

The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart

READING GROUP GUIDE



About the Book

Nine-year-old Alice Hart lives in isolation by the sea, where her mother's enchanting flowers and their hidden meanings mostly shelter Alice from the dark moods of her father.

After tragedy changes her life irrevocably, Alice is sent to live with the grandmother she never knew existed at Thornfield, the family run native flower farm that provides a refuge to women who, like Alice, are lost or broken; in the Victorian tradition, every flower has a meaning to say what words can't. Alice settles into her new life and learns the language of flowers to express the things that are too hard to speak. But, as she grows older, she becomes increasingly frustrated by the secrecy surrounding her family story.

In her early twenties Alice's life is again thrown into chaos when a devastating betrayal, and a man who's not all he seems, combine to make her realise there are some stories that flowers can't tell.

Alice begins to understand that if she is to have the freedom she craves, she must find the courage to possess the most powerful story she knows: her own.

**Holly Ringland on writing
*The Lost Flowers of Alice
Hart***

Reviews

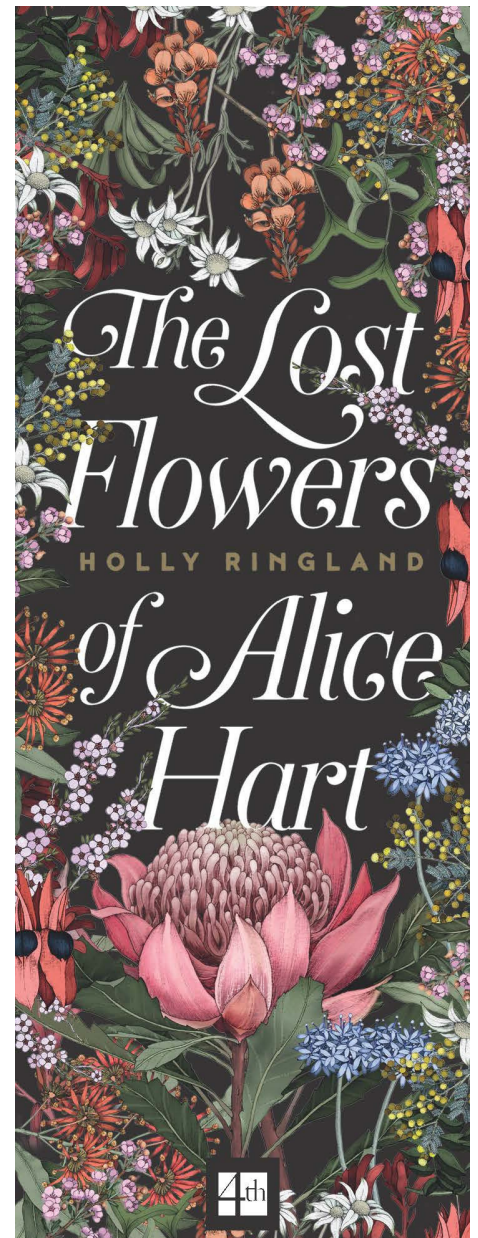
Reading Group Questions

Holly Ringland on writing The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart

The genesis of this novel was trauma. I've lived with male perpetrated violence for a lot of my life, which silenced my voice, courage and the dream of being a writer I've had since I was a child. In 2012, I started a PhD in Creative Writing. My research looked at traumatic experience and the process of writing fiction. It was through this research that I discovered Tom Spanbauer's concept of 'dangerous writing', which is the idea of going into the sore place we all have inside of us, and writing from that place; using fiction as the lie that tells the truth. I realised that I'd never written from the sore place. If anything, I'd written around it, aside it, in spite of it. Never from it. So, my research became my own call to arms, but threw up all kinds of questions for me. What would become of me and my life if I wrote the thing I was most scared to write? What story would emerge, and how might it live in other people's hearts, if it ever saw the light of day? What else can trauma be made into, other than unrememberable memories? These kinds of questions are why I wrote *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*.

I started writing the novel in May 2014. I'd had an immediate-family bereavement and the madness of grief and being so close to mortality drove me to find the strength I needed to be bigger than my fears and just start. I sat at my writing desk in Manchester, uncapped my pen, and wrote the first line as if I knew it by heart. I handwrote the first 11,000 words over the following month.

'What would become of me and my life if I wrote the thing I was most scared to write?'



