

## HARMLESS

JULIENNE VAN LOON

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### ABOUT THE BOOK

It is an unseasonably hot day in early November, in one of the outer eastern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia. Eight-year-old Amanda is making her way on foot towards the prison where her father Dave is serving a six-year sentence. Dave's girlfriend Sua is not long dead. Behind Amanda trails Rattuwat, Sua's father, who has come from Thailand for his daughter's funeral. Falling further and further behind the little girl, the old man is left to navigate in an inhospitable and bewildering landscape.

As the visiting hour comes and goes, and Amanda and Rattuwat do not appear to see Dave, each character is isolated in regret, grieving, a desire to turn away from the way things are. The lost promise of the beautiful Sua wears at each of them like sharp wire, bound too tight on the skin.

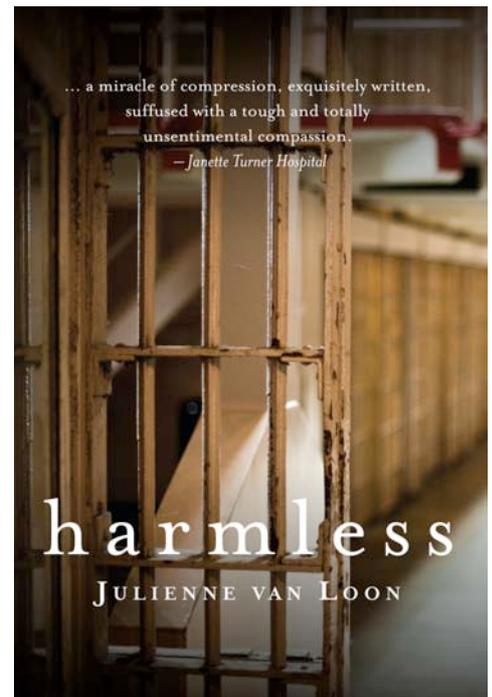
### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julienne van Loon teaches creative writing at Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia. She is the author of two novels, *Road Story* (winner of *The Australian/Vogel's Literary Award*) and *Beneath the Bloodwood Tree*. Her short stories and personal essays have appeared in *The Monthly* and *Griffith Review*.

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### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The story is told through the points of view of multiple characters. What is the effect of this on the reader?
- In what ways are the characters connected to each other? In what ways are they quite alone? Are their journeys similar or different?
- The tension at the heart of this novella is caused by the presence of the blue wire that Dave finds amongst Sua's hidden things. What is the importance of blue wire to the plot, and to the journeys of the characters – in particular to Dave and Sua?
- What is meant by the novella's title? How does the title interact with the cover image?
- The author has said that these stories were inspired by The Jataka, the stories of the Buddha's previous lives. In what ways might the story of each of the characters have a deeper myth behind it? Can you define the shape of each of these?
- What virtue (or its absence) does each of the characters embody?
- What role does the Buddhist practice of mindfulness have in this story?
- What is the meaning of Rattuwat's vision at the roadhouse? And in relation to Ant?
- *No one could tell the precise point at which atmosphere became space, solidity became air. I'm not here, he thought, and was quietly satisfied with the idea. I'm not here.* (p. 130) Why do you think Dave climbs up onto the prison roof? What happens to him while he is up there?
- What role do confined spaces play in this novella: the prison cell, the house in which Sua lives with The Fiancé, Dave's bunker into which Amanda retreats?
- *'When you let go of pain,' Sua says, 'there is only love. It is all we have.'* (p. 136) Is this true for each of the characters in this novella?
- What part does the Australian landscape play in the story?
- What do you make of the novella's ending? Why has van Loon chosen to end her story here?



- If we consider each character's 'myth', what are the implications of the novella's ending in relation to each?

