



THE KILLING OF LOUISA

by Janet Lee

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THE STORY

‘My hands look different in these shackles, and again I think they are not my own. It is as though being in irons has made me a new person. I am now a woman who has done a terrible thing. But it was not me who done it. It was the woman who wears the black prison gown and shackles, and that is why these hands are not mine.’ (p. 50)

In *The Killing of Louisa*, Janet Lee tells the tragic story of Louisa Collins. Beginning with an actual letter written by Louisa to the Sheriff of Darlinghurst Gaol, Sydney, where she is interned, the book continues in Lee’s fictionalised version of Louisa’s narration.

Louisa has been jailed for supposedly murdering her husbands: her first husband Charles Andrews, so that she might marry Michael Collins, then her second – both with rat poison. She endures two inquests and three trials, and none of the trial juries have found her guilty. Regardless, she is kept in jail and is popularly known as the Botany Murderess. Her many children have been separated and visit only rarely. Louisa’s case is debated in parliament, petitions are organised on her behalf and newspapers across the country avidly report on her trials. The fourth trial finds her guilty of killing Michael and she awaits her death – by hanging – in a solitary cell, with her only comforts being the kindness of the warder Alice Harper, the chaplain, Canon Rich, and the female Governor.

Janet Lee has written a brilliant novel extrapolating on the historical record to re-imagine what the real Louisa’s life might have been and how that life led to her being convicted. The voice in which this is written is richly imagined and poetically detailed; it is searing in its veracity and heart-rending in its pain. How a beautiful naive young woman was reduced to such circumstances is told with carefully researched authenticity. Tragically, Louisa’s life was not her own, and she believed until the end that she would receive a reprieve.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janet Lee’s manuscript for *The Killing of Louisa* won the Emerging Queensland Writer category in the 2017 Queensland Literary Awards. She has a Doctor of Creative Arts from the University of the Sunshine Coast. Janet lives in south-east Queensland with her family.

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DISCUSSION NOTES

1. First the boss's wife and then Louisa's parents determine her future. 'But then I have learnt since, sir, that life has many turns, and sometimes the turns are made quickly.' (p. 78) Did Louisa have any control over her own destiny? Could she have changed anything?
2. 'It's not diamonds they want to put around my neck.' (p. 28) This sort of 'gallows' or black humour leavens the narrative. Louisa's cellmate Flora is particularly humorous in her utterances. Louisa's reflections on people are always witty and astute. What role does humour play in this novel?
3. Was Louisa driven to drink by her circumstances or did she contribute to her own downfall by drinking so much? 'And it was about that time that I first began to like a drink.' (p. 124)
4. The prison conditions described are horrendous and yet Louisa writes: 'Until I came to prison, it had been a long time since I had sat and had a meal placed before me that was not one I had needed to prepare myself, so I like the experience of it, even if the meal is only prison food. There is something of a companionship among us, for we are a world of women all locked up together away from the men.' (p. 17) If the prison is a haven, what does this suggest about the lives of these women?
5. There are many possibilities in this narrative as to whether Louisa did or did not commit a crime. Her life was one of unrelenting poverty and hard work. Was her loss of so many things – family, safe haven, home, beloved babies – more than enough to have driven her to murder?
6. Would Louisa's behaviour (also dealing with insurance and other money matters immediately after Charles's death) have been more convincing had she 'acted out' her grief more fervently? 'Being tight did me no good. The newspapers said I was cold and heartless.' (p. 61); 'And I am told they have talked about this in the papers, about my not wearing black and how it was unseemly. But then they would not know the half of it, would they?' (p. 170)
7. Louisa hopes that May will be able to direct her own life. How likely might that have been, given her circumstances in being sent away to an unknown home and guardian?
8. 'Mourning and feeling feeble is a luxury, and it is my observation that only the rich have that luxury, sir.' (p. 100) What part does class and poverty play in Louisa's downfall?
9. Michael was a compulsive liar and gambler. What did you think of Charles? Was he a better husband to Louisa?
10. How effective is the inclusion of newspaper articles from the era? For example: 'In giving evidence against her mother, Louisa Collins ... a pretty child, named May Andrews, 11½ years of age, was much affected. The prisoner and several of the jurors felt the situation keenly.' (p. 12) Does this have more impact than simply describing Louisa's reaction to May's testimony?

University of Queensland Press – Book Club Notes

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FURTHER READING

The QLA Emerging Writers Award judges said that: ‘The Killing of Louisa follows the tradition of *Burial Rites* and *Alias Grace*, with one woman unfairly sent to death by men in the judiciary.’ Read and discuss this work in relation to those two novels.

The author has referred in the acknowledgments to a range of primary and secondary texts which readers may wish to explore further, particularly Caroline Overington’s *Last Woman Hanged*.