UK and US in 2016. *The Hope Fault* is her second novel.

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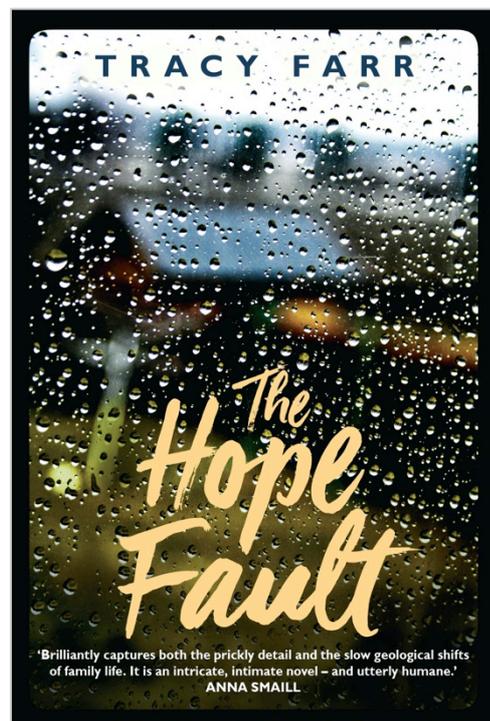
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This is a novel with a very particular structure. What is the effect of placing Rosa's part in the middle of the two present-day parts?
2. Do we see Iris differently when we encounter her again in part three of the novel?
3. Why do you think Farr chose to order the middle section as she has?
4. How does Iris think of her 'family' and what do you think the author is telling us about extended family?
5. *The Hope Fault* is about many different kinds of text: cartoons and drawing, the blanket Iris stitches, Luce's song, Rosa Fortune's *Faery Tales*, letters, postcards, Zigi's book of poems, geological reports and maps. Why do you think the author uses so many texts in her novel?
6. What is the relationship between these texts and the epigraph that begins the novel, as well as the epigraphs that begin each section?
7. How has Zigi found the poetry in geology? What role do poems play in his life?
8. How would you describe Kurt's state of mind? How well does his mother know him?
9. Who would you identify as the main characters in the novel?



10. What would you say is the role of the house in this novel?
11. What effect does it have on the reader when the rain finally stops?
12. How is the unnamed baby related to the progression of the story and why do you think the novel ends where it does?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What was the genesis of this multi-textual, multi-generational novel? Can you recall which character came first?

It started with setting myself the challenge of writing something different from my first novel, *The Life and Loves of Lena Gaunt*. Where that novel was told from the point of view of a single character, I wanted this new novel to have an ensemble cast of characters. I wanted to create a sense of rolling from one perspective to the next, of people talking (and thinking) over each other. I wanted them all to talk at once, occasionally, in chorus (those chorus chapters are some of my favourites in the novel). Where Lena Gaunt's story spanned most of the twentieth century, and much of the world, I wanted to bring all the characters together in this new novel, to focus tightly on a short time period, in one place – for the central strand of the narrative, at least.

Iris was the character who came to me first. In fact, I borrowed her from an incomplete novel that I long ago relegated to the Folder of Unfinished Manuscripts, but that's proved a rich source of characters – so far, it's given me starting points for Iris and Marti (in this novel) and Mo Patterson (in *The Life and Loves of Lena Gaunt*). My initial character concept was of a woman, Iris, who was at the centre of the lives of those around her – her elderly mother, her son, her ex, her best friend – and was busy organising everyone else's celebrations. That was the idea I started with, though it twisted off in other directions as I got deeper into the novel, and particularly as my sense of the other characters developed. Luce was the last character to be cast. When I introduced Luce, and worked out how she fitted into the story, everything finally clicked into place.

The idea of constructing the novel around different texts came a little way into the writing process, as I struggled to make sense of the material I had and how to pin it together. I tend to binge-write, then intermittently reverse engineer what I've written, take it apart to see how it works, trying to determine what I have to do to turn it into a coherent story. Reasonably early on, I mapped the different texts in the novel to their creator, their recipient/audience, their meaning; I even mapped them to rock or paper or scissors, as I tried to use that game as a way of structuring (or, more accurately, understanding) the novel. *Do whatever works, however weird it seems* is my writing motto.

Was it always your intention to explore and celebrate extended, messy, non-linear family in the way that you have? Were there any surprises for you in doing so?

In New Zealand, the word *whānau* means extended family, and that includes friends who may not have any formal kinship ties. The closest I can come in the Australian sense is *mob*. From the beginning, I've thought of this as a novel about mob, about whānau; 'a novel about a bunch of people' was how I described it to anyone who asked what I was working on.

I'm a big fan of mess, in life and fiction, and I've always been interested in the non-linear aspects of families. Some of our most important and supportive relationships are with close family friends, like aunts who aren't related by blood or marriage; and links with ex-partners often remain important long after the relationship is over. My own family has a lot of this sort of complexity, and I see it in other people's lives, too. So, right from the start I was interested in reflecting this in the novel.

