

## WHEN WE REMEMBER THEY CALL US LIARS

SUZANNE COVICH

### ABOUT THE BOOK

*When We Remember They Call Us Liars* tells the true story of a child growing up in a violent family home nestled in one of the most picturesque and seemingly idyllic valleys in Australia. This compellingly honest and well-written memoir tells how the author, Suzanne Covich, and her siblings maintained a silence around the terror that they experienced at the hands of a violent and abusive father, who insisted that what went on in his house stayed 'within his four walls'. The author reveals how relatives, a school principal, police and neighbours stood back, unwilling to get involved.

The story begins with Suzanne's memory as a toddler with her older sister who kneels to pray to keep them all safe. It goes on to weave together the most traumatic, and the most happy, experiences in her first fifteen years of life. The book challenges misconceptions about 'at risk' children and shows that children who are out to please and are highly focused (as Suzanne – dux of her class every year at primary school – was) are as much at risk as children who consistently misbehave and do not do well.

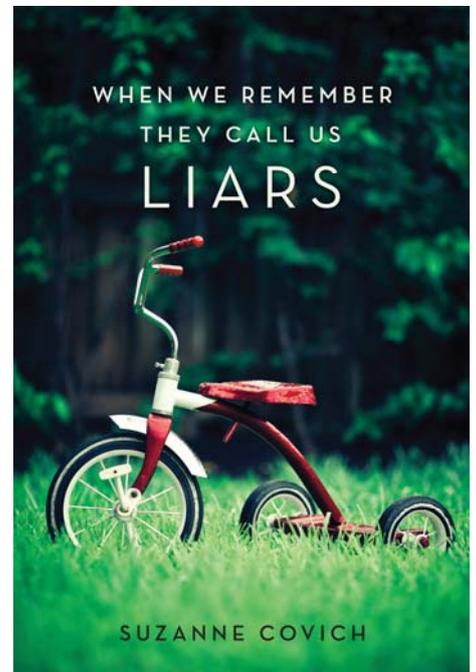
Sexually violated by a neighbour at five years of age and later by her father at twelve, Suzanne loses her faith in a loving God and learns not to trust anyone. Her story demonstrates how intergenerational patterns of abuse are perpetuated – including in her own life by maintaining the silences, lashing out at school and using male lovers to escape, as her mother attempted to do. The author's struggle to understand her parents is a significant focus in this memoir.

Male fictional heroes, especially Huck Finn, become role models as Suzanne imagines being like them – able to defeat anyone who harms her or her siblings. She escapes into her imagination, finding comfort in the landscape. Suzanne's dream to tell her story, as an eleven-year-old standing in the woodheap of a small country school, manifests in this self-reflective narrative that ends with her leaving home to take on the world with an older lover, Hansel.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Suzanne Covich spent her early years in a large family in the country, leaving school unwillingly at thirteen to work in an old people's home. After entering university in her mid-thirties as a single mother, she went on to obtain a PhD in Creative Writing at Edith Cowan University. She now works as a high school teacher and was the first Australian to win two National Excellence in Teaching Awards (NEITA).

Suzanne writes poetry and short fiction. Her work has been performed on ABC Radio National and published in major Australian journals including *Quadrant*, *Meanjin*, *Island*, *Southern Review* and *Northern Perspective*. Her work features in the anthologies *Summer Shorts*, *New Beginnings* and *She's a Train and She's Dangerous*.



She is a public speaker and child rights activist, and, in 2002, initiated and edited an anthology of student art, photography and writing: *A Circle in a Room Full of Squares*.

## FROM THE AUTHOR

*Suzanne, can you tell us what your memoir is all about?*

Yes. My memoir is about a small-town Australian country girl, who's dux of her class every year at primary school, loves the bush, the river, the mountains, reading, writing and singing and, always wants trousers with a fly!

She grows up in a violent home, lives in constant fear of her father and does her best to cover it up at school. She finds many ways to escape, being the best at everything she can, especially at school, and her greatest dream and inspiration is to be just like Huck Finn, who eventually runs away from *his* father on the river with another escapee, Jim.

