

## The House of Fiction

Leonard, Susan and Elizabeth Jolley

### About the Book

*Leonard saw us off at the station, and that was my last memory of him. It was busy and noisy. He hauled the cases into the carriage and then lifted me up to give me a kiss before placing me in the carriage next to my mother. He slammed the door shut and stood back, still looking up at me. The guard blew his whistle and the train drew away. My father began to run after the train and I, held tight by my mother, leaned out as far as I could to wave until he slowed down as the train gathered speed and he disappeared in a cloud of smuts and steam.*  
(pp. 31–32)

*The House of Fiction* is, in the words of Andrew Riemer, ‘a moving recollection of troubling experiences, family secrets and unsettling discoveries.’ With candid and sensitive narration, author Susan Swingler recounts the strange events that at the age of twenty-one set her on a journey spanning four decades and two continents in search of her absent father.

At the age of four, Susan, with her schoolteacher mother Joyce, together face uncertainty as they leave behind their home in Birmingham for a chaotic boarding school near Bristol, then a convent in France and finally settle in Exeter. Susan’s father Leonard, meanwhile, is out of sight but never out of mind, first in Scotland, then in faraway Perth, Australia.

Unknown to Susan, the woman Leonard builds a life with while absent is family friend Monica Knight, known later as Elizabeth Jolley – one of Australia’s most esteemed writers of fiction.

When Susan turns twenty-one, her contact with Leonard’s family resumes. Secrets that have been carefully kept for nearly two decades begin to rise to the surface leaving Susan feeling as if her very identity has been stolen.

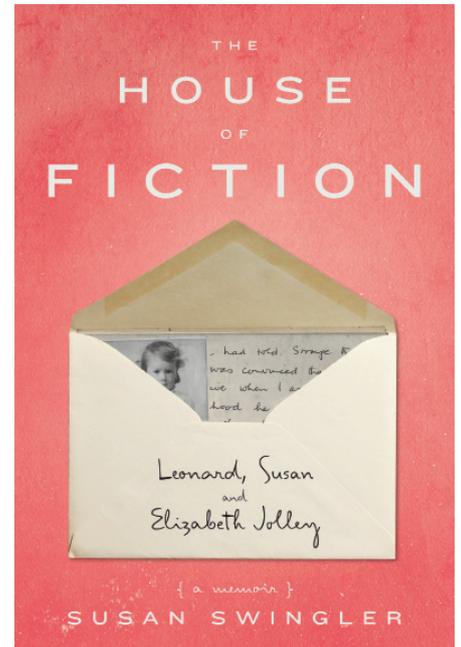
Susan Swingler’s experience as a researcher and curator is evident in this treatment of her own family history. She investigates letters, diaries and photographs and in them seeks facts rather than solace. She relates moments of distress and confusion without flinching or censure. And when she recalls the ebb and flow of emotions – anguish, disbelief, anger – these too are laid out for us to see. Swingler is set, it seems, on untangling the fact from the fiction. But as memories and secrets surface in this ethically complex story, so does the question: can the two ever be separated?

This is the story not only of a daughter and her quest for an absent father. It is the story revealing the deep love and complex fidelity of the women in Leonard Jolley’s life. And it is the story of writing itself: how we might use self-expression to make sense of – to hide, or to find – who we are.

In his afterword, Andrew Riemer writes, ‘[i]nvariably, this memoir will subject Jolley’s work and personality to fresh scrutiny.’ Susan Swingler’s revelations don’t simply uncover family secrets; her book is also an invitation to the reader to revisit the oeuvre of Elizabeth Jolley, and to consider again the relationship between ‘real life’ and fiction.

### From the Author

The story I tell in *The House of Fiction* has shaped me and influenced the way I live my life. Over the years I’ve told some elements of this story to friends and family, and, like most writers of fiction, have drawn on my experiences in my writing. In the early 1980s, for example, I wrote a short story for radio about an English child in France trying to get to grips with not only a foreign language but also a religion she has never encountered before – where curiosity very nearly kills the cat.



