



READING GROUP NOTES

THE TEACHER'S SECRET Suzanne Leal

About the book

The Teacher's Secret is a story of life in a close-knit coastal community and the secrets and struggles of the people who live there.

Terry Pritchard, assistant principal at Brindle Public School, watches his career collapse when he is accused of inappropriate behaviour towards his students. Nina Foreman, a new teacher at the school, struggles to deal both with the breakdown of her marriage and a classroom of students who don't like her. Rebecca Chuma, also new to Brindle, is a curiosity for the locals who don't know what she's doing there and why she can't return home. Joan Mather, by contrast, has lived in Brindle all her life. Since the death of her elderly mother, however, she's been finding it hard to even leave the house.

Built of richly conceived characters, *The Teacher's Secret* is a big-hearted book about a small community and the search for grace, dignity and love in the midst of dishonour, humiliation, grief and uncertainty.

About the author

Suzanne Leal is the author of two novels, *Border Street* and *The Teacher's Secret*. A lawyer experienced in child protection, criminal law and refugee law, Suzanne is the senior judge for the 2017 NSW Premier's Literary Awards. She is also a regular interviewer at Sydney Writers' Festival and other literary functions.

Curiosity about hidden stories and secret lives drives Suzanne's writing. It sparked her interest in the lives of her Czech landlords, Fred and Eva Perger, who were the inspiration for her novel, *Border Street*, commended in the Asher Literary Award. Curiosity, too, prompted Suzanne to explore the intrigues of the schoolyard and bring them to life in *The Teacher's Secret*.

Suzanne lives in Sydney with her husband, David, and her four children, Alex, Dominic, Xavier and Miranda.

Reviews

“Suspenseful, moving and full of heart. I couldn’t put it down.” Richard Glover

‘Elegantly structured, unsettling, yet with moments of surprising wit - in this novel Suzanne Leal captures the life of a small community with real tenderness.’ Kathryn Heyman

‘What happens when we are forced to leave what we love? Our life’s work, our marriage, our homeland? *The Teacher’s Secret* is a delicately woven tapestry of interlinking stories that reveal the ordinary struggles of decent people in the small town of Brindle. Built of richly conceived characters – teachers, mothers, wives – it draws you in to the web of relationships in and around a little public school, its dramas, crises and victories, as people navigate their own and bear witness to each other’s struggles. It is a story of rupture and repair, about the betrayals of the past, and what happens when the systems and institutions we trust to guide our lives fail the humans within them. This is a big hearted book about a small community and how small acts of kindness and courage, and the willingness to face the truth, restore the human spirit to a sense of new belonging.’ Joanne Fedler

‘The Teacher’s Secret..is.. an absorbing modern tale of good and evil.’ Dorothy Johnston, *Sydney Morning Herald* 23 June 2016

‘This multi-layered story of hope in the face of adversity is great book club fodder.’ Julie Hosking, *The Weekend West*, Perth 11 June 2016

For discussion

- In what way can *The Teacher’s Secret* be seen as a critique of contemporary Australian society?
- Is *The Teacher’s Secret* ‘a story of hope in the face of adversity’, ‘a modern tale of good and evil’ or neither of these things?
- In contemporary Australian society, is there a general suspicion of male teachers? If so, why do you think this might be?
- In *Teacher’s Secret*, which character did you most identify with? Which character did you least identify with?
- Did you sympathise with Terry? Why or why not?
- Did your opinion of Laurie Mathews change over the course of the novel? Why? In your view, was she responsible for a witch hunt or were her concerns about Terry justified? What would you have done in her place?
- Brindle is a fictional coastal town. Does it remind you of a place you know, perhaps even a place where you have lived? How did the setting of the novel

assist the narrative? Would Terry's behaviour have been more or less acceptable had he been teaching in a more urban setting?

- Terry provides Nina with information about Bridie's parents that not even Bridie is aware of. In doing so, was Terry wrongly betraying a confidence or rightly doing what he could to protect the child?
- Do you think Terry was justified in withholding information about the students from the acting principal, Laurie? What would you have done in his place?
- In *The Teacher's Secret*, each chapter is given the name of the character from whose perspective the chapter is told. How does this affect the unfolding of the story?

Suggested further reading

Border Street – Suzanne Leal

The Slap – Christos Tsiolkas

The Eye of the Sheep - Sofie Laguna

Cloudstreet – Tim Winton

The Harp in the South – Ruth Park

Poor Man's Orange – Ruth Park