She's a tomboy and Huck Finn is in her bones, and even though terrible things happen to her, she eventually strikes out on a new life leaving all that she knows behind her.

*Can you tell us about the kind of violence you lived with?*

I certainly can. Apart from seeing my mother and sisters repeatedly bashed, one of the most powerful incidents that I clearly recall is when our house burnt down when I was ten. I heard footsteps that night, told others but no one believed me.

*Was your father ever suspected or charged for this?*

No. I believed, as did my siblings and neighbours, that my father set fire to the house. When I went back to my hometown I asked a neighbour about what he thought about it all. He said, 'It was common knowledge that your father torched the house.'

*How did you feel when you heard this?*

Affirmed. I'd thought the same thing all of my life. Still do.

*Suzanne, there are many painful incidents that you have written about in your memoir. So tell me, what was it like for you getting in touch with these things?*

To be able to finally write my story was both terribly painful, and celebratory. I had to basically relive the things I have written about. Bring each incident to life again and when I did this, each one acutely affected me. It was as if I was right back there, experiencing the terrors and the aftermath, especially keeping quiet about it all. It was an awful struggle not to tell the world about the violence that went on in our home.

So, knowing it would not be easy when I began to write about these incidents, I sat in the corner of a coffee shop where I felt safe and wrote about what I remembered – like describing pictures in a gallery, skimming across the surface. It was only when I got closer to the incidents that I really felt terribly vulnerable. I am a high school English teacher and I knew only too well that I'd never have been able to re-enter my childhood and write my memoir while still teaching. So, I took three years out and with the help of ECU and two academic scholarships I worked on my memoir. Completed my PhD in Writing. Lavender baths and long drives into the country listening to country music were essential. Why? They held me and so, too, did my university supervisor Jill Durey, my sister Vonni and her husband and close friends.

The real celebration for me is in the fact that I'd been able to use my writing skills to finally tell my story – a story I'd wanted to write since I was eleven years old.

*That's taken a long time Suzanne. Why did you wait so long?*

Firstly, I was not in a strong enough financial position to do his earlier. From the time I was thirty, I raised my four children alone, educated myself, taught English in WA high schools for about fifteen years and paid off my own home. Debt free. I could only write without having to think of how to survive. The scholarships were a huge gift to me! ECU made it all possible.

Secondly, since my early thirties, I have written journals and poetry to keep my childhood memories alive. Kids I have known in my classes have also helped me to stay in touch with my story, especially those who've lived similar childhoods to me. I am always angered when hearing of how kids are violated and the anger I had for my own parents really needed to be used as the fuel for me to write, rather than a weapon to lash back. More importantly, I wanted this story to be one that highlighted my skills as a writer too! I think I have done that.

Basically, I needed that time to stand back and only then, go in and out of the experiences as I wrote in what I believe is a celebratory way. Amongst the rotten things I lived with as a child, there's a lot of bubble and bounce in my memoir! A Huck Finn kind of bubble and bounce!

I was watching *Boston Legal* the other night and Allan, my favourite lawyer, told a fellow who was about to be executed that 'to be a hero was to be human'. It clicked with me and the way I have written my story. I am no saint, I make no pretensions to be and I loved writing about the feisty girl and somewhat rebellious teenager I was. Still am really!

*There are a lot of stories about people who've survived violent childhoods. Misery Lit comes to mind. Does your memoir fit this category? If not, why not?*

My memoir is powerful. I want no sympathy and I do not come across like a powerless victim. Huck Finn was my childhood hero, and I wanted to write a story as creative and energetic as Mark Twain did – celebratory!