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

*Harmless was inspired by The Jataka, the stories of the Buddha's former births. What led you to The Jataka? At what stage did you understand that these stories would form the beginning point of your writing of this novella?*

I have been a practising Buddhist for more than a decade, although perhaps a better way to say this is that I consider myself a student of Buddhism as both a practice and a philosophy, and I'm learning more about it all the time. I began to become aware of the popularity of the The Jataka when I was working as a library volunteer at my local Buddhist Society. Many of the stories from The Jataka have been translated and published as children's picture books and these were always popular with families who used our library. Also, as a student of the Dhamma, you often hear monks and nuns using stories from The Jataka to illustrate their teachings. I couldn't help noticing the narrative elegance of some of these tales and so my curiosity was raised. I ordered my own copy of the English translation of The Jataka. There are around 550 stories in the collection, published across three thick volumes. They date back to the time of the Buddha, around two and a half thousand years ago, and they are couched as stories of the Buddha's former lives. He reveals at the end of each tale which character in the story was the Buddha. The most recent English translation, however, is a little dated, and very often written in a stilted way, in the manner of a European anthropologist viewing the exotic, predominantly Asian tradition. I found I wanted to do something to share the beauty of these stories with a broader contemporary audience, to play around with them in an imaginative way. So, the idea for Harmless grew from those aspirations.

*What do you see now as the relationship between those stories and what you have written?*

The relationship in some ways grew looser as the contemporary story developed. I initially aimed to take fifteen to twenty of the Jataka tales and recast them in a realist mode and a single continuous narrative, especially for a contemporary audience. But as the key characters and the key dramatic problems at the heart of my own story developed, my intentions changed. In the final version, I think there are about five Jataka tales fully intact, but they are an important little group and although I have transformed many aspects of those stories, I feel I have been true to the heart of those 'morality tales' as the Buddha told them (or at least, as I've interpreted them). It doesn't matter to me that contemporary readers may not identify the points at which I cross in and out of the original tales. Those who are familiar with the Pali Buddhist canon may recognise the traces of the Jataka tales, but those who are not will, I hope, enjoy a different but no lesser reading of the novella on its own terms.

*Did you always intend Harmless to be a novella? What are the challenges and opportunities that seem particular to this form?*

I discovered something important about myself as a writer in the process of writing this book. I had initially wanted it to be a novel because I felt, perhaps misguidedly, that readers want to buy or borrow big books. But in the process of trying to make it into a longer work, I convinced myself once and for all that my territory as a writer is in the 'in-between' form of the novella. It is the economy of form that suits me so well, and also the way it is, in many ways, such a close relative of the short story. Endings can be more open, dramatic arcs less overtly flamboyant than we tend to get in the form of the novel or the epic. This book taught me that I'm a writer of novellas, essentially, and I'm happy to dwell with this form for a long time to come yet.

*What are some other novellas you admire?*

Oh, where to start? I'm never keen to declare favourites, because I enjoy so many different books, from so many different traditions. Here's a little go at a list:

All of the Sicilian crime writer Leonardo Sciascia's novellas are wonderful. The Day of the Owl, and two collections published as The Knight and Death and One Way or Another, and Sicilian Uncles. I've read these in translation, of course. He published originally in Italian, mainly during the early sixties.

Many of David Malouf's works are novellas, and his are amongst our best works of literature in Australia. Helen Garner is another notable contemporary Australian example. *The Children's Bach* remains a personal favourite. I would classify her more recent *The Spare Room* as a novella, too.

There are plenty of literary classics that are novellas. I prefer Tolstoy's shorter works to his longer ones, for example, and the same goes for Gabriel García Márquez. Much of Kafka's oeuvre fits the novella length, so does a lot of the work of Albert Camus and Thomas Mann. In the American tradition we have F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

Looking for more novellas written by women? I love Joyce Carol Oates' *Black Water*, and Kate Jennings' *Moral Hazard*, and Yasmina Reza's *Desolation*.

*Is it fair to say that your writing is preoccupied with the Australian landscape and in particular with small towns and suburban lives on the fringe? Why do you think this is?*

Yes, probably, and it's probably because these are the spaces in which I have worked and lived. During the writing of *Harmless* I have lived in the far Eastern hills on the outskirts of Perth and I've commuted a long distance to work, so I've had a lot of time on the road thinking about the urban fringe. Where I live, the suburban developments haven't quite reached yet, but they're not far away, and people travel out to the remnant bushland and small holdings farmland that constitutes our area, and they conduct their drug deals, or commit their suicides, or dump their suburban rubbish, then leave again. Dwelling in that space for upwards of a decade now, I've thought about it a lot. It is not quite country, not quite city. There are plenty of people without any money, and a few with plenty of money but no sense of obligation. There are people from quite different cultural backgrounds dwelling alongside one another, and there are inevitable little gangs and cliques. It's not that different to the urban fringe of many modern Australian cities. It's interesting terrain. It gets you thinking about borderlands, and the inevitability of change.



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