



# THE AUNTS' HOUSE

by Elizabeth Stead

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## THE STORY

‘Clara and Elsa would love her then. She was only eleven – there was plenty of time.’ (p. 59)

This is a story about a young girl’s desperate search for love. After being orphaned, Angel Martin moves into Persia Potts’s Bushland Boarding Establishment, which is populated by an assortment of eccentric and colourful characters. Her landlady sells everything Angel’s impoverished mother left her and puts Angel to work. However, despite her desperate circumstances at the mercy of Mrs Potts’s miserable scrimping and saving, Angel refuses to accept her fate. Her belief in the possibility of love is irrepressible. And so she is determined to forge a sense of belonging despite rejection from her two aunts, Clara and Elsa, who blame Angel’s mother for their brother’s death and treat her extremely poorly. Gradually Angel makes her way into their hearts on her Sunday visits to the aunts’ house by the Bay.

Happily there is some further light in her life, as well. The music that accompanies her everywhere and her Sunday travels by tram to the beautiful Bay give Angel the emotional sustenance she lacks elsewhere as does her discovery of art at the gallery. She’s also befriended by the gregarious Winifred Varnham – a vision in exotic fabrics – and the numerically gifted Barnaby Grange.

Elizabeth Stead brings her classic subversive wit and personal insight to this nostalgic portrait of wartime Sydney. In Angel Martin, she has created a thoroughly original and unforgettable young heroine whose trials and tribulations leave no character in this novel untouched.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Stead is the Sydney-born niece of acclaimed novelist Christina Stead. From childhood, Elizabeth was greatly inspired by her grandfather David George Stead, pioneer naturalist, conservationist and storyteller. Elizabeth has published short fiction and five previous novels: *The Fishcastle*, *The Different World of Fin Starling*, *The Book of Tides*, *The Gospel of Gods and Crocodiles* and *The Sparrows of Edward Street*. *The Aunts’ House* is her sixth novel.

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### QUESTIONS

1. Angel Martin is a singular character. Her tough upbringing has made her prickly, feisty, determined, unsentimental, and yet strangely hopeful. What is the source of Angel's sense of hope? Why is she such an original personality?
2. A sense of place in this novel is essential to its characterisation. The aunts' house (which gives the novel its title), and the Bay, Persia Potts's Bushland Boarding Establishment, the gully that becomes 'Angel's sanctuary' (p. 12), even the tram, could be seen as 'characters' in their own right. When Uncle George asks Angel which she prefers – the gully or the Bay – her answer (p. 224) reveals the depth of her emotional attachment to place. What part does place play in the thematic development in this novel?
3. Mrs Persia Potts is described as a character who Mr Charles Dickens 'would have loved' (p. 19). Other exotic characters people this novel, such as mathematician Mr Barnaby Grange; Mister Joseph; the flamboyant Winifred Varnham; the eccentric and damaged aunts Elsa and Clara; their stepmother, the ghastly Jessie; and Mrs' Potts's estranged husband Harry Potts. Which of these characters did you find most interesting, and why?
4. 'So many things happened in 1942. It was a "headline" year everywhere' (p. 38). Stead's vivid description of people and social morays of the time fuel the veracity of the novel. She is one of the few Australian writers still publishing with firsthand insight into the period. What aspects of social life did you find interesting or surprising?
5. Angel's casual abuse at the hands of her headmaster, Mister Daisyfield, the boarding house resident Mr Canning, and Uncle George (p. 235) are shocking. How vulnerable were such young girls in this era? What was the novelist suggesting in presenting these various scenes of abuse in this novel?
6. Humour and subversive wit are hallmarks of Stead's writing: 'Quality is quality, even if it's scuffed.' (p. 13) or: 'Mister Dickens would have wrapped Angel up in an old torn shawl and tossed her into snow if he could find some.' (p. 19) or: 'I do wish you'd stop speaking like a lost pirate, Mister Potts.' (p. 179) What other passages did you find particularly amusing?

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7. Music and colours (p. 60) are Angel's constant companions and the sea is part of that orchestra: 'She loved the wind ... wings of gulls.' (p. 40) What part does music play in this novel? Later Angel discovers a love of art at the Gallery (p. 193) and this too becomes a recurring theme in the novel. What part does art play in this novel? (You might like to source copies of some of the famous artworks mentioned in the novel to inform this discussion.)

8. 'I think the world is full of people not right in the head and so far, I love them all. I always knew I wasn't the only one.' (p. 145) What does this statement tell us about Angel?

9. Angel is familiar with death and grief from a very young age – she witnesses the drowning man (p. 45) having already experienced both her parents' deaths, her grandfather's demise, and a tram conductor dying; she also witnesses her Uncle George's death. How does this novel suggest that we should deal with death?

10. Angel, Elsa, Clara and most of the other characters in this novel are bereft of emotional attachments. Some (like Uncle George, Mister Joseph and Harry Potts) are stunted by this lack of emotional empathy. Is this primarily a novel about a search for love?

### FURTHER READING

#### Read:

Elizabeth Stead's previous novels.

*The Fishcastle*

*The Different World of Fin Starling*

*The Book of Tides*

*The Gospel of Gods and Crocodiles*

*The Sparrows of Edward Street*

#### Listen to:

'Elizabeth Stead on writing, family, and the beginning of feminism', *Conversations with Richard Fidler*, Tuesday 1 May 2007 <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2007/05/01/1911276.htm>

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'Outbreak of World War II', *80 Days that Changed our Lives*

<http://www.abc.net.au/archives/80days/stories/2012/01/19/3414749.htm>

### Visit:

'Australia and the Second World War: Living with war', *Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs*

<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/history/conflicts/australia-and-second-world-war/resources/all-australian-homefront-19391945/living>

'Home front: Second World War', *Australian War Memorial*

<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/homefront>

'Australian home front during World War II', *Wikipedia*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian\\_home\\_front\\_during\\_World\\_War\\_II](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian_home_front_during_World_War_II)