



## The Children

*Charlotte Wood*

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When their father is critically injured, foreign correspondent Mandy and her siblings return home, bringing with them the remnants and patterns of childhood. Mandy has lived away from the country for many years. Her head is filled with images of terror and war, and her homecoming to the quiet country town - not to mention her family and marriage - only heightens her disconnection from ordinary life.

Cathy, her younger sister, has stayed in regular contact with her parents, trying also to keep tabs on her brother Stephen who, for reasons nobody understands, has held himself apart from the family for years. In the intensive care unit the children sit, trapped between their bewildered mother and one another; between old wounds and forgiveness, struggling to connect with their emotions, their past and each other. But as they wait and watch over their father, there's someone else watching too: a young wardsman, Tony, who's been waiting for Mandy to come home. As he insinuates himself into the family, the pressure, and the threat, intensify and build to a climax of devastating force.

This acutely observed novel exposes the tenacious grip of childhood, the way siblings seem to grow apart but never do, and explores the price paid for bearing witness to the suffering of others - whether far away or uncomfortably close to home.

## **The Children Details**

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Author : Charlotte Wood

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## From Reader Review The Children for online ebook

### Mish says

In a small county town, Geoff is outside doing repairs to the roof. Margaret, his wife was in the kitchen preparing dinner when she heard a loud 'thump'. Geoff has fallen. He's in a very bad way with severe head injuries and they don't know if he will survive. Margaret calls her adult children, Mandy, Stephen and Cathy, to tell them of the terrible news and the siblings all return home.

Mandy is a foreign correspondent and has been living in war zones parts of the world for many years, while her husband Chris is at home. Mandy is mentally affected by the horrendous images that she saw while on location and is having constant flashbacks. When she arrives home she finds it difficult to adjust to normal life and distance herself from her family - including Chris which puts a tremendous strain on their marriage.

Stephen hasn't seen his family for many years and no one really knows why. One day he just up and left without a word, not having contact with the family, except for Cathy - as she's the only one that kept in regular contact with them all. Stephen takes a lot longer to decide to come home, but when eventually he does everyone tip toes around him, too afraid to say the wrong thing for fear that he will disappear again.

In hospital Tony Warren, the wards man, is watching them. He knows Mandy from many years ago and she left a lasting impression on him. Since then he has been keeping track of her every move, waiting for her to come home.

Growing up they didn't come across as being a loving and affectionate family but felt they were selfish and cold. And as they grew to adulthood, they drifted even further apart, not able to communicate to one another. Yet I think there were signs there that they wanted too, but I felt didn't know how.

I know we all react differently to crises but Margaret behaviour and thoughts after the accidents, I couldn't relate too. Yes I'm sure she worried about Geoff but she went about her every day life very casually. Going to the hospital seemed like a chore, and concerned herself with the most trivial things (worrying about what colour paint to choose). I thought this was a rather peculiar behaviour especially when your spouse is lying on death bed.

And then there is Mandy, who is tortured by her visions and is breaking down before their very eyes, yet I don't believe the family took her seriously. And when she did speak up, they thought her over reacting and were cruel. No one sat down to talk to her about what happened and it was evident she's silently screaming for help. You could see Mandy struggling to stay in control, but it slowly builds and builds, and then when she finally comes undone it's explosive.

At first I didn't know what to think of Tony. All I knew were his stalker tendencies made him sound creepy and I didn't feel comfortable hearing of his thoughts on Mandy. And I was curious and a little on edge as to where it was leading. Woods blended his story in well with Mandy's story, and the unexpected turn of events was pretty shocking.

The writing was superb and I loved the soft and gentle tone. Visually beautiful in places and horrifying in others. I went through a whole range of emotions from anger to pity to sorrow for the family. They're not the perfect or ideal but I did see some hope for them towards the end.

It's a story of family life and the bond between siblings. But more importantly it's how these significant events in the past, make us who we are today. The characters came across as unlikeable at times so it's not going to be for everyone's taste but if you don't mind these type of books, then I'd say give it a go.

