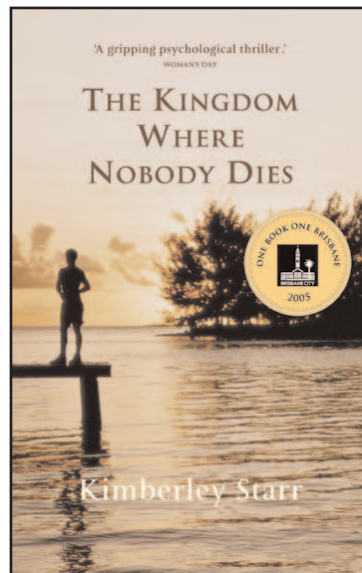


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*Readers' Notes*  
*for*  
*Book Groups*



The Kingdom Where Nobody Dies

by

Kimberley Starr

ONE BOOK ONE BRISBANE  
SELECTED TITLE 2005



*Dedicated to a better Brisbane*

## **The Story**

Madeleine Jeffries travels from Rockhampton to Brisbane in response to a police request for a psychological profile of the man charged with the murders of five young boys. It's her job and she is used to it, but this leave-taking has under-currents of significance for her current life and raises memories better not revisited. The farewell with her six-year-old son, unhappy at being left with his father and—as Madeleine learns—soon-to-be new wife, creates a heightened emotional mind-set; her love for the vulnerable child and her need for him almost physically seeping out of her.

Brisbane is not unfamiliar to Madeleine. As a teenager she had lived there in her grandmother's house in a pocket of a suburb bounded by the river. Anger and grief at her mother's death from cancer has set the teenager apart at her new school and at odds with her grandmother; neither knows how to accept the other or even how to comfort one another. Madeleine's only respite is during art lessons, and in visits to her almost perfect next-door-neighbour's house. There she makes friends with the younger Bridget and lusts after the older Andrew whose eyes are, in turn, firmly fixed on a swimming career.

This time is defined for Madeleine—as for many people who have experienced a time of communal fear—by the disappearance of a young boy from their street.

Time past and time present merge for Madeleine in this taut, almost incidental thriller, which is also a beautifully realised coming-of-age novel paralleling psychological insights into one's and others' self.

## **Setting**

Starr has set her novel in a quasi-Brisbane suburb. Readers will possibly equate the setting with different suburbs. The river is central to the story; it defines and encloses the suburb in which Madeleine and her grandmother live; it laps at gardens and parks; its banks provide solitude and hidden meeting places and its depths contain secrets.

The setting also provides historical contexts—a Brisbane predating the population growth of the past twenty years and the beginning of the housing renovation boom. The author has said:

*One of the first houses I lived in, in Brisbane, was a beautiful old Queenslander and I was immediately impressed by the capacity for story that seemed suggested in its graceful construction, and even its blue colour. There was something at once mysterious about it because it was old, and cheerful, because of its colour... The house was a remnant of the past in the present era and later, when I thought of this story, and how it's about digging through our own past, an old house that was a part of even earlier times seemed immediately appropriate.*

Suggested discussions about the setting:

1. Does the fact that the book is set in a quasi-Brisbane suburb make it more 'realistic' and more immediate for Brisbane readers?
2. Discuss the author's statement above regarding old Queensland houses.
  - Are the old houses presented as merely remnants of time past, or are they icons of identity?
  - Should they be preserved for their historical significance; for their suitability for the climate and lifestyle?
  - Can such ideas be generalised. For example, even Maddy, who loves the next-door Coleman's house hates her grandmothers house of the same age: *my grandmother seemed as completely old and miserable as the place she lived in. (p.23) the front door as heavy as gloom, into the dark hallway ... to the fusty closed-in veranda that Grandma called her TV room and liked to keep as hot as a sauna. (p.27)*

*By comparison, The Coleman's House was bright, airy, modern, expensive, as if copied straight from 'Home Beautiful' or 'Vogue Living'. Vertical-jointed walls were painted fruity colours of apricot, lime and peach and the carpet was thick and woolly... (p.13) Scrolls and waves of white-painted wrought iron ... rippled over their roof and frothed along their porch and dripped down their stairs. (p.23)*

Then there is the old Mather's house, *decaying blue-painted timber behind a tangle of green vines that had threaded themselves through window frames and around downpipes ... Lower, a balcony handrail hung at a precarious, broken angle.* (p.34)

Do the houses contribute to the story by defining character? By suggesting levels of decay and renewal? Note that Maddy on inheriting her grandmother's house has it renovated.