But, as well as celebrating the rich and happy messiness of these strong connections, I was also interested in going a little deeper and darker. The novel explores some of the complex elements of family that get hidden, forgotten, misreported, or otherwise remain untold.

I think the only surprise for me came in seeing how the relationships of the cast of characters in the novel came together and played out and changed in the writing. I had the sense, not uncommon for a writer, that the characters were at times in charge of their own destinies, and half a step ahead of me as I wrote.

Was the distinctive structure of this novel there at its inception?

The separation into days – Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and so on – was there very early on in the writing process. I organised scenes that way to help myself keep track of what was happening when, though I didn't necessarily intend it to be as overt in the final novel as it is. At a certain stage, though, I realised that I really liked the clarity and separation of those sections of the contemporary narrative into days. It marks the passing of time, and adds to the sense and importance of household and home and the domestic; it shows light changing, and serves to turn down the bedclothes and turn the page at the end of each day. I was influenced, too, by Deborah Levy's *Swimming Home*, a novel that obsessed me while I was writing, and which is also marked out into days.

I struggled a great deal with the overall structure of this novel. It was really important to me to constrain the focus of the Cassetown parts of the novel to a tight time and place, to have the sense of all the characters coming to the house, and all of the action taking place there over a very short space of time. But Rosa's not with the family at the house over that long weekend; so, if I wanted to tell Rosa's story – and I did want to – I had to find a way of doing so *apart* from the Cassetown story, without breaking that attention. The separation of the novel into three parts, and how those three parts work separately and together, came very late in the writing process, when I was just about ready to give up!

I was very lucky to have funding from Creative New Zealand that allowed me to work full time for six months to complete the novel, after I had a first draft written. That funding gave me the time and space to try different things, to read widely, to approach the problem obliquely, and – most importantly – to sometimes just let it simmer and turn itself over in my mind until I worked out the shape of the novel. During that six months, I had a two-week residential fellowship at Varuna, and really broad-ranging conversations I had with other writers there – particularly Jessie Cole and Eliza Henry-Jones – sparked off some ideas that helped get me on the right track. And finally, at a late stage in the process, the structure became obvious to me. One day I didn't know how to put the novel together; the next, it was absolutely crystal clear to me. That sounds a bit witchy, but in fact I think it was simply a result of having the time and space to let things sort themselves out in my mind.

The novel's three-part structure is a nod to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Other works that influenced me (and helped me take risks with my book's structure) include Ali Smith's *How To Be Both*, *Legend of a Suicide* by David Vann, Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, *Hicksville* by Dylan Horrocks, Kirsty Gunn's *The Big Music*, *Possession* by A.S. Byatt, and recent first books by Yvette Walker (*Letters to the End of Love*) and Ellen van Neerven (*Heat and Light*). Now that I've started listing influences, I could name a list as long as my writing arm, but these are among the touchstone books that I kept on a shelf at eye level as I wrote.

Where did you discover Raphael Freund and what was it about him that inspired you to include this thread in your narrative?

Raphael Freund is a geologist who shook this novel off its foundations! Four or so years ago, when I was just starting to sketch the character of Iris, my concept for the novel centred on Iris dyeing textiles – the novel was going to be all about colour and disguise, masking and transformation. Then, while I was sorting a box of old scientific bulletins at work, I discovered one called *The Hope Fault*, published by New Zealand Geological Survey in 1971 and written by Raphael Freund, a young German-Israeli geologist who visited New Zealand briefly in the late 1960s, specifically to map this fault on the South Island. I was initially simply struck by the

title – the juxtaposition of those two ideas, hope and fault, was irresistible. *Good title*, I thought, and tucked the idea away, thinking it wasn't related to the Iris book.

But the idea of *The Hope Fault* kept nipping at my heels, until eventually I went back to look more closely at the geological report. I was delighted to find that this slim report was full of text and maps that – to me – read as poetry; it was written about rocks and geological processes, but all I could see were poems. Added to that, the maps and diagrams reminded me of sewing patterns (with darts and seams and fold lines; dashed lines like lines for stitching), and there was a recognisable and delightful overlap in the lexicon of geology with that of textiles. So I knew I had to find a way to switch Iris's textile focus from dyeing to stitching, and to focus on the overlap of languages of geology and poetry, language and textiles.

I loved the idea of making my geologist a poet – because I could see the poetry in this real-life geological report – and so I started jotting down poetry in his imagined voice, from words and phrases in the geological bulletin. Because I was veering off-piste with my poet-geologist, I decided to invent the character of Zigi Silbermann. There were some very basic elements, though, that I borrowed from the little I knew of Raphael Freund, the real-life geologist who'd written the geological report I had on my desk.

