

WE SEE WHAT WE EXPECT TO SEE

EXILES

JANE
HARPER

Bestselling author of *THE DRY*

READING NOTES   



BLURB

AARON FALK RETURNS IN THIS MASTERFUL NOVEL OF INTRIGUE.

At a busy festival site on a warm spring night, a baby lies alone in her pram, her mother having vanished into the crowds.

A year on, Kim Gillespie's absence casts a long shadow as her friends and loved ones gather deep in the heart of South Australian wine country to welcome a new addition to the family.

Aaron Falk, federal investigator, is joining the celebrations. But as he soaks up life in the lush valley, he begins to suspect this tight-knit group may be more fractured than it seems. As hidden truths slowly emerge, Falk faces the darkest of questions.

Praise for Jane Harper:

'a crime-writing force of nature' *ADELAIDE ADVERTISER*

'Queen of outback noir' *SUNDAY TIMES*

ABOUT JANE HARPER

Jane Harper is author of the international bestsellers *The Dry*, *Force of Nature*, *The Lost Man* and *The Survivors*. Her books are published in forty territories worldwide, and *The Dry* has been adapted into a major motion picture starring Eric Bana. Jane has won numerous top awards including the Australian Book Industry Awards Book of the Year, the Australian Indie Awards Book of the Year, the CWA Gold Dagger Award for Best Crime Novel, and the British Book Awards Crime and Thriller Book of the Year. Jane worked as a print journalist for thirteen years both in Australia and the UK, and now lives in Melbourne with her husband, two children and two cats.

A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO *EXILES*

** Please note, this summary contains spoilers **

A year before the events of the novel, thirty-nine-year-old Kim Gillespie disappeared at a rural food and wine festival in the fictional Marralee Valley, South Australia. When her shoe was found jammed in the filter of a nearby reservoir, she was thought to have drowned. However, her body was not found, and many questions remain about her disappearance. She left behind a husband and two daughters, the elder from a previous relationship and the younger only six weeks old. The baby, Zoe, was found alone in her pram at the festival on the night Kim vanished.

A year later, Kim's family and friends gather to make an appeal to the public for new information. This is held at the food and wine festival on the anniversary of Kim's disappearance. Aaron Falk, who was there the year before to attend the christening of his friend Greg Raco's son, has returned for the christening and is present for the appeal. The Raco family has long been connected to Kim Gillespie through Greg's brother Charlie, Kim's ex-partner and the father of her older daughter, Zara.

It was known that Kim had been suffering from depression at the time of her disappearance, but Zara is convinced that Kim would not have left Zoe alone in her pram, let alone taken her own life and left her and Zoe motherless. And there are many potential sightings of Kim that create confusion about the way in which she disappeared. One witness claims Kim did not leave the festival grounds via the exit leading to the reservoir, as is assumed.

The appeal does not generate any meaningful leads. However, returning to Marralee Valley stirs up memories for Falk, who, sensing Raco's misgivings, starts to feel there might be more to Kim's disappearance than originally thought. Unofficially, he and Greg Raco begin to re-examine the case, hoping Falk's fresh eyes might reveal something new. At the same time, Falk is reunited with a local woman, Gemma, who he met briefly nearly two years earlier. There was a spark between them, but circumstances at the time had meant that nothing had eventuated from their meeting.

As Falk begins to ask questions and dig deeper into the case, he starts to see that certain elements don't add up. Other past events, such as a near-assault Kim suffered as a teenager and the death of Gemma's husband Dean in a car accident ring quiet but insistent alarm bells.

Then, at the festival once more, Falk notices Raco's daughter waving at people she doesn't know on a ride and the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. Kim was never present at the festival – they had just all been carefully manipulated to think she was. And the person responsible had done so to cover up the fact that he had killed Kim on the way there. Kim's body is recovered from the bushland where Falk suspected her husband Rohan had killed her, and at that point Rohan confesses and the mystery is solved.

Six months later, Falk has moved to Marralee Valley to start a new life with Gemma. One day, when reminded of evidence from the scene of Dean Tozer's death, he realises he knows who was responsible. He confronts Sergeant Dwyer with the evidence and Dwyer confesses that his daughter was driving the car that killed Dean and that he himself covered up the crime out of a misguided sense of love and loyalty. Dwyer hands himself over to police.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Exiles* is written in the third person, past tense, mostly from the perspective of Aaron Falk, a police officer with the Australian Federal Police. How does this writing style and point of view influence your perception of the events in the novel?
2. The novel is set in the heart of South Australian wine country. In what ways does the setting play a role in the plot, and in each of the characters' stories?
3. Pages 19–20. '*[T]here was something in human nature that compelled people to fill in the gaps. But what they'd seen and what they thought they'd seen were not necessarily one and the same.*'
Falk says this very early on, but it turns out to be deeply pertinent to solving the mystery of Kim Gillespie's disappearance. Why?
4. The prologue asks us to '*Think back. The signs were there. What were they?*' (page 1) In your opinion, what were the signs that Kim may have been suffering from domestic abuse and had met with foul play?
5. Spending time in Marralee with good friends makes Falk rethink almost every aspect of his life. Apart from the drawcard of his blossoming relationship with Gemma, what is it that appeals to him about the different lifestyle a rural town offers? In your opinion, what are the aspects of city versus country living that appeal – or don't?
6. Domestic and family abuse can be perpetrated in ways that do not involve overt physical violence. Indeed, Rohan thinks to himself even as he's killing Kim, '*For God's sake, he wasn't that kind of man.*' (page 372) What are some of the ways Rohan manipulates and exerts control over Kim? Do you think Kim was a vulnerable target for this abuse?
7. Did you, as a reader, suspect that Rohan was the one who killed Kim? If so, what were the signs that led you to this conclusion? Who else did you suspect?
8. Sergeant Dwyer's daughter died in an alcohol-related incident at the age of twenty-two, and he and his wife raise money for a charity that provides support for families of those with alcohol abuse issues. Alcohol also played a clear role in the death of Joel's father, Dean. Discuss the drinking culture and attitudes towards alcohol in Australia today.
9. Isolating people from their loved ones and those close to them is a common way that perpetrators of domestic violence and coercive control exert power over their victim. How does Rohan achieve this with Kim?
10. Why do you think the book is titled *Exiles*? Which of the characters might this term apply to, and why?
11. How do the ideas of fear and shame around sexual assault and/or domestic violence protect the perpetrator, and hinder victims from seeking help? Was that a factor in Kim's situation, both when she was nearly assaulted as a teenager and at the time of her death?

12. What, if any, red herrings were there in the plot that distracted the onlooker from the truth?
13. A distinction is drawn between the wild beauty of the bushland that perfectly hides the crime of Kim's death, and the neat humanmade rows of grapevines that have been imposed onto the earth and provide the livelihood of those who live in the valley. In what ways does the idea of the wild untamed land versus the humanmade environment permeate the novel?
14. Although Kim's and Dean's deaths are not eventually related to one another, Falk's attention to detail helps him notice there are elements missing from both crimes. What are these, and how does this idea help Falk solve the crimes?
15. Many of the characters experience moments of regret in *Exiles*. Falk finds that he regrets not spending time with his father when he had the chance at university. How does this insight influence his ultimate decision regarding his future with Gemma? Do any of the other characters act on or acknowledge their regrets? What might the outcomes in the novel suggest about regrets in general?
16. Throughout the novel, several characters tell Falk different versions of the story of the evening on which Kim disappeared. We see the true version of events at the novel's conclusion, from Kim's and Rohan's points of view. What might these differing perspectives tell us about the nature of stories, of memories, and the nature of truth?