This memoir has had a very long gestation. Although friends said to me it's such an extraordinary story, you should write it down, it was only after my mother died that I began to think that at some point I would do so. One day, I thought, not just yet.

Soon after the death of my mother, Elizabeth Jolley wrote to tell me that Western Australian Professor Brian Dibble was writing her biography and asked if I and other members of Leonard's family, would meet him on his next research trip to the UK. Here was an opportunity to unload onto a third unbiased party the information of the duplicity that had been practised on Leonard's family. I didn't need to write about it at all, Professor Dibble would! However, it didn't take me long to realise that I did want to write about it, but would do this only when I felt comfortable. My cousin and my aunt spoke to Brian Dibble but I kept quiet.

I was working on a biographical exhibition about Princess Mary, the daughter of George V and Queen Mary, when I began to see how a book about Leonard, Elizabeth and my mother might take shape. My thoughts at that time were that it would be an objective account, rather than the personal story it has since become.

I kept putting off actually doing anything about it until I began an MA course in creative writing. As an experiment, and part of a longer and totally fictional piece of work, I used the experience of the occasion when I first met my father and Elizabeth in Perth in 1989, alternating the points of view between the father and the daughter and adding a satisfying fictional end to the scene. This made me wonder if I might fictionalise the whole thing. But would anyone find it credible as fiction? And wouldn't that be a cop-out?

I continued with the research and thought about my projected account of three people caught up in the mores of the 1950s, a story related by a neutral observer – me. I really enjoy historical research and am used to the kind of detective work that is required when reconstructing the past for an audience; and as a curator of historical exhibitions I have experience of fitting together pieces of a jigsaw to tell a story. I'm also very aware of gaps and how the lack of information can skew a historical account, and yet if you are to make a coherent story you must use whatever information is available to you. This is particularly relevant to the final chapters of *The House of Fiction* where I am given access to a small part of Elizabeth and Leonard's personal correspondence over a four-year period. When the rest of the papers become available to the public a different interpretation might well prove more reasonable than the one I have put onto what I read. The issue of interpretation relates to much of the material I cover in *The House of Fiction*: Elizabeth Jolley scholars will likely have a very different response to the passages I quote from her writing. But this book is not an academic exercise, it is a personal response to events, documents and my own reading.

It was only after Elizabeth's death in 2007 when I read in obituaries that all her personal papers had been deposited in a library and would be inaccessible to the public for many years that I became determined to write my story. I soon realised that it had to be up close and personal – an area of writing well out of my comfort zone. This kind of writing wasn't easy for me and the last thing I wanted was for my book to be a misery memoir. I saw it more as a mystery, the unravelling of a tangled web of misinformation and deception and an investigation into motivation – why the main characters had behaved as they did.

To begin with I kept my distance from the material, avoiding what I saw as too much emotion, but as I got used to writing about such personal 'stuff', I managed to get closer to my own feelings. There were times, though, when the feelings were overwhelming and I was quite unable to draw back – the most difficult scene to write was about my mother's death and how I had failed to be honest with her about having been to Perth when I met my father and Elizabeth.

There were some things that were very pleasurable to write about and they weren't necessarily of happy times. I particularly enjoyed writing about the distant past – of my time at St Catherine's School, staying with my grandmother and cousins in Kent and my year in France. There are arguments to be made about the fallibility of memory, and others who shared my experiences might well remember them differently. I contacted some of the people who appear in the book (and whom I was able to track down) to ask if this was the way they remembered things, and mostly they did, and often gave me additional information, some of which I incorporated if it was relevant to this story.

My research trip to Australia in 2008 was a very rewarding experience: to be in Perth where my father had spent so many years, meeting people he and Elizabeth knew (and regretting I hadn't been back there since my visit twenty years before) and then to have the chance to spend time at Bundanon on an artist's residency was both restorative and ultimately very productive. My last few days in Sydney provided the icing on the cake. When I got home from Australia I started writing this book.