I find memoirs that fit the Misery Lit category terribly frustrating! Mostly, I feel as if I want to jump into their stories and give the kids a swift kick. The covers of these memoirs immediately position readers to feel sorry for the victim: a girl with one sock down, one up, sad eyes, sad faces, slumped shoulders, backs to the readers, alone, tragic. It's not what I wanted on my cover and not what I wanted readers to experience! The titles, by the way, do the same thing! *Why Daddy Why? Why Mummy Why?*

They are often written by ghostwriters, often focus on explicit gruesome details, often appear to be voyeuristic, and more often than not, come across like superficial, one dimensional recounts of traumatic events. As far as I am concerned they work to reinforce the victim status of children/adults who have lived such childhoods.

I recall a Perth counsellor once telling a group of 'Incest Survivors' (a group I soon got out of) 'Once a victim always a victim'. How convenient is that! She'd surely work to reinforce this and in doing so, never run out of business. 'Victim'? 'Survivor'? I despise both terms. Of course, to be violated as a child requires a Perpetrator and Victim. But the word 'victim' when applied in the way this counsellor did, conjures up an image of helplessness. Rubbish. Survivor? I haven't figured out why I also despise this term, but I do. I prefer Fighter! I like Hero! This is where I am coming from in my memoir. To be a fighter and a hero you need courage. You need to be able to assess various life-threatening situations and act to address them, regardless of the cost, as I do in, and with, the completion of my memoir. You need to know the dangers, to run against the grain, to be in touch with your strengths as you step up to the challenge and, never give up. I know only too well the dangers to myself when this story hits the market, as I did when writing it – as I did when I was a child who knew the terrible consequences, the threats to my life if I broke the silences.

*So what is so threatening to you right now? After all, your memoir is out there?*

Now this is where I get to practise the art of being a politician. Knowing what I can and cannot say. Talking generally. Hiding stuff. But I certainly know. I guess, to make it as general as I can, I'd have to say that the

greatest threat would come from those who are challenged by what I write. People who like to be seen as victims and those who wouldn't have a clue about what a kid like me lived through. I break stereotypes in my story. The biggest stereotype I break is the stereotype of the victim – the girl who fights back, the girl who quickly learns not lie down and let the world walk over her – the girl who would do anything to escape the violence. This girl is no angel!

*You are talking here, of course, about Elijah and Hansel.*

Yes. My relationship with both of them must be read within the context of the times – 1950s–60s. People thought differently back then about teenage girls being sexually active, just as they thought differently about pulling kids out of school at thirteen to go to work. You would not see an Education Department in this country giving the green light to a kid leaving school to go to work at that age, as they did with me and others I knew of. Back then in the valley within which I grew, it was acceptable for teenage girls to be sexually active with teenage boys. I'm talking about boys and girls below the age of sixteen. It was seen as a good thing for an older teenage boy to be with a younger teenage girl. And, even if I did not initially know this as a teenager, it was not seen as a good thing for a girl to be in a relationship with an older man – someone who was not a teenager. It was even worse, apparently to be going out with a New Australian, that is, if he was not English. New Australians were feared and we were often told that they carried knives in their socks and would stab you at the drop of a hat. It's in my book.

My relationship with an older man, Elijah, the one I speak of as being the most beautiful childhood memory that I have, for many, would be the most confronting part of my memoir. The idea these days is that such a man being with a teenager like me would be nothing short of child abuse. The thinking would go as follows: He knew what he was doing and I didn't. I was the victim and he was the perpetrator. Not so! I knew exactly what I was doing and I never felt like a victim. I loved him, wanted to be with him and now, I have nothing but loving memories. I still see him, talk with him and still think he is as lovely as I did back then.

When thinking of this relationship, it is important yet again to take into account the context, the people in the valley within which I grew. Families knew about the kind of man my father was, and my mother was seen as the 'town bike'. Parents warned their children to stay away from us. We were tarred with a terrible brush and there's no doubt that a girl growing in a family like mine would be considered a slut. Boys of course, were applauded for the sexual conquests they made, notched them up, talked about them.

Imagine the harm it would have caused me to be sexually active with any one of them! I never gave them the chance! Besides, my initial aim with Elijah and later with Hansel was to get them to take me away from my family. I finally got exactly what I wanted.

