

BOOK CLUB NOTES

The Last Sky

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About the Book

From the winner of the TAG Hungerford Award comes a remarkable novel of intersecting lives that ranges across continents and time.

The Last Sky is a novel about the nuances of attachment, the workings of memory, storytelling and history on nations and on individuals, and the strange legacies of colonialism, love and betrayal. At its heart is a meditation on the forces that bind people together and fling them ineluctably apart.

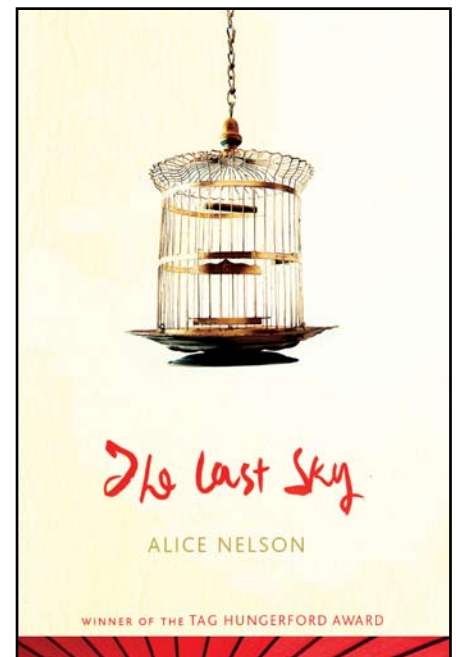
Weaving between the seething urban metropolis of Hong Kong and the sparse silence of South-Western Australia, the novel follows the lives and the complicated marriage of an Australian couple.

Set against a backdrop of uncertainty and changing political temper, the narrative takes place in the months leading up to the return of the colony of Hong Kong to China after ninety-nine years of British rule. Loyalties are divided, the privileged world of the British expatriates is under threat and the Chinese population is strained and uneasy.

Into this maelstrom steps a young woman, Maya Wise, an Australian art historian in Hong Kong with her husband Joseph, an archaeologist obsessed with the buried history of the Chinese deserts.

Her husband away in the desert, Maya drifts through the city, exploring the strange world of the expatriates and the equally intricate worlds of the Chinese people she encounters. She meets an elderly Chinese bookseller and the wealthy wife of an American businessman and becomes deeply involved in their stories and the strange and unpredictable overlaps between the worlds she is uncovering.

Consumed by a sense of cultural and personal dislocation, Maya tries to make sense of her own life by weaving together stories. She begins to uncover the secret past of the old Chinese bookseller and the wartime love affair he had with a young Jewish woman seeking refuge in China. As Maya pastes together the fragments of a life destroyed by desperation and love, she begins to imaginatively reconstruct the story of the forgotten histories of Hong Kong and Shanghai.



The narrative is interspersed by an imagined series of stories about the Jewish refugees in Shanghai and the strange, transient world they created in the ghettos of the Chinese city: the jazz clubs and the makeshift kosher bakeries, the bars where you could dance with a Russian countess for ten cents.

As the novel unfolds and her husband becomes more and more immersed in grander narratives of Chinese history and increasingly isolated from the less exotic narrative of his own life and floundering marriage, Maya finds herself on the side of Life — of the loves and memories and betrayals that shape the politics of everyday life. As the narratives of the other characters unravel, she begins to piece together the narrative of her own fragmented existence and to find a courage and clarity that enable her to shape her future.

The Last Sky is a novel rich with character, emotion, and incident, a story about love, about family, about identity and exile, about the quest to unlock the hidden past and come to terms with the future.

Nelson is coaxing us to acknowledge the universality of those themes hiding there inside her title — exile, the end of love, the ways we save one another and the debts we owe to those who save us — and to see how they link all of us, irrespective of our backgrounds or circumstances or eras.

