

## ONLY BIRDS ABOVE

PORTLAND JONES

### ABOUT THE BOOK

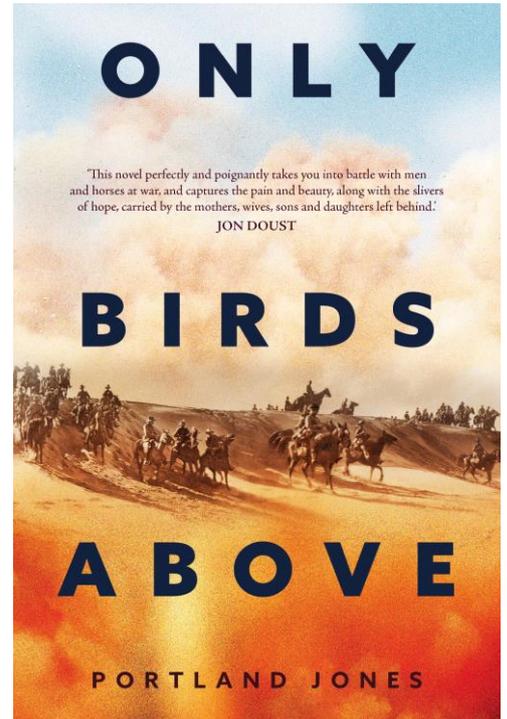
*Only Birds Above* is a work of historical fiction, from an author who has spent her life working with horses. Arthur, a blacksmith, goes to war with the West Australian 10<sup>th</sup> Light Horse to care for the horses of his fellow soldiers. When he returns, his wife, Helen, and their children, Tom and Ruth, bear witness to a man forever damaged by what he has seen and suffered. In a family of silences and misunderstandings, Arthur insists on his son Tom going away to work in Sumatra. But World War II arrives and Tom is taken prisoner by the Japanese. Made to work on the Pekanbaru Death Railway, he is sustained by memories of life on the farm at home and a growing compassion for his father. This story captures the deep and mysterious connection between humans and horses – whose presence lends a sweet, steady counterweight to human frailty, and whose nobility aligns with human courage.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Portland Jones is a writer, lecturer and horse trainer who lives and works in the Swan Valley in Western Australia. She has a PhD in Literature and her first novel, *Seeing the Elephant*, was shortlisted for the City of Fremantle Hungerford Award. *Only Birds Above* is her second novel and she has also co-authored the non-fiction book, *Horses Hate Surprise Parties*. She lectures at university and works with the Australian organisation HELP, a charity that offers ethical training support to elephant trainers across Asia. Portland has three children and is currently working on her third novel and another non-fiction book.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is the novel called *Only Birds Above*?
2. How has this book been structured?
3. What difference do you think it makes that the author has told her story in this way?
4. What kind of a father is Arthur?
5. What are the parallel experiences between Arthur and Tom?
6. Why do you think that Tom's experience in Sumatra helps him think about his own father differently?
7. In what ways are Arthur and Tom men of their time – or does the experience of war transcend generations?
8. Would you say that Arthur is responsible for what happens to Helen?
9. What is the role of women in this story about men and war?
10. What difference does it make to the novel that the author knows horses so well?
11. What qualities does this knowledge bring to the novel?
12. How does the presence of the horses help provide a commentary on the actions of the men?
13. Why do you think the novel ends where it does?
14. Do the impacts of war on a family ever end?



## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

***You have written something of the genesis of this novel in your afterword. But how did you go about creating the other characters in the family? Are they based on your own?***

I guess all writing is autobiographical in a way. So the characters are composites, stitched together from friends and family and pieces of myself. My children often scold me for interrogating the people that I meet, but I like people and I like the stories that they tell. If they turn up in my writing I don't think of it as theft, I think of it as gently holding onto a small piece of them. In my first novel, one of the characters was based on a friend who died a couple of years after the novel came out. Although I never owned up to having that little piece of him in the book, there was definitely comfort in that at his funeral.