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### **Sam says**

I loved this book, but then again I love everything Charlotte Wood writes. I find her writing so vivid - her descriptions of this Australian family and the environment just take me home every time, although I hope not to have any sort of experience similar to that which appears in the book! It is just so wonderful to be able to read novels set in this decade, in my own country. Woods prose and her ability to place you in the story are outstanding. Nothing else matters for the hours/days it will take you to read her books. The characters have stayed with me months later, especially Mandy; the vivid portrayal of life as a war correspondent and the way the author captured the family dynamic of her characters, the undercurrents within the family, without actually spelling them out is a talent few writers possess. I believe Charlotte will become one of our country's great authors. 2016 update: still love it :) Although, to be clear, my family is more in the lower range of dysfunctional. So far.

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### **5inabus says**

Here is a collection of the most depressed, depressing individuals that it is possible to conjure in one small volume. The inside flap would have you believe that you're taking a journey into the heart of a family "as normal, and as broken, as any other". What a load of ostrich feathers. Everyone knows there's no such thing as a normal family, and the reference to broken is simply to cash in at the counter for the Recognition of Dysfunctional Families (incorporated).

Don't get me wrong. Dysfunctional families, siblings with unfathomable behaviour traits, passive aggressive mothers, violent fathers - it's a reading currency I'm more than happy to trade in. But it's got to have a point, right? There has to be some greater lesson, some rhyme, some reason - hell, even just a question that alludes to a *possibility* of an answer - otherwise what's it all for? When everything remains so murky - for example, why does Stephen hate his sister (surely not JUST because she's better at making kites?). And why is Mandy so incapable of loving her husband? Or more to my immediate concern, what kind of a man has zero libido when his wife returns after 4 months abroad?? Sure, Mandy is damaged by war (this part is done very well), but what's it all got to do with the crazy orderly guy and the bushfire when she was 16?

I'm being deliberately facetious; for the most part I *did* understand the threads and undertones of "The Children", and the links aren't as tenuous as I'm making out. But the problem, superbly written though it may be, is that it just doesn't ring true - either as a whole OR as individual parts. The attempt to leave some things unwritten, to let the gaps speak for themselves, resulted in a great big thumping echo ringing back at me. Other authors have attempted the same thing and gotten away with it (even managed to have the characters laugh at themselves once in awhile too, now there's a novel idea!) - Sarah Winman, Penelope Lively, Andrea Levy are just a few that come to mind off the top of my head. Not so for "The Children". Without a hope of an answer for all this emptiness, much less a kernel of wry humour to ease the bitter pill, I may as well just point my head to the window and think about my own er... issues. Which is *just* about as productive, if somewhat less enjoyable. Oh, and that's without even giving you the spoiler, which involves a gun and

aforementioned crazy orderly guy.

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### **Lesley Moseley says**

Such a well-written, book of real people. VERY graphic memories of being a war correspondent by the eldest daughter, the falling into their younger sibling roles, and old memories long buried all come to a life changing scene. Fabulous author. It was even better this second reading.

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### **Carolyn McK says**

When I was a short way into this novel I realised I'd read it before but it was well worth reading again. The basic idea of adult children coming together for an accident, a death, a funeral or even a celebration is not new but Wood breathes life into this common theme through her astute observations of behaviour and her insights into the dynamics of family, especially where siblings have all taken very different directions in life.

In this case the children have come together because their father has had a fall and is dying in the intensive care of the hospital of the country town where they all grew up. Mandy is intellectual - critical of herself and of others - but has grown weary and indeed damaged by her work as a journalist reporting wars, famines and other disasters. Stephen on the other hand has refused to engage in life at all and has a menial job and no meaningful relationships in his life. Cathy is the least developed of the characters - merely acting as a foil (or perhaps a sponge) for the sparring interactions of her brother and sister.

Their mother Margaret is a great character - having chosen a quiet life in a rural Australian town, her attitudes and indeed memories are now dangerously challenged. "It is as if his skidding boot, his body as he tumbled, has knocked loose a stone in a wall and made a small irregular gap through which her life comes during, dry as sand."

Into this mix throw the Mandy's long-suffering husband, Chris and the rather sinister Tony, a wardsman at the hospital, who claims a peculiar connection to Mandy.

It all makes for a taut and convincing drama about death, love, protection, the responsibilities we have for others and the evasions we all practise. Beautifully written. Very impressive.

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### **Dale Harcombe says**

Hard to classify this book and just as hard to rate it. But I think I'll stick with 3 stars.

