

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.

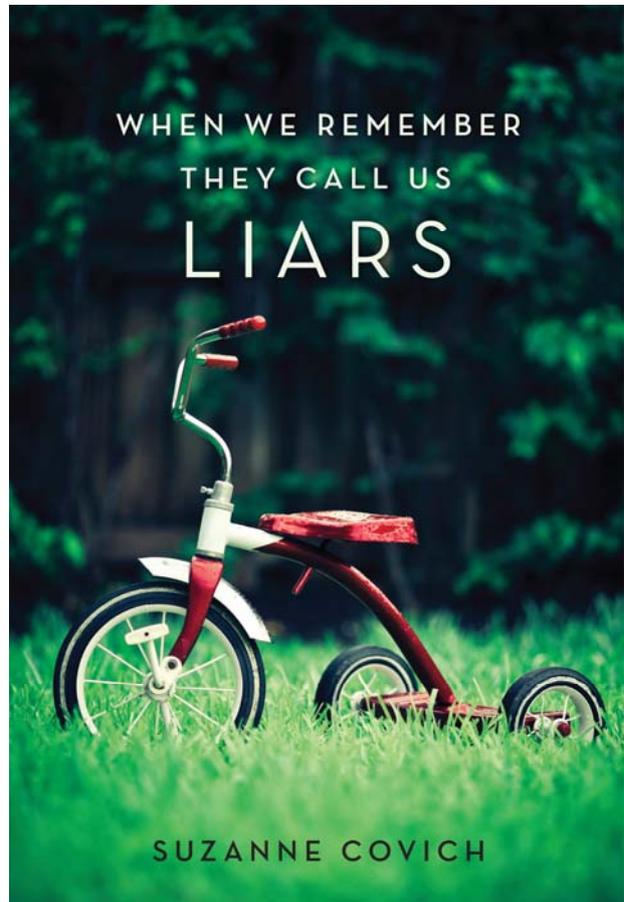
Male fictional heroes, especially Huck Finn, become role models as Suzanne imagines being like them – able to defeat anyone who harms her or her siblings. She escapes into her imagination, finding comfort in the landscape.

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*.

STUDY NOTES

Questions for Discussion

- There are many books about people who have lived through 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*)?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- Is her story insightful? Are her actions, or those of other characters, believable? Does it provide the reader with any answers?
- Do you think this memoir is about a victim/survivor or a fighter? What is the difference?
- 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?
- The author grew up in small-town Australia of 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?