

Bookclub notes



About the book

Set in the Mackenzie Basin, this vivid novel is about familial love, friendship and how our lives touch, connect and impact upon one another.

Having returned to the Mackenzie Country to deal with the unexpected death of his brother, Roland has more than enough on his plate. He could do without the demands of a cantankerous neighbour, the complaints of his partner back in Australia and discovering that someone is impersonating him online, stirring up the locals against him.

Even the weather is hostile, rendering roads unpassable and his old home an icebox, the fire offering little comfort. And yet, when cycling on the empty roads, cocooned in a snow-muffled landscape, he finds he can confront what he actually feels.



About the author

Laurence Fearnley is an award-winning novelist. Her novel *The Hut Builder* won the fiction category of the 2011 NZ Post Book Awards. In 2014 her novel *Reach* was longlisted for the Ockham New Zealand Book Awards, and, in 2008, *Edwin and Matilda* was runner-up in the fiction category of the Montana New Zealand Book Awards. Her second novel, *Room*, was shortlisted for the 2001 Montana New Zealand Book Awards. In 2004 Fearnley was awarded the Artists to Antarctica Fellowship and in 2007 the Robert Burns Fellowship at the University of Otago. In 2016 she won the NZSA/ Janet Frame Memorial Award and in 2017 she was the joint winner of the *Landfall* essay competition. She was named a New Zealand Arts Foundation Laureate in 2019. She lives in Dunedin.

A Note from the Author



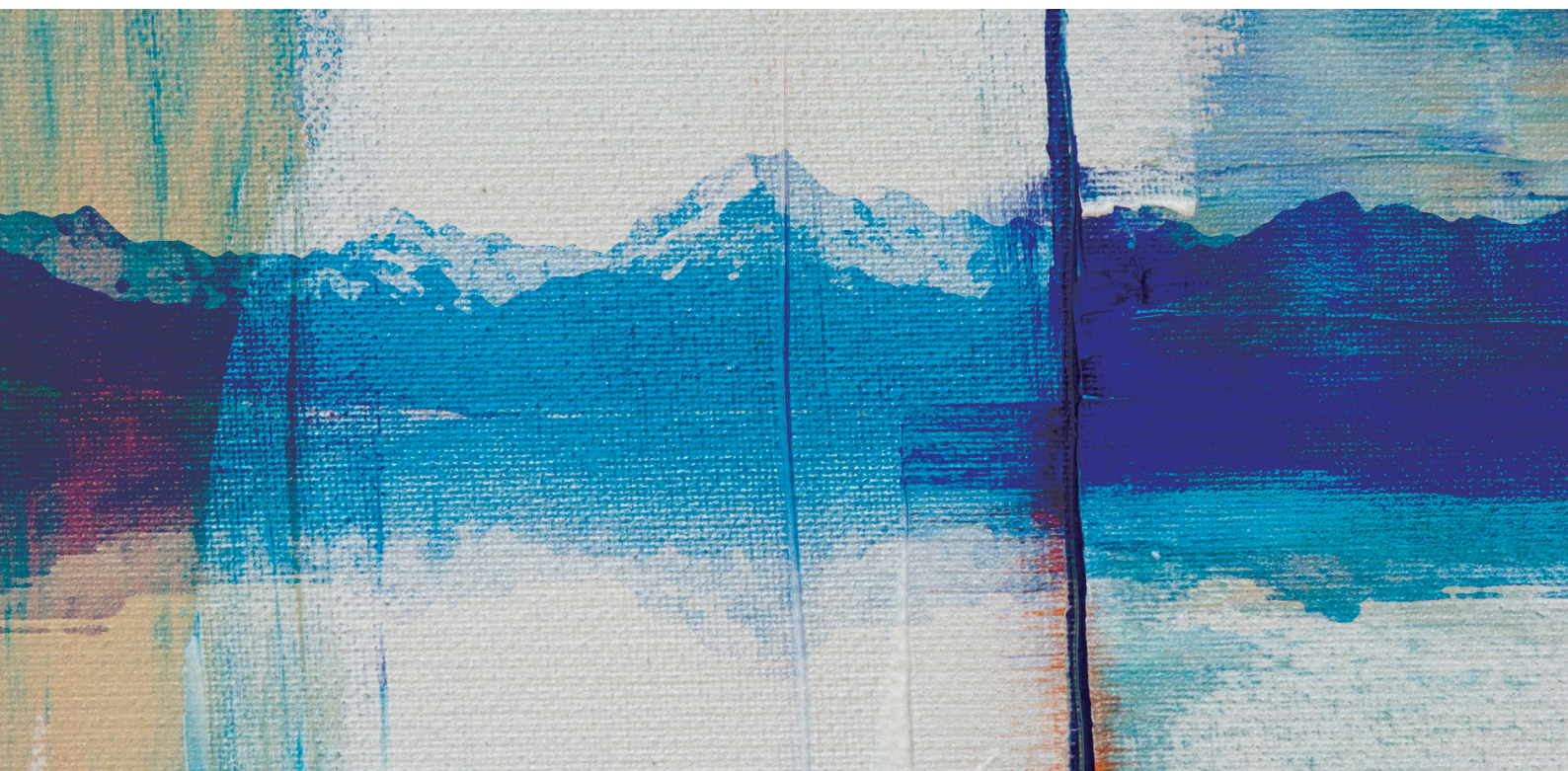
My mother, Wendy, died a few weeks before the first COVID lockdown in 2020. I missed our daily conversations but at the same time felt relieved that she was not dealing with COVID alone, up in Christchurch. During lockdown, I found my thoughts returning to my early childhood in Fairlie and the holidays we made to the Mackenzie Basin. I think memories of the landscape and open spaces of the Mackenzie were made more striking because of the restricted Level 4 life I was experiencing. I kept coming back to an image of snow: the dazzling brilliance, the cold and quiet. A snowy landscape seemed to capture and reflect my own emotional landscape, and I began writing *Winter Time* as a way to process my grief: to create something from the loss.