Some of it is beautifully written and made me sit and absorb the structure of sentences and descriptions, like that of crepe myrtles, 'are in shocking pink flower all down the road. When she was little she loved their gaudy pinks and crimsons, but as she grew older she began to realise they were tawdry, that these were the colours of bargain shops and chemist-brand lipsticks and she became ashamed for them. Now, as she walks through the streets, the crepe myrtles are the only bright shriek in all the dried-up anonymity of the town.' The description of Stephen and his father with the fishing rod off Culburra Beach is as vivid a description

and visual image as you could ever wish for. It is beautifully done. The reader can see everything that happens and feels the sense of wonder.

The same novel used profanity and coarse language that for me echoed and aggravated like a tolling bell. The story is also bleak in outlook, brutal in places and not just those to do with Iraq but conveys a sad look at the complex relationships within a family. The description of Mandy is telling, 'Mandy has always had a gift for disagreeableness.' In the end that was one of the things I found hardest about this book. I didn't like any of the characters and felt glad not to have belonged to such a disagreeable family.

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### **Catherine says**

This beautifully paced story had me from the first chapter, the tension builds adeptly til the final climax. Highly recommend!

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### **Betty says**

I started reading this, and although it is beautifully written I was worried it was going to be "a new Australian novel....all landscape and imagery and symbols and no plot" as the protagonist Mandy says. However, the story builds and the novel becomes quite compelling as the reader follows the family members as they cope with the dying of their father. It is beautifully observed and thoughtful. One character comments on Mandy's open nature, saying "her unchecked opinions were rare at university, where...everyone made a furtive calibration towards irony before they spoke"; And then finally: "When everything is useless, when there is nothing to be done, all we can do is pay attention, keep watch."

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### **Helen King says**

Lovely, painful book centring around adult children returning home in the event of their father's accident, which has placed him into intensive care, and likely to die. The interactions between the 'children' and in laws, their mother, the memories of their father, are well crafted. Not a particularly uplifting book, but true to life.

Quote that seems to be referred to often, but is very true - 'You bring your children up to escape sorrows. You spend your best years trying to stop them witnessing it on television, in you, in your neighbours' faces. But then you realise, slowly, that there is no escape, that they must steer their own way through life's cruelties'.

'When everything is useless, when there is nothing to be done, all we can do is pay attention, keep watch. In his boys-own innocent's fucked-up vigil, Tony knew this, and it was all he had. Her remorse will never leave her.

She leans forward, stands up, collecting the glass to go inside and help with the dishes. Because it is enough. And her purpose now, she knows more certainly than anything, is to keep watch over these small things, these ordinary decencies. To pay attention to her mother's walk, to Chris' voice. Her sister's, brother's eyes'.

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### **Steve lovell says**

A dysfunctional woman returns from a dysfunctional war zone to her dysfunctional marriage in a seemingly functional Australia. It is the summer of the Cronulla riots with a cold-hearted prime minister politically and not too subtly fanning racial intolerance. A father's tragic accident is the reason for a family coming together to bicker, to go over old hostilities and to try and see each other in a less corrosive light. Another dysfunctional life then imposes itself on the family allowing Woods to build an underlying tension as the family slowly comes to terms with the patriarch's condition. The tensions explode in what this reader felt to be overwrought fashion at novel's end, the only jarring note in this masterfully engrossing work. The novel is a seamlessly written homage to fractured families and Australian life away from the epicentres of the big cities. Her descriptive prose, conveying the fragility of interweaving lives, has something of 'The Slap' about it in its tone. The title is significant in the unhappiness and frustration that pervades the novel. The appalling vignettes from Iraq and elsewhere as relayed via Mandy, a war correspondent, shock and haunt. The links between these and contemporary Oz are both subtle and sledge-hammer clear. And to think that with Kevin '07 we had thought we'd moved on! Both this novel and her previous 'The Submerged Cathedral' point to a writer worth following.

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### **Brenda says**

I enjoyed this book very much. It is a different type of book for me, but it is our current bookclub book and a quick, easy read.

It tells the story of 3 adult children who return home to Rundle, near Sydney, Australia, when their father is terribly injured falling from the roof of his house...

Mandy is a war correspondent based in Iraq, and has seen awful things happen..Stephen has been estranged from his family for years, and Cathy has been trying to keep the family together. Chris is Mandy's husband, and doesn't know what to make of Mandy....

