

## THE RIVER MOUTH

KAREN HERBERT

### ABOUT THE BOOK

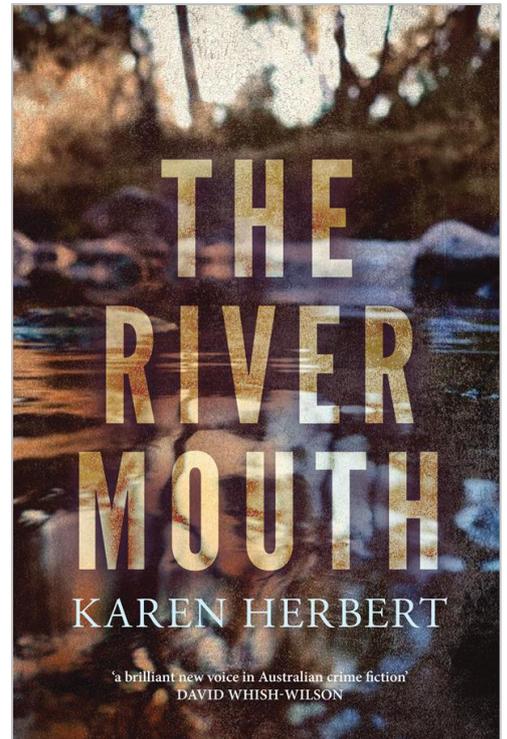
*The River Mouth* is about a woman torn between protecting a secret and finding the truth about her son's murder. Sandra lives in a coastal town, small enough that the policeman investigating your son's death used to drink beers with your husband, big enough to have a twenty-four-hour hospital emergency department, but not so big that you can pretend the darker side of the community doesn't exist.

As an ED nurse, Sandra has picked gravel from the legs of boys who rolled the farm ute after scoring at the pub. She has worked through rape kits with fifteen-year-old girls who won't tell that their assailant is the household breadwinner. But she also sees the homeless man who is allowed to shower at the tennis club and the school mums who buy him dinner when they get fish and chips for their own families.

Ten years after her son is killed at the river mouth, Sandra's best friend, Barbara, is found dead at a remote campsite. Barbara's DNA matches the DNA scraped from under Sandra's dead son's fingernails. When the investigation is reopened, Sandra questions what she knew about her best friend. She discovers disturbing truths about her local community and her own son, and wonders if her loyalties have been misplaced and whether the secrets she herself has kept now need to be spoken.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Herbert spent her childhood in Geraldton on the midwest coast of Australia, attending local schools before moving to Perth to study at the University of Western Australia where she attained a Bachelor of Commerce with First Class Honours. She also holds a Master of Science in Applied Psychology. Karen has worked in aged care, disability services, higher education, Indigenous land management, social housing and the public sector and is a graduate member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors. She is a Board Member of The Intelife Group and Advocare Inc., and President of the Fellowship of Australian Writers (WA). Karen lives in Perth, Western Australia with her husband, Ross, and the occasional fledgling.



### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In this novel, the story of Darren is told as a countdown to his death. Why do you think the author has chosen to do it this way?
2. How is the ordinariness of this account of the lives of teenagers undercut by the reader's knowledge that Darren is going to die?
3. What kinds of assumptions does the opening chapter set up in the reader's mind?
4. What kind of a boy is Darren and what are the sources of his vulnerabilities? Do you think his personality contributes to what happens?
5. Why do you think that Karen Herbert has chosen Barbara's son, Colin, as the second person's point of view to tell this story from?
6. How would you describe the friendship between Sandra and Barbara? Do you think that even when there are secrets between friends, friends should still trust each other?
7. What are the secrets on which this novel turns?

8. In what ways is Weymouth a typical Australian regional town?
9. Do you think that the troubles this book exposes are also typical of smaller communities in Australia?
10. What weight does the story put on different kinds of crimes – the Weymouth rapist, the death of Darren, the disappearance of Esther?
11. In Chapter 21, Sandra and Stuart struggle with coming to terms with Barbara's death. What assumptions do they each bring to this scene?
12. In what ways would you see this novel as offering a commentary on the challenges faced by an Indigenous population in an Australian country town?
13. What do we learn about the underbelly of this small town as the novel progresses?
14. How would you describe the relationship between Greg and Sandra, prior to Darren's death and in the novel's present? Is it possible for Sandra to reconcile what she knew of her ex-husband with what she comes to learn?
15. Do you think Sandra's loyalties and core beliefs change over the course of this novel?
16. Chekov famously said that one should never place a loaded gun on the stage if it wasn't going to go off. What is the role of the gun in this particular murder mystery?

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

### **Where did this story come from? Is Weymouth based on a real town?**

The story started with the scene at the river, where the boys are playing on the rope swing. It is a scene from my own childhood, when I used to roam – without permission – at the mouth of the Chapman River on the midwest coast of Western Australia with my sisters. I started to wonder about the boys, what happened to them, and how they were influenced by the community around them.

### **At what stage in the writing process did you settle on this structure?**

I could see very early on that there were two stories: Sandra's and Colin's. I was interested in Sandra's story as a woman of my generation. She works as a nurse, she raises a child with a disability, and adulthood has exhausted her. She sees the shortfalls of her town and also its dignity and kindness. I wanted to see how she made sense of wider issues in her community when most of her energy was already spent on getting through her own life.

I also knew there would be a perspective that Sandra would never see; that the boys' stories would be hidden from her in the way that children's lives are. The boys are allowed to roam, to spend time unobserved by their parents. Out of sight of adults, they learn how to get on with each other, solve problems, and respond to events around them in ways that are different to their parents.

### **Were there any issues in particular that you wanted to explore in writing this murder mystery, or was just telling a good story the most important thing for you?**

I wanted to see if I could combine telling a captivating crime story at the same time as holding up a mirror to life around me. Aged care has been a big part of my life over the last decade, and we continue to wrestle with answers to the way we support people with disabilities and their carers. These issues for me are important to include in any portrait of a community. Less discussed are the stories of disappeared Indigenous women. They are heartbreaking and more so because of the way they seem to be a side story; we don't even have reliable statistics for the number of Indigenous women who go missing each year. In *The River Mouth*, the amount of attention given to Darren compared to the attention given to Esther is a mirror of what happens in our own community.

### **What's next for Karen Herbert?**

My second book, *Cast Aways*, will be published by Fremantle Press in 2022. *Cast Aways* follows the dilemma faced by a young, naïve student, Josh, when he steals two research mice from a university laboratory after a night out with his friends. Still living at home with his parents, Josh has nowhere to keep the mice and can't bring himself to return them to their fate, so he hides them in the basement of the upmarket retirement village where he works as a carer. But they can't stay there forever, and one of them is getting fat. He must find them a home before they are discovered or, worse, cause a deadly disease outbreak.