From the Author

I wrote *The Last Sky* while living away from my own country in New York and, as a result, the novel is about identity and dislocation and personal geography, which are all ongoing preoccupations of mine. And relationships — the gaps and spaces in the most intimate relationships, and the loss of love. Writing about these things is a way of making sense of them for me. Of course, there's a lot of delving into oneself if you want to produce anything worthwhile. All the travelling and living abroad I was doing when I was writing the novel was incredibly nourishing. I don't think I could have written a novel that is essentially about different forms of exile if I hadn't been living away from my own country. Although, having said that, I think I set large parts of the novel in Western Australia because I was homesick. I wanted to remember the Australian light and the ocean.

People often asked me if I did a great deal of planning for the novel and I have to admit that it was a very organic process. The actual line of it didn't emerge until I was finishing. The process of writing the novel was the process of discovering the precise novel I wanted to write. Gail Jones has spoken about the emancipated feel of writing in clouds of unknowing, and that's a beautiful way of putting it — this kind of intuitive intelligence you allow to take over as you work. It's almost an act of faith in the unseen, if that doesn't sound too grandiose.

I'm particularly interested in the power of storytelling in our lives — the stories we tell ourselves and others and the ones we create to make sense of our lives, so this was a theme that came up again and again in my writing. All the characters, but Maya particularly, create stories, or bury themselves in the stories of others when they cannot bear the weight or consequence of their own stories.

Discussion questions

1. This is a story in which the very idea of stories is important, from the first sentence, 'My husband told me a story about buildings before we came here.' How much information does this sentence convey at first reading, and then after you have finished the book?
2. Maya loves stories. She finds academic investigations unsatisfying and likes to fill in the gaps with her own imaginings. But who are her stories really for? What is it about the gaps that she feels so compelled to fill them with story? See the conclusion to the story of Maya's Spanish filmmaker friend on page 153. ('She had narrated herself more successfully than I ever could.')
3. What makes Maya follow Ken Tiger? What is it about Ada that fascinates her?
4. The gradual and scarcely acknowledged loss of love between Maya and Joseph seems to be paralleled in Ada and Ken's more graphic story. The author seems to be saying that you can't truthfully know anything more about humans and their relationships than can be shown in images. That to fill in more would be to take advantage of the poetic licence of story telling. What do you think? Is it possible to truthfully portray people's stories in more than images or outlines?
5. Various marriages, friendships and other relationships are revealed in the book: Maya and Joseph; Joseph and Stein; Ken and Du; Ken and Ada; Ada and Victor; Clarissa and Geoffrey; Gideon and Hannah. Where is love to be found?
6. How does the Chinese landscape of the novel — Hong Kong, Shanghai and the Taklamakan Desert — reflect the inner lives of its inhabitants? Why do you think that the author has chosen China as the setting for her story? What significance do other landscapes, like Western Australia and New England, hold for the story and its characters?
7. If Joseph were to reflect on his relationship with Maya how might he tell the story?
8. There are many examples of cultural dislocation — the Chinese, the Filipina maids, the ex-pats in Hong Kong, Vietnamese refugees, missionaries in China, the exodus of Russian Jews to Shanghai. Is the ex-pat community in Hong Kong qualitatively different from the other migrant communities described? If so, how, and why?
9. Maya creates her own cultural milieu in domestic space with her possessions and decorations, whereas Joseph's office is 'very small and bare.' (p. 127) What does this say about them and their relationship? Would it be relevant to describe it as cross-cultural?
10. Who is Maya? She's a modern woman, an intellectual and a writer, yet she seems remarkably passive. What is happening to her in Hong Kong? What, too, of Ada Lang's passivity?
11. Cups and pots of tea crop up several times through the book. What do you think the author is doing with this recurrent theme? What other images recur?
12. Lines from a Mahmoud Darwish poem reproduced on the back cover provide the book's title: *When should we go after the last frontiers/ Where should the birds fly after the last sky.* Why do you think the author chose these lines?
13. Why has the book designer used an image of the birdcage on the front cover? Why is the cage empty? What other objects or images might have been used to illustrate the book?
14. Do you have photographs or remembered images that distil for you the sense of a relationship or a time in your life? Are there photographs that misrepresent the truth?