The story of their lives as they sit by their father's bed, the trauma, the tragedy of the past, and the present, all come together. Then there is Tony, who has a past with Mandy, though she doesn't remember it... Tony seems to be stalking Mandy...she doesn't trust him, thinks he's creepy and weird...what is he up to?

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### **Robyn says**

I really like this author; have now read this and also "Animal People" which is a loose sequel to TC and very much enjoyed both. Her characters are ordinary Australians of all types, and through them she touches on many contemporary issues in a really interesting way. This book - dealing with a family coming together after the father has a serious accident - was poignant, especially for those who have lost a parent, or indeed, grown up with brothers and sisters. The seriousness is leavened though by some comic stuff about the three grown children who are still acting out their sibling rivalry years after growing up and leaving home. These scenes are some of the best in the book - handled deftly by Ms Wood. Reading her bio it appears she comes from a family with a similar composition to that in the book, so maybe some of this is drawn from life!

Above all, she is a great storyteller, and her books keep you interested and reading on to discover what comes of all her characters. I would recommend starting with this one and then moving on to "Animal People". I'll also seek out some of her other work - they all look intriguing.

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### **Jo says**

After reading The Natural Way of Things and LOVING it, I looked up some of Charlotte Wood's other books and found this one. It certainly reinforced my opinion that she is one of the best Australian authors out there at the moment, and worth seeking out.

Her writing is beautifully structured and evocative, bringing complex scenes and characters to life in only a few well crafted sentences. This book is set in an Australian country town, and centres around a family of children who have grown up and moved away but return when their father suffers a life-threatening injury. All of the old sibling rivalry returns, with the original causes made more serious by the passage of time and growing into adulthood. The serious injury of their father brings everything to a head and enables them to resolve their differences by realising what's most important.

I especially liked the characters of Mandy (the daughter) and Chris (her husband). Mandy is a war journalist recently returned from Iraq, who has a compulsive need to witness and report suffering and truth, which has ruined all of her relationships. She encounters a memory from her past which led her down this path and is able to finally come to terms with her compulsion.

It's the writing and the honesty of the characters and their situations which make this a great read. I look forward to reading her other books as well.

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### **Lisa says**

The Children is an unfortunate title; it's not appealing and it made me leave this book unread on the TBR for quite some time. Yet it's a clever title, because the adult protagonists of this novel behave exactly like children do: they're immature, impulsive, selfish and irrational. Just like people, just like children.

Uncharacteristically, I wrote about this book a fortnight after reading it, and found myself not able to remember all the characters very well. This was not entirely my memory lapse – the mother is deliberately not very well drawn. Her husband has fallen from a ladder and is on life support – he exists only in memory. The mother seems lost in a fog of her own emotion, already she is ceasing to be a person in her own right (if she ever was) but is now someone hurt by others, needing to be supported but irrelevant to the lives of children who still have a life to live.

Mandy is the most decisively drawn character. She's a war correspondent, tortured by flashbacks of atrocities she's witnessed, especially the gruesome death of a little boy in Iraq. She is angry that no one in safe, complacent Australia understands or cares, and this anger spills out throughout the story. It can be triggered by seemingly trivial things like trendy restaurants appropriating an ethnic recipe and getting it wrong, and it alienates her long-suffering husband – who really is a bit too good to be true. He stays because he has no other family and is close to the mother, but really – he should move on!

To read the rest of my review please visit <https://anzlitlovers.com/2008/11/08/t...>

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### **Jillwilson says**

Last night at my women's group we talked about the impact of being in a tribe - in my case a large and close family. We talked about the sense of security it gives you. There is a layer of confidence that you have in going out to meet the world, because your tribe is strong, you are loved, there are people that will care for you and opportunities for intimacy. It provides a kind of resilient backbone.

The Children is about siblings in a family. It might not be very interesting if it was about a tribe as secure as mine is. This tribe is a little dysfunctional - brought together after an accident and forced to spend unaccustomed time together. As well as the depiction of these relationships, the novel presents a very fine and accurate picture of life in a NSW country town. It thrusts life in this small town up against the experiences of one of the main characters, Mandy, who has become a foreign correspondent and lived through some extremely traumatic events. Small towns can produce their own forms of trauma however, and these play out subtly in the novel. There is one faintly jarring plot line that runs through the novel unnecessarily but the rest of it was just fine and a pleasure to read.

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