

READING NOTES

THREE BROTHERS, ONE DEATH, NO ANSWERS . . .

THE LOST MAN

'Harper has harnessed what captivates the Australian psyche – the landscape'

JANE HARPER

Bestselling author of *THE DRY* and *FORCE OF NATURE*

BLURB

The man lay still in the centre of a dusty grave under a monstrous sky.

Two brothers meet at the border of their vast cattle properties under the unrelenting sun of outback Queensland.

They are at the stockman's grave, a landmark so old, no one can remember who is buried there. But today, the scant shadow it casts was the last chance for their middle brother, Cameron.

The Bright family's quiet existence is thrown into grief and anguish. Something had been troubling Cameron. Did he lose hope and walk to his death? Because if he didn't, the isolation of the outback leaves few suspects...

For readers who loved *The Dry* and *Force of Nature*, Jane Harper has once again created a powerful story of suspense, set against a dazzling landscape.

THE AUTHOR

Jane Harper is the author of the international bestsellers *The Dry* and *Force of Nature*. Her books are published in more than 36 territories worldwide, with film rights sold to Reese Witherspoon and Bruna Papandrea. 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 and daughter.

PLOT SUMMARY

When cattle station owner Cameron Bright is found dead at an outback landmark known as the stockman's grave, miles from anywhere and in the searing heat of a Queensland summer, most people assume he must have intended his death. Why else would he have walked away from his car, which was stocked with supplies and water, his only possible means of survival in that brutal climate?

There are no signs of violence or foul play, so the local authorities conclude that he must have done, but his older brother Nathan knows something is very wrong with the picture. Cameron ran the family's profitable cattle station with their younger brother Bub, and had a wife and two small daughters. He was clever, successful and well liked in the local town. Suicide – especially in this manner – was out of character.

Along with his teenage son, Nathan returns to his childhood home to help with the fallout from Cameron's death. He finds that things are not quite what he expected: Cameron had been tense and distracted before he died, and there are other factors that just don't add up. Nathan starts looking for answers, but the more he digs, the closer to home the truth seems to lie...

THEMES

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence lies at the heart of many of the events of this novel.

1. *'You want me to teach them this a different way?' [Carl had] said in a way that made Nathan glad Liz didn't ask again . . . 'Either of you ever try this bullshit again, I promise you it will be ten times worse. And not just for you two.'* Nathan had felt Liz tense again, and after that, for a long time, both he and Cameron had done exactly what they were told.

(Pages 169-170)

Carl Bright is shown through the novel to have been an aggressive and violent man, but his abuse was not always of a physical nature. What does the novel have to say about the power wielded by a perpetrator of domestic violence, and the long-lasting effects of that abuse?

2. *[Nathan] had never told anyone. Not Jacqui, not Xander. Not Bub, and not Cameron. He and his brothers had never talked about it, not once in their whole adult lives.* (Pages 316-317)

How does the secretive nature of domestic violence protect the perpetrator? How do the ideas of fear and shame hinder victims from seeking help? Are there any other reasons the Brights might not have sought help for their situation?

OUTBACK WAY OF LIFE

Sheer distance and isolation impacts the way crimes are responded to and investigated in the outback.

1. What effect did the lack of police and medical support have on the outcomes for the rape of Jenna Moore, and the death of Cameron Bright?
2. Nathan is excommunicated from the local township when he doesn't stop to help Keith Walker on a remote outback road. What does this have to say about the nature of small, isolated communities? What are the advantages and disadvantages of communities such as these, do you think?

THE EFFECT OF PAST TRAUMA

1. *'I believe you. I'm just –' [Nathan] thought about his brothers and himself. And their dad and the years growing up under him. What they'd all become. 'Very sad.'* (Page 313)

Nathan, Cameron and Bub all suffered from their father's domestic violence against them and their mother through their childhood, but they have dealt with that abuse in very different ways as adults. What effect has that abuse had on each of the brothers? What are some of their different coping mechanisms? Which of them do you think has been the most successful at dealing with this traumatic childhood, and why?

2. For those who have also read Jane Harper's *The Dry*, an interesting link is made between Liz Bright and her abusive brother, Malcolm Deacon. What could you infer from this connection?

CHARACTERS

NATHAN BRIGHT

1. *A large part of [Nathan's] reluctance around fatherhood, he had realised after Xander was born, had been fear. It had been deep and ingrained in a way that Nathan tried to keep buried. He had not told Jacqui. Instead, he had stumbled his way through by thinking about how his own father would react to a given situation and then – with sustained effort at times – doing exactly the opposite.* (Page 224)

How has Nathan's upbringing affected his approach to parenthood? How do the events of the novel influence his attitude towards how he interacts with Xander and Jacqui in the future?

2. Nathan must confront many of his demons over the course of this novel. What is it that allows him to make such progress, do you think?

3. Nathan's impression of Cameron changes as he gets closer to the truth about Cameron's death. How and why does it change?

BUB (LEE) BRIGHT

1. *Bub sounded resigned. 'Bloody Cam. I don't know how he did it. He was as much of a dickhead as the rest of us, he was just better at hiding it.'* (Page 298)

In spite of the family's persistently low expectations of Bub, it is Bub who is the most perceptive about Cameron here. In what other ways is Bub underestimated in the novel?

2. Bub is almost always referred to by his childhood nickname. What effect do you think this might have had on him as he grew up?

CAMERON BRIGHT

1. Over the course of the novel, Cameron Bright is revealed to us as someone who had both good and not so good qualities, which he hides well. What were some of the ways Cameron manipulated the people around him? Why and how did he get away with it?

2. In spite of the influence Cameron had on those around him, all the other characters in the novel benefit in some way from Cameron's death. In what ways are they now better off? Do you think this justifies Cameron's death in any way?

3. Nathan tells us that Cameron was Carl's favoured son. What effect might this favouritism have had on Cameron, and his two brothers?

LIZ BRIGHT

1. Did you suspect at any point that Liz might have been involved in Cameron's death? Why or why not, do you think?

2. With the benefit of hindsight, what signs were there that might have thrown suspicion on Liz, or, in contrast, diverted attention away from her?

3. What do you think about what Liz did, both to Carl and to Cameron? Do you think that her actions were justified? Do you think Nathan is doing the right thing when he decides to keep her secret?

SETTING

1. The remote Queensland outback and its fictional town of Balamara is the central setting of the novel. How does this remote, isolated setting inform our ideas about the people who live there and the events that take place there? How does the setting itself impact the events of the novel?
2. The stockman's grave is the scene of several major events in this book. It is the location of Cameron's death, it is the focal point of Ilse's escape plan, and it is the source of Cameron's prize-winning painting. In what ways does the idea of this lonely grave permeate the novel? What does it have to say about outback life, both now and in the past?

WRITING STYLE

1. Jane Harper has chosen to tell this story in the third person past tense, entirely (with the exception of the prologue) from Nathan Bright's point of view. What is the effect of this?
2. The novel begins with a prologue from an omniscient viewpoint that describes the bleak setting of Cameron Bright's death. Why is this approach such a powerful way to introduce the events of the novel?
3. Throughout the novel, several characters tell different versions of the story of the stockman buried in the stockman's grave. It is Nathan who tells the true story at the novel's conclusion. What might this tell us about the nature of stories, and the nature of truth? Can you draw any parallels between this and any other stories told in this novel?