All the settings in the novel are informed by places and people I've known and loved. My experience of growing up on the southeast Queensland coast informed my portrayal of Alice's childhood seaside world as much as my experience of living in central Australia informed my portrayal of Alice's life in the desert. I don't feel I could have written any of this particular book without firsthand sensory knowledge of and connection to the landscapes and people I've fictionalised. To me, fiction is emotional truth; this novel is wholly drawn from some level of experience I've had in my life.

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Possibly the most beautiful part of writing this novel was the enormous honour I had of creating the Thornfield language of flowers. I spent the first years of my life often playing in my grandmother's abundant garden that grew alongside her house and as I grew up I watched my mother turn to coaxing flowers from dirt in her own garden. After I moved to England in 2009, I came across the Victorian language of flowers for the first time. As I read about this 19th century floral craze that swept across Europe, a spark came to life in my mind. It remained there, flickering in the background, until 2014 when I started writing *Lost Flowers*. I knew from being in the gardens of the women who raised me that Australian flora often thrives under harsh conditions, in extreme landscapes and weather. Thornfield and its language grew from there, as I considered the ways we find to use our voices even when we're not able to literally tell our stories.

Poring over books and botanical art, pairing native flowers with meanings was a deep source of wonder and light while I was writing the darker, more harrowing parts of this novel.

The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart is for every reader who has ever felt like their voices have been silenced. For women who doubt the worth and power of their story. For readers who love their fiction infused with a sense of wonder, and love page-turning fiction driven by messy characters who make the wrong choices with the best intentions. This book is for readers who believe that stories can be the kind of magic that has the power to change our lives.



Reviews

The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart is a lush, powerful contemporary novel from debut author Holly Ringland. It revolves around Alice, who we first meet as an isolated young girl living by the sea with a violent father and an unwell mother. When tragedy strikes, a teenage Alice is sent to live on a flower farm run by a group of women, including her estranged grandmother. There, she grapples with her family's secrets and learns more about the women who have suffered and endured throughout the farm's history. As Alice enters adulthood, a past betrayal forces her to flee to the central Australian desert, a dazzling landscape, where she meets a man who is as dangerous as he is charming. This is an engrossing novel imbued with passion and reverence for the Australian natural world, with a cast of characters that inspire affection in the reader even as they make mistakes. Ringland's decision to preface each chapter with a flower and its emotional significance is deftly handled, creating a thematic through-line that underscores and enhances the story. Those who couldn't put down *The Natural Way of Things* will find a gentler but no less compelling journey of female survival in this novel.'

Bookseller+Publisher five star review



About the Author

Holly Ringland grew up barefoot and wild in her mother's tropical garden in Southeast Queensland. When she was nine-years-old, her family lived in a camper van for two years in the US, travelling from one national park to another; an experience that sparked Holly's interest in cultures and stories. In her twenties, Holly worked for four years in a remote Indigenous community in the central Australian desert. Moving to England in 2009, Holly obtained her MA in Creative Writing from the University of Manchester in 2011. Her essays and short fiction have been published in various anthologies and literary journals. She now divides her time between the UK and Australia. *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* is Holly's first novel. It has now sold in twenty territories around the world.

Reading Group Questions

1. Why do you think Alice stopped talking?
What does her muteness mean?
2. Do you think June was right to keep so much information back from Alice? Does this make her a bad person?
3. What do you think the 'lost flowers' in the title – *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* – refers to?
Could it have multiple meanings?
4. Dogs are prominent in Alice's life. How do they reveal the nature of Alice's character and of others, for example, Moss, and Dylan?
5. What do you think motivated Oggi to write to Alice after all those years? What was his letter trying, implicitly, to tell her?
6. The women in Lulu's family passed down foresight. Honey grevillea, which grows rampant in the desert, also means foresight. What deeper meaning could be at play in how this idea is used in the novel, for example, when we can see things coming, does that necessarily empower us to do what's right?
7. Many of the characters' appearances are disclosed, but Dylan's is not. Why do you think this is?
8. Fear and past pain shapes the lives of characters in the novel in varying ways. Discuss the characters you feel are most dictated by fear and the past.
9. After the point in time where the novel ends, what do you think Charlie will do with his third of Thornfield?
10. What's your favourite flower and meaning in the novel, and why?