I wasn't alone in this endeavour. I have been a member of a writing group for about ten years. We met on the creative writing course and have continued to meet regularly to 'workshop' each other's writing. It doesn't suit all writers but it works well for us, and

while it can sometimes be hard, it is also a lot of fun. Finding an Australian agent and publisher, with an excellent editor, has been a remarkably positive thing for me as a writer and for this book.

Although I am an avid reader, I haven't had a lifelong burning desire to be a writer. Most of my published writing has been in the form of exhibition texts, reports and suchlike: nothing personal and no fiction (apart from my one radio short story). An interest in all things visual has been at the centre of my work, whether teaching art students, as a photographer, a curator or as a gardener, and this, I think, is why a sense of place and the physical environment are important to me as a writer. I enjoy creating real spaces as well as imaginary or remembered ones.

Has writing this book brought me any resolution? It's not an easy question to answer. The sifting through memories, the re-reading of letters as well as reading around the subject, have each been interesting and instructive. I've had to face things I might prefer not to think about and have had to sort out my thoughts. However, I didn't set out to 'get it out of my system' and I might well find that readers' responses will set up a whole lot of other questions to be addressed.

## Questions for Discussion

- *The practice of writing might be a way of giving shape to, and garnering strength for, difficult aspects of life that necessitate survival or resolution* (Publisher's Note, p. 5). In what ways is this statement true for Susan Swingler's writing? In what ways is it true for Elizabeth Jolley's?
- What is the significance of the book's title, *The House of Fiction*?
- The wedding greetings from Susan's relatives stir in her the question: *But why had I never heard of them before?* (p. 13). What are some other moments of shock and realisation for Susan as she uncovers her family's past? What emotions does she describe at those times? Why are these moments important to the story?
- What kind of place is St Catherine's School? What role does it play in shaping Susan's view on life?
- When she first arrives in France, the young Susan refuses to speak French. Why do you think that is? Are there other instances in the book where Susan experiences herself as an outsider?
- How have her own experiences as a child shaped the way that Susan receives new environments and how she registers them internally?
- *But it was his eyes that held me, that I found so disturbing. Looking into his eyes was like looking into my own eyes.* (p. 144) What role do shared genes play in the way people in this book relate to each other?
- The book includes photos and scans of letters. What effect do these have on the reader? Why do you think the author chose to include them?
- Leonard's character and actions are contended and debated throughout the book: by his sister Laura, by Monica/Elizabeth, by Brian Dibble, by Joyce and by Susan herself at various points in her life. What is your take on Leonard's character and motives? What conclusions does Susan ultimately arrive at regarding her father?
- Susan sometimes feels that she has been weak: *I hadn't confided in Joyce; I hadn't asked Leonard the questions I wanted to have answers to and now I never would.* (p. 166) What internal and external forces prevent Susan from doing so? Do you consider this to be weakness?
- Do you consider Susan Swingler's memoir to be balanced in its unpacking of the sixty-year family saga? Why – or why not?
- What is behind the fascination so many of us have with the 'real lives' of authors? Why is it we seek the truths and secrets behind the fiction that springs (only seemingly?) from nothing but the writer's imagination?
- How does this memoir position itself in relation to some of the content in the novels of Elizabeth Jolley? How does it engage and/or disengage with this content?
- This is a story that might be seen as a product of its time. Discuss the changes between public and private lives and selves that might have taken place between the 1940s–60s and now.
- Laura writes to Susan: *The final end of all artefacts is the waste heap but I am passing the decision to you.* (p. 221) What do you think are the challenges associated with the genre of memoir – a subgenre of creative nonfiction? What are the risks a writer might encounter in writing about things that are true?
- Do you find the idea of writing about your own life inviting? Why – or why not?

## Further Reading

*Five Acre Virgin and other stories* – Elizabeth Jolley  
*The Newspaper of Claremont Street* – Elizabeth Jolley  
*Milk and Honey* – Elizabeth Jolley