Writing my great-grandfather was interesting. My grandmother had never met her father-in-law and my grandfather never spoke of the past. I had photos of Dirk, family stories and records from the Dutch archives. In Sumatra, I stood in the place where he died. But all those things, strangely, made him more difficult than conjuring a character from the air. When eventually he spoke, to me he sounded like my grandparents and I wasn't unhappy about that.

***Do you think this is a very Australian (or indeed, West Australian) story?***

I think it's a very Australian story. My academic work was based on Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War (or the American War, depending on your perspective). And it struck me then how many Australian families had sent three generations of their men to wars in countries not their own. It's an unusual family legacy and I often wonder how this legacy has shaped modern Australian families, and in particular modern men. It's such a complex, and sometimes, tragic heritage.

I have three children, two of them sons, and I think I write always with a mother's heart. Throughout our history, to me, there's a sense of successive governments squandering our young men.

I think *Only Birds Above* foregrounds place, which probably also makes it a very Australian story. I've often wondered why I need to do this. When I lie across the back of a young horse for the first time I'm not frightened, but everything is just more of itself. The sky is more blue, the eucalypts more scented, the magpies more melodic. And maybe writing place is just my way of trying to catch that feeling because it's a kind of magic. I never want to let it go.

Warren, my father, taught me to see the beauty in the everyday world. He loved birds and trees, being in his garden or walking along the beach. He saw the world through an artist's eyes. I read sections of the novel to him when he was dying and I'd like to think that he would have seen his influence in the way that place is represented.

***Can you tell us how you went about writing this novel? At what stage did you decide upon its structure?***

I wrote the novel in pieces, but I had a really clear idea of how it would all hang together. Then, when it came time to stitch it all up, it turned out it didn't hang together at all. It was all over the place. I often pictured it as a slippery reptilian beast that I was trying to wrestle into some kind of order. The day I finally had all its limbs under control was a very happy day indeed.

After vowing to never choose a complex structure again I'm now working on a novel which I think is even more complicated. I have such a sense of optimism that it will all hang together when it's done but, in reality, I know there will be wrestling, hand-wringing and swearing at the end.

***How would you describe your relationship to horses? Was it difficult to transform that aspect of your life into prose?***

There have always been horses in my life. I'm in love with them, still, after all these years. They are one of the fastest animals on the planet and yet they're so fragile. To me, there's no animal more beautiful and I feel an enormous sense of privilege to spend my life with them.

Horses have been living alongside us for over 5,000 years and there's this moment each day when I get a really strong sense of being a part of that. The afternoon feeds are done and the sun is dropping down behind the trees. The quiet sounds of early evening, the last of the light on horses' backs. Horse handlers throughout the centuries must have felt the same sense of calm in the peace of that moment.

It's been very difficult to get that feeling down on the page. I wanted to honour the memory of the thousands of horses that left Australia and never came back during World War I. And I wanted to try and convey a sense of the connection between the men and their horses. The bond that develops between animals and the people who love them, to me, is remarkable and timeless. It is one of the most admirable aspects of the human character to deeply love an animal because their time is shorter than ours. We know we will outlive them. I think a lot about that.

There's a kind of fierce joy in a galloping horse. The smell of leather and horse sweat – to those of us that live amongst horses that's the smell of home.

***What's next for Portland Jones?***

Writing a novel gives you a great reason (excuse) to indulge your fascinations and call it research. I am currently working on my third novel and it's already taken me to the Abrolhos Islands and has also given me the opportunity to fall in love with a peregrine falcon. Both experiences gave me profound joy and also a mild sense of panic at the responsibility of trying to coax such extraordinary things onto the page.

I'm also working on another non-fiction book about the science of horses. When you inherit a tradition that is as ancient as horse training there are a lot of myths that come along with the practice. In my lecturing and teaching roles I try to show people the science of horses and training, rather than the commonly held beliefs, because science is more remarkable and in no way less beautiful.

I'm a horse trainer by trade and I'll keep on doing that for as long as I can because I can't, or maybe don't want to, imagine a life without horses in it.



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