For someone to tell me that I did not know what I was doing as a teenager is to highlight their ignorance and place unwanted burdens on me. Such thinking is more about them, not me. Patronising!

*You are very clear about this, Suzanne, and I can see the issues you may well confront. So tell me now, how have your family reacted to your memoir.*

Whatever I have to say here, will be based on my desire to protect their identities. I was one of a family of eight, four boys and four girls, so the fact that it is me who is telling this story says something. My three sisters and two bothers have all been involved in the writing of my story. Each added their bit, things they have clearly remembered as I have, and things I have not. That makes five out of seven siblings. The other two, brothers, are estranged from me for various reasons. All, apart from my eldest brother whom I do mention, have given me pseudonyms they'd like me to use. I have done this. The name I give to my big brother is, Big Brother and I'll leave readers to consider why that might be.

My sister Vonni, who lives in WA, has been the most supportive and that probably has to do with her being so like me. She is very proud of what I have written, says I've been too soft and is bold in the stand she makes alongside. My twin and my eldest sister are less bold and while being supportive, have tended to hold back out of their fears of being exposed. They have lived 'hidden' lives in a sense, fearing what people will think of

them if their childhood experiences are revealed. They are not very different to an old aunt who never wanted her kids to know what she'd lived through with my grandfather. She was 80+ when she told me. First time she'd ever spoken of it. Similar fears.

All three sisters and two brothers have either read my memoir in its draft form, or the bits relevant to them. The title is the exact words my twin spoke one morning at breakfast with her.

In one way or another they have all been afraid of me telling the story, and who can blame them. They, like me, grew up with the terrible fears of what might happen to them if they spoke up. I recall my twin once telling me how scared she was when she used to see me doing risky boy things as a kid, like swinging down from trees or jumping into rivers. I think she is just scared for me now.

*To conclude, Suzanne, when did you first realise you were a writer?*

When I won second prize in a short story competition run by the biggest newspaper in my home state when I was eleven. Then, when I stood in the hollowed-out woodheap at my primary school where we'd made a small theatre. I told the kids that day that one day I'd grow up to be a writer and they'd be reading my stories like they did the ones in our small school library. It's taken a long time to get to this point but another significant milestone was when I won a 6PR 'Home For Xmas' Competition run by Lionel York in the 1980s, in my late twenties. In my thirties, after going back to school and completing an Honours in English at UWA, I got my poetry and short stories published in a few national literature journals and anthologies, and shared the ECU Creative Writing prize with Bridget Lowry when I was doing a postgrad course at Curtin University in the late 1980s. It's gone on from there.

Writing and dreaming of writing has always been one of my great loves. I remember a dream I once had in my thirties. I was in an amazing underground cave and there I was, a book on my lap, reading out loud. It was my book! So here I am.

## Questions for Discussion

1. There are many books about people who have survived violent childhoods. Does this book fit the 'Misery Lit' genre? Why, or why not? How does it compare with others you may have read (*Wild Swans*, *Angela's Ashes*)?
2. Do you think the author has succeeded in breaking the silence about child abuse? What devices work/don't work? Do the adult voices of her siblings add weight to the message?
3. As a child, Suzanne finds solace from the violence by escaping into books. Her favourite was *Huckleberry Finn*. What were your favourite books as a child and why did they resonate? Did they make you dream of escape or other things?
4. The author took risks in writing this book. What do you think the risks might be? Do you think such bravery is foolish or laudable?
5. Is her story insightful? Are her actions, or those of other characters, believable? Does it provide the reader with any answers?
6. Do you think this memoir is about a victim/survivor or a fighter? What is the difference?
7. Do you agree that the author's anger for her own parents was used as fuel to write, rather than as a weapon to lash back? Was this effective?
8. The author grew up in small-town Australia the 1950s and 60s. This is a story of that time. What would be different if this story was about a child growing up in the early 2000s?

# BOOK CLUB NOTES

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