Other than his scientific outputs, there's not a lot to be found online about the life of Raphael Freund, who died aged only 46 or 47, in 1980. According to two brief obituaries I found online, Professor Raphael Freund was known to his friends and colleagues as Rafi (or Raphy). He seems to have been a good man, a fine geologist, colleague and teacher, with a great enthusiasm for life. I hope my invented character, Zigi Silbermann, does Rafi's memory justice.

It seems to me that this is not an explicitly dramatic novel, but one that has a quiet unfolding. Even so, it is driven forward by a narrative tension that seemed to suggest that something, at any moment, might go drastically wrong. Was this your intention?

Yes. I liked the feeling of containment – or, to spin it another way, of being trapped – that the novel's setting (the house, the rain, the tight time period) provides. There's the feeling almost of a country-house-type mystery. I was aiming for a sense of people being thrown together who know each other *so well* – and yet, they *don't*. Not any more. They have so much history with each other, but it's tangled, and messed up, and knotted. It's unreliable. So that narrative tension feels right, to me. The quiet unfolding – untangling the knots; or failing to do so, and having instead to break the thread – was what I was aiming for.

At a low, simmering level, I also wanted to play on the idea that when family come together there's often tension, or its possibility. Siblings bickering at Christmas, Uncle So-and-So getting drunk at the wedding, that sort of thing. Often, with family, there's someone who's always busy keeping it all together, making sure people get fed, and looking and listening out for what might go wrong, being ready to smooth things over – so, yes, precisely that sense that something might go wrong, any minute.

It's *not* an explicitly dramatic novel. I was thinking a lot about 'home' – in many senses – as I wrote it. I read what Kirsty Gunn (*44 Things* and *Thorndon. Wellington and Home: My Katherine Mansfield Project*), Paula Morris (*On Coming Home*) and Geraldine Brooks (*Boyer Lectures 2011: The Idea of Home*) wrote about home. I realised that I was trying to make 'a home in words' (in the sense that Edward Said, cited by Kirsty Gunn, describes writers doing), in which the *unmaking* of a home can take place.

The black swans flapping through the novel are emblematic of home, for me – growing up in Western Australia, which has the black swan as its state emblem, the swan was everywhere. It was printed on our school books; it was on car number plates. And circling back to the sense of tension in the novel, and the potential for things to go wrong: as a kid I found swans terrifying, so being taken by my grandmother to feed the swans at Lake Monger or Kings Park wasn't the uncomplicated treat it was intended to be – would they hiss, or chase, or bite? Let's not analyse how and why black swans have come to represent home for me (and yes, you can find me on Twitter @hissingswan)!

The Hope Fault is real, and Cassetown feels like a real place too, though it is not. How did Cassetown come to be?

The house in my novel is in a fictional place I've called 'Cassetown', on 'Geologue Bay', three hours south of the city. In my mind it's in the south-west of Western Australia, in the vicinity of Vasse, Busselton, Geographe Bay, Dunsborough, Cowaramup. On a very straightforward level, I needed a geographical layout (house here, river here, beach here) that none of those places quite delivered, so the setting of the novel is a sort of mashup of those places which I know reasonably well, from spending holidays there as a child and throughout my twenties.

The fictional placename also picks up the thread through the novel of names and naming, and of things (and people) having more than one name. Where a local historical event is referred to in the novel, I've called the drowned sailor Édouard Casse to distinguish him from the real-life sailor Thomas Vasse, while still reflecting him (like a warping mirror). More to the point, though, the fictional setting is a nod to the importance in this novel of faerytale, fiction and make-believe.

Was it hard to write about rain over and over?

The rain set in on this novel very early. In autumn of 2014, while I was writing the first draft of the novel (and still not quite sure where it was set, though I knew it was set in a holiday house over a contained period of time), I spent a month as the R.A.K. Mason Fellow at New Zealand Pacific Studio, an hour or so inland from where I live in Wellington. And it just poured with rain, for what felt like weeks, almost without letting up. The first fine day after all that rain was Easter Monday; the weather was clear and cool, the sky brilliant blue. That afternoon, with three of the other artists staying at the Studio, I drove to see a little old Norwegian church on a hill, maybe twenty minutes away. The sense of being outside after all that rain was – like the little wooden church on the hill, surrounded by lichen and toadstools and graves and farmland, and full of dead and dying flies – a mixture of delightful, magical and strange. We were all mesmerised and a little bewitched by that building, that afternoon. The next day, I put the characters from my novel into their car and let *them* drive out to the church, to see what they'd make of it.

A few months later, I shifted the novel's setting from New Zealand to Australia, and that scene no longer belonged in the novel. However, the 3000 words that spilled out that day eventually turned into a stand-alone short story, 'Once had me'. Turning the 3000-word writing exercise into a short story also gave me a new character who became key in the novel: Luce. It also gave me the strong sense of *after-the-rain*, which I knew I wanted the novel to work towards. So writing about all that rain in the novel's first two-thirds was really quite fun, because I knew (spoiler alert) it was, eventually, going to stop.

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