



Laughing at the Dark

Book club questions



From the best-selling and acclaimed author Barbara Else, *Laughing at the Dark* is a funny, moving memoir about how she rebelled against being a ‘good girl’.

By the time she was in her forties, Barbara was married to a globally recognised academic physician and had two beautiful teenage daughters. As her writing career developed, her husband became angry at the prospect of her being anything but a housewife. In a moment of madness — or realisation — she packed her car and took off to live with the man who would become her second husband.



In a career spanning three decades, Barbara Else has written plays, short stories, novels for adults, children’s novels and a non-fiction work, and has edited collections of stories for children. She has held a number of fellowships and residencies. She was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2005. She has won multiple awards in New Zealand for her children’s books, and has been internationally recognised at Bologna with a White Raven. In 2016 Barbara received the Storylines Margaret Mahy Medal in recognition of her services to children’s literature.



A note from the author

I never intended to write a memoir. Except for the marriage break up, my life seemed far too ordinary. But I began a novel partly set in the 1970s and found my own memories of those times were stirring. From curiosity, I had already jotted down some of my first childhood memories: were there any signs of the type of person I'd turn out to be? When I wrote a few more it grew clear that even an ordinary life had turning points and moments of revelation that often come far too long after the fact. Then I was given an awful medical diagnosis. I couldn't possibly concentrate on the novel, but kept on with the memoir. Writing helped give structure to my day during the arduous recovery period. It also helped me unpick the breakdown of my first marriage and how my writing career developed. There was a great deal of sadness in the memories, but just as much laughter.

I came to feel that a basic everywoman thread about society's expectations wove through my Pākehā middle-class female experience. The undercurrent of feminism didn't surprise me at all.

Book club questions

- How has Barbara's life – and book – confronted darkness with laughter?
- How have attitudes to women changed over Barbara's life, and were you surprised by any that she had to contend with?
- What defines a 'good woman' in the eyes of society . . . and in the eyes of women?
- Barbara's life has been nomadic, yet her memoir shows that in each new place it was important to her to establish a home. Is this tension between settling and moving on characteristic of most lives? Is it characteristic of the lives of New Zealanders?
- What do you think the difference is between memoir and autobiography?
- What role has writing played in Barbara's life? Has it saved her, redefined her, provided a purpose, employment, a community?
- Barbara mentions the patriarchy of institutions and says: 'Kate Manne in *Down Girl* (2017) clarifies it when I find her book in 2019. The patriarchy rules, and its police force is misogyny.' Do you agree?
- The working title of *The Warrior Queen* was 'The Parrot's Version' to make it clear the story was from the wife's point of view. Barbara says that the husband's story would be very different. What do you think?