



HINTERLAND

by Steven Lang



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THE STORY

Miles Prentice is a third generation GP in the old farming district of Winderran, two years widowed by the death of his wife Sonia, losing a battle with his drinking problem, while juggling his small cattle property and his busy practice. Joy, the practice manager, is an intimidating local fount of knowledge who is holding things together. Miles' locum, Nick Lasker, is filling the gaps left by Miles' increasingly unreliable behaviour and trying to establish a life following his separation from wife, Abie, and their children, Josh and Danielle, and a string of short-lived affairs. Nurse Eugenie Lensman is trapped in a loveless marriage to FIFO husband David, and is primary carer for their two daughters, Sandrine and Emily, while heavily engaged as spokesperson for the local No-Dam protesters. Helen Lamprey is battling cancer and her selfish and sexually ambiguous novelist husband Guy has serious writers' block. The latter has been enlisted by shady politician, Aldous Bain, the local Federal Member and Shadow Minister for Energy and Employment in the Lonergan cabinet, and business magnate Peter Mayska, to join his conservative party as a spokesperson for the pro-dam movement. Lindl and Marcus Barker are aging greenies whose dedicated re-planting of their property is threatened by the dam. Geoff Steever is a scientist devoted to protecting an endangered frog. Alt is a well-intentioned career protester. Ex-army mechanic Will has returned from Afghanistan confused and angry, and he and his mate Damo have joined Jaz and his militia-style boot camp which is being supported by mysterious forces. Will's fling with Ange, one of the hippies protesting against the dam, makes Will moody and dangerous. Cooper, Mayska's teenage son, is disconnected and rebellious, and when beaten up at boot camp, is rescued by Lasker at Bain's behest. Nick is being directed by all these events to become a significant figure in this community, and in Eugenie's life. But does he really want to be?

Winderran is about to reach boiling point with the clash between these forces underpinned by personal clashes in marriages and relationships. Told in 19 chapters from the alternating points of view of Miles, Nick, Guy, Eugenie and Will, *Hinterland* canvases environmental politics, social cohesion and social engineering, moral choices, ultra-nationalism, the complexity of relationships, the ethics of fidelity in marriage, terminal illness, post-traumatic stress disorder and many other topics. It works towards a climax in which the personal and political collide; all these characters are involved, and none are likely to escape without significant changes in their lives.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Lang is the author of two novels, *An Accidental Terrorist*, which won Premiers' Literary Awards in both Queensland and New South Wales, and *88 Lines about 44 Women*, which was shortlisted for both the Christina Stead and the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards for Fiction. Steven co-directs Outspoken, an extended writers' festival taking the form of occasional conversations with major Australian and international writers. He lives in Maleny, in South East Queensland. www.stevenlang.com.au

DISCUSSION NOTES

1. 'Showered, dressed in shorts and shirt ... the impossibility of their co-existence.' (pp 2–3) Read this extended passage about the irony of early clearing of land for farming, which is now being re-planted by greenies or developed into artfully designed properties by the wealthy, and unravel the issues being raised here about how human beings use the environment around them.
2. In Chapter 5 (p 82) Miles's death comes as a shock; he had opened the narrative, and seemed set to be one of its major characters. What does his death precipitate in the novel's action?
3. Read this passage in full and then debate it: '... over the last few decades in Australia we've created a society which expects the State to offer a safety net. That's fair enough, but it's also a society which doesn't seem to think it has the right to ask for anything back. What we believe is that in any social contract there should be expectations on both sides. We are not frightened of having a debate about these things. About what that might mean. Of whether or not we are prepared to ask something of our young, not for their whole lives, just for eighteen months, asking them to give back to the country which, in turn, has given them life. And I know what the Honourable Member is going to say, that this is thinly veiled nationalism and that nationalism is dangerous ... Other countries do it, why shouldn't we?' (p 38)
4. 'And while much of this might or might not have been true his scepticism was, she thought, nothing to do with the politics, it was cover for his dislike of her having a life of her own, interests that didn't include him or have a direct economic input on the household. He wanted to be in control.' (p 47) Is David's behaviour towards Eugenie due to his insecurity as they drift apart; does he seek to control Eugenie because he knows that she is beyond his control? Or is his behaviour typical of many marriages?
5. 'Australia likes to think itself a classless society, requiring even its oligarchs to dress like their inferiors, to talk in the same way, to appear to want the same things. It doesn't mean they have to mingle.' (p 69) Is ours a classless society?
6. Helen forgives Guy's homosexual affair with Edward Greave but clearly it wasn't an aberration, and his upbringing has left him emotionally scarred. Why did he marry? Was their genuine love between them? How did their loss of Alan, their son, influence their marriage? What did Guy's actions when Helen was dying reveal about his feelings towards her and their daughter Sarah? How well do you think Guy's political career is going to progress?
7. 'He'd been at McDonald's with Josh and Danielle when the call came through. The end of a long day, doing

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things: the museum, a walk around the lake, a film, then hamburgers. As if buying their happiness with wall-to-wall entertainment. Danielle still of an age where she wanted to make it work. Josh of an age where he didn't, having brought along some game device from which he was impossible to separate, even to eat the food of his choice. (Abie wouldn't have taken them to a McDonald's in a fit. He'd had to make them promise not to tell her.)' (p 94) Custody visits are difficult for children and parents as they inevitably involve pre-arranged outings to places which make meaningful communication difficult.

8. Nick observes his fellow guests at Guy Lamprey's dinner, and surmises that Harry Barkham suffers from 'PIPS, Previously Important Person Syndrome'. (p 97) This seems flippant but perhaps there is an underlying message for all retirees? (Earlier in the novel, Miles thinks: 'Harry's problem, Harry's disease, peculiar to towns like Winderran, has its roots in boredom. He retired too soon. Came up here, spent the first couple of years building his pile, organising the landscaping (he has forty-three varieties of camellia in his 'grounds', which he opens to the public once a year) but once that was done had little else to occupy him.' (p 6) What does this novel suggest about 'tree-changer' retirees?

9. Discuss Australia's contracting-out of security services in gaols and detention camps in relation to the following two quotes: 'Dad, for example. He's read history. You get massive inequality and sooner or later you get revolution. But hey, if you already own the means of production, why not own the means of protection? That way you can repress the masses for at least a couple of cycles ... if the State's not going to look after your privilege you have to do it yourself.' (p 168) AND 'It could be an effect of the long peace, of course, but they've become so enamoured of this idea of "small government" that they've taken to subcontracting out the instruments of law enforcement – domestic and international – to the private sector ... What they've failed to recognise is that if you give the monopoly of violence to someone else, even under contract, you no longer have it yourself.' (pp 251–2)

10. Helen is 'eased' from her world of pain with a powerful dose of morphine. Discuss this in relation to the euthanasia debate and comments made by people such as Andrew Denton and Karen Hitchcock [See Further Reading below].

11. Carefully crafted 'sleight of hand' observations make Steven Lang's social commentary very astute, for example: 'He was, of course, a doctor. It's not that they're not smart, just focused on their work to the point of autism.' (p 259) AND 'A leather bag over her shoulder and a bottle in a brown paper bag in her hand, the paper pushed back from the top, like a wino, except it was cranberry juice, not port. A decade ago, so as to have something to do with her hands, she'd have lit a cigarette; instead she took a sip from the bottle.' (pp 265–6) What other quotes particularly appealed to you in how they described contemporary social customs?

12. The open ending of this novel suggests that in her coma Eugenie has seen more clearly than ever before. What has she seen?

University of Queensland Press – Book Club Notes

HINTERLAND

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FURTHER READING

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