Then a strange thing happened. I was about two-thirds the way through the book when I became very sick. I had trouble breathing, a constant cough and drenching night sweats and nausea. An odd lump could be felt through the skin on

my thigh, and it became very painful. It turned out to be cancer, soft-tissue sarcoma, and it left me exhausted and unable to write. The novel was set aside as I began treatment. While I was in hospital I was waiting for some kind of epiphany, but in reality I lacked the energy to open myself to life-changing miracles. However, one thing I felt with all my being was that writing is really important to me. Writing was the hope I needed

Ten months later, I was dealing with complications from various surgeries and I was feeling niggled by the fact that my novel was unfinished. I began writing again. I changed the name of the location of my story to Matariki because I felt like I needed to move on from a dark period and make a new start. So, this book began as a way to get me through my grief and ended as a way to help me back to life.

Laurence Fearnley





BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

1. Following the death of her mother, Laurence found herself coming back to memories of her early childhood, and family trips to the Mackenzie Basin. The image that stood out for her – and that gave birth to this novel – was of a snowy landscape and the memory of winter cold. Do you think she captured this sense of winter and is it one you have experienced? Do you have your own winter memory?
2. This novel is the second written by Laurence that is set in the Mackenzie Basin. The first was *The Hut Builder*, written ten years earlier, in 2011. While it is not uncommon for authors to return to the same location in their work (you can probably think of an author who has set more than one novel in Auckland, for example) it is less common for a New Zealand author to ‘return’ to a small, rural South Island location. Do you think readers get more out of a novel when they recognise the setting and have a personal connection to it, or doesn’t it matter? What are the risks of locating more than one novel in the same location?
3. The location of the novel has the fictional name ‘Matariki’. Why do you think Laurence chose to adopt a fictional name and what are the advantages of doing so?
4. Laurence is attempting to write five novels based around the five senses. The first of these, *Scented* (2019) explores the sense of smell and scent. Which sense is explored and developed in *Winter Time* and how is that sense interpreted in different ways by the author?
5. Love and friendship, loss and grief are given equal weight in *Winter Time* in terms of the relationships described. For example, the loss of Eddie from Roland’s life is balanced by the presence of his partner Leon. The friendship with the secondary character Bay is balanced with the difficult character of Mrs Linden. What is the impact of these relationships on Roland and do you think he has undergone change or emotional growth as a result of them?
6. Roland has experienced a difficult relationship with his father as well as the loss of his beloved mother, brothers and sister. Returning to Matariki triggers memories of these relationships. How does Roland’s past impact on his present life: in terms of the relationships he forms, his sense of identity and self-worth? What are his strengths and weaknesses?
7. The use of ‘contrast’ is something that is a common feature in Laurence’s books. Groups of people such as couples, families, students, wedding parties pop up throughout the novel in contrast to Roland’s isolated, ‘lone’ self. Another contrast is physical: the enclosed dark, cold interior of Roland’s family home vs. the open landscape and bright snow. What other contrasts did you pick up on and what is their effect on the novel?
8. In what ways is humour utilised throughout the novel?
9. Social Media plays a significant role in the novel, providing a story-line that adds to Roland’s distress. In what ways might this novel be regarded as a mystery?
10. Do you think the novel ends on an optimistic note?
11. In recent years there has been an important conversation concerning the ‘ownership’ of stories. In fiction, the question of who has the right to tell a story often centres on identity and can include issues surrounding race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and disability. Roland, the protagonist of *Winter Time* identifies as gay. This is not the ‘lived experience’ of the author. Do you see this as a problem or do you think the author is simply reflecting society?

Other books by Laurence Fearnley

