

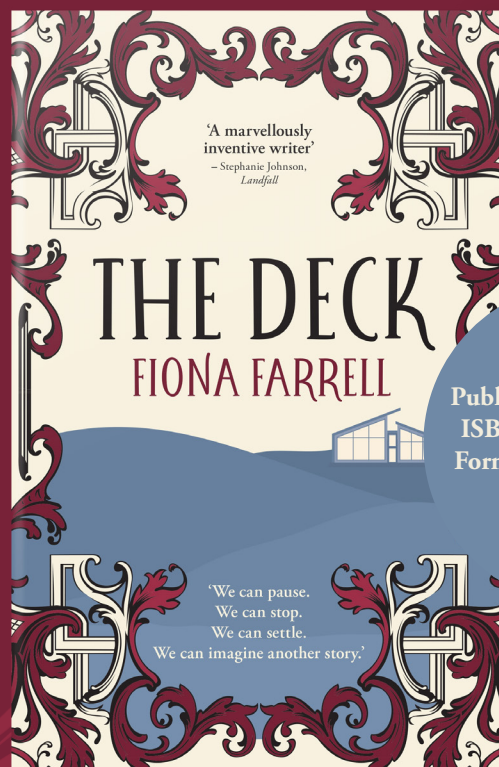


THE DECK

BOOK CLUB NOTES

What is the point of inventing stories when reality eclipses imagination?

A little way off in the future, during a time of plague and profound social collapse, a group of friends escapes to a house in the country where they entertain themselves by playing music, eating, drinking and telling stories about their lives.



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A note from the author



A family sits on the roof in the dark as floodwaters rise.

People arrive at parliament with nooses to hang the prime minister.

The sky turns yellow with ash from bushfires thousands of kilometers distant.

A virus infects millions. The world goes silent. Rows of passenger jets line up in desert boneyards.

Rivers are reduced to dustbowls. The oceans are warming. Icy continents melt. Every hour, another species becomes extinct.

How do you write fiction when reality is outstripping it so conclusively?

What's the point of inventing an alternative world when the one in which we actually live is collapsing into chaos?

I love fiction. I love reading it and for over 30 years, every morning, very slowly, between 9am and 1pm, I have loved writing it. It's how I have tried to understand things and gain some sense of control: that random events can be shaped to arrive at a happy ending.

But with this novel, my eighth, written between 2020 and 2022, I felt less sure. Was fiction just a distraction from urgent reality? Was the notion of a 'happy ending' a delusion?



Book club questions

1. I borrowed the structure of this book from another book written during a time of chaos, Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*: a non-fiction preface and conclusion framing an inner core of fiction. I liked the interplay of fact and fiction, knowing and feeling. It's a contrast I've used before when writing twinned books about the Christchurch quakes, *The Villa at the Edge of the Empire* (non-fiction) and *Decline and Fall on Savage Street* (fiction). Do you like the interplay of fact and fiction in *The Deck*?
2. I made 'the novelist' into a fictional character, rather than writing the preface and conclusion in the first person. I wanted her to keep her distance from the events she writes about, to be not quite 'real'. Does it work as a device? Do you prefer reading autobiographical books in which the author addresses you in the first person?
3. Does the frame make you think about the role of fiction in a way you might not have done without it?
4. Does reading about a plague in 1348 affect your perception of a pandemic in the twenty-first century?
5. The stories in *The Deck* are all based around just one of the themes of the stories in *The Decameron*: 'Tales of those who after diverse misfortunes attain unexpected felicity.' Are you convinced by the fiction of a 'happy ending'?
6. Do the separate stories show love in spite of loss, creativity in the face of despair?
7. The Decameron has 100 tales told over 10 days. *The Deck* is one tenth the size and personalises the lives of the narrators the way modern fiction does, and Boccaccio does not. Do you like the artificiality of the tales, or do you prefer the more realistic style used to tell the story of these characters and their sojourn in the bay? Would you have preferred to read 100 tales?
8. I finished *The Deck* in September 2022, long before the floods of 2023. Does fact deliver a greater emotional charge than fiction?