



# Reading Group Notes



## Reading Group Notes

### *The Life of Houses*, Lisa Gorton

#### ***About the Book***

*The Life of Houses* explores, with a poet's eye for detail, the hidden tensions in an old established Australian family that has lived for generations in a large house in a coastal town in south-eastern Australia. These tensions come to the surface when the granddaughter Kit is sent by her mother to spend a holiday with her grandparents, and the unmarried aunt who looks after them, in their old and decaying house by the sea. Kit barely knows them, because her mother is estranged from the family and never talks to or visits them. Recently divorced from Kit's father, she sends her daughter to her parents now so she can pursue an affair with her new lover. Kit's presence brings the old quarrels to life as family memories take hold of the present, brought to a flashpoint by the anger and resentment of Kit and her mother, and the dementia and sudden illness of her grandparents. *The Life of Houses* is written in an extraordinarily expressive and dynamic prose that makes use of the close focus and the oblique perspectives that Gorton has mastered so successfully in her poetry. It is a style reminiscent of Henry James and Patrick White, a high style, perfectly suited to the social decorum and inhibition of her socially elevated but unhappy subjects.

#### ***About the Author***

Lisa Gorton has a PhD in English Literature from the University of Oxford. Her first poetry collection *Press Release* won the Victorian Premier's Award for Poetry, her second *Hotel Hyperion* was awarded the Philip Hodgins Medal; she is the author of *Cloudland*, a young adult novel, and is an essayist and reviewer.



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#### *Lisa Gorton on writing* *The Life of Houses*

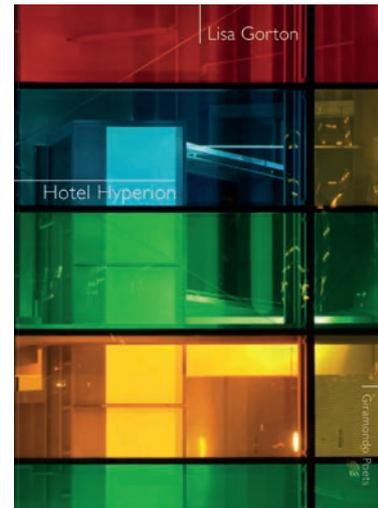
I wrote *The Life of Houses* alongside my poetry collection *Hotel Hyperion*. In both works I was interested not in what places say about us but in how they speak to us. I wanted to realise in writing how, when we live in a familiar place, we seem to be moving about in structures of feeling: memories, worries and desires.

*The Life of Houses* dramatises how this experience of inwardness works in a family: how the feelings of possession that build up in us might shape our most intimate relationships and come in conflict with the outward facts of ownership.

*The Life of Houses* is a book concentrated on women. In it a daughter returns to the house in which her mother was a child. The book alternates between the mother's and daughter's point of view and considers, day by day, the nature of this relationship, in which the mother and daughter not only occupy each other's thoughts but can seem to shadow forth each other's past and future.

*The Life of Houses* takes its motive force from the tensions that arise between the outward structures of a place and how we feel about it; between our appearance to others and our experience of our own inwardness. It considers also how this life of feeling, in which we find ourselves dealing with dreams and symbols, nonetheless brings us up against events – accidental, unanticipated, irrevocable.

LISA GORTON





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#### *Discussion Questions*

1. Kit didn't know her grandparents as a child because her mother didn't take her to visit. Do you think that it was fair for Anna to keep her daughter's life separate from her parents?
2. How do you feel about Treen? Do you think that she sacrificed her independence for her parents or that she used them as an excuse to avoid branching out on her own?
3. What do you think of the way that Scott relates to Kit? Do you think he behaves inappropriately?
4. The rooms in the book almost become characters. How much did the setting of the individual scenes effect your emotional response to them? What were the details described that made the greatest impression on your imagination?
5. Class is a central concern of the book. What are the markers for old money and new money in the book and is there a perjorative tone favouring one over the other or does the book remain neutral on that front?
6. How would you describe her character? Do you think that Anna was too hard on her family or that their behaviour brought about her coldness towards them?
7. What do you think of Anna's parenting style? Are you sympathetic to her choices – such as keeping her relationship with Peter private or going through Kit's room in her absence?
8. Kit is impassive for much of the novel, being taken around by her aunt, instructed by her grandparents and acting as a sort of sounding board for Scott. Were you surprised that Kit left on her own at the end of the book? How do you think Anna will react?
9. Which other authors did the style of the writing remind you of? What words would you use to describe the tone and tenor of the book?