3. Look at the part the Brisbane River plays within the story. Much takes part on its banks and in it: The Colemans picnic there, the police search it for a missing child; light dances on its surface but *beneath the cheery blue sky, the muddy brown river had become dangerous because Cameron's body had floated in it.* The river symbolises the wider world which had, because of Cameron's death *become a different place.* (p.200) Maddy has an almost physical need to paint it and *Riverside Phantasy was probably the best painting I ever painted.* Rivers have symbolic overtones, especially in a dry country prone to flooding. They are life-giving and life-taking.

### **Structure:**

The six chapters that form the bulk of the book each begin in the present time before sliding back into the summer of 1984. The seventh and last chapter is a repeat of the first section of the first chapter—a goodbye and a taxi journey to the airport—this time instead of leaving home, returning home.

At the end of her three days in Brisbane Maddy has experienced two life circularities; finding out that, like her mother who died when Maddy was fourteen, she too has cancer; and, by revisiting the defining time of her adolescence through the eyes of her adult professional self she identifies an act in adolescence which may have resulted in the deaths of the boys in the present time.

Discussion points:

1. Does the movement between the present and past add a dimension to the narrative?
2. What does the disclosure of cancer repeating in the family do to the ending of the book?
3. How important is it to the heightened state of the narrative that the current relationship between Andrew and Maddy is kept secret?

The rich mix of emotion and ideas throw much of the book open to discussion on broader issues:

### **The child**

Starr first places the child at the centre of her book by the choice of quotation from which she has drawn the title of the book. It precedes the narrative:

*Childhood is not from birth to a certain age and at a certain age  
The child is grown, and puts away childish things.  
Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies.  
Nobody that matters, that is.*

Edna St Vincent Millay from *Wine from these Grapes*, 1934.

Children and childhood are central to the story:

There is Lachlan, the dependent loved and loving child; Cameron Seymour, the lost child; Maddy the isolated and isolating child; Bridget the average happy child and Andrew, the self-obsessed child. There is even a glimpse of the child Kevin Mathers in the description on pp.129-130.

Each child is enmeshed in a different parent-child relationship.

Discuss :

- The quotation from Millay with reference to any one or more of the children in the story.
- Is Maddy's closely-felt love for her son driven by the realisation that she may be placing him in the situation she was left in as a teenager? Note in both cases the father is absent.
- Childhood is made more precious by the threat of it being taken away. First Cameron Seymour and then, twenty years later the other boys—both at the hands of a man perhaps damaged himself in childhood. Then there is loss of childhood by loss of a parent.

4. Look at other quotations relating to childhood:

*There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.*  
Graham Green *The Power and the Glory* Chapter 1

- Discuss with particular reference to both Maddy and to Kevin Mathers

*The childhood shows the man,  
as morning shows the day.*

John Milton, *Paradise Regained* Book 4

- Discuss with particular reference to Bridget

*Tis the eye of childhood  
That fears a painted devil.*

Shakespeare; Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* Act 2 Scene 2

- Discuss with particular reference to Bridget and Maddy.

5. Discuss the aptness or otherwise of the comment by Peter Pierce in his review of *The Kingdom Where Nobody Dies* in the *Canberra Times* 4th September 2004:

*The strongest part of the story is the evocation of the awkward, silently brave adjustments that many children have to make.*

## Grief

Grief permeates the book:

Maddy grieves for her mother.

Maddy's grandmother grieves for her daughter.

Mr and Mrs Seymour grieve for their lost (and then) murdered child.

Rebecca, Andrew and Bridget Coleman grieve for the death of husband and father.

Rebecca and Bridget grieve for the missing Andrew.

Maddy speaking to Andrew on pp.111-112:

*People keep giving me advice about how to deal with it, I said, There's only one thing that anyone's said that's helped me understand, and that's that everyone's parents have to die some time.*

*... There's another thing people say that's true ... That life goes on.*

*... Who did I think I was? Some sort of counsellor?*

- Discuss the ways in which the book gives insights into the grieving process (include the healing nature of Maddy's art).
- Given the number of deaths in the books, and the grief that accompanies them, discuss the appositeness or otherwise of the title.

## Even a God cannot change the past.

Agathon (Athenian tragic poet c.445 BC)

*literally 'the one thing which even God cannot do is to make undone what has been done.'*

Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 6 (from *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* Fifth ed.)

Maddy takes onto herself the guilt of pushing Kevin Mathers over the edge into murder.

She also is of the opinion that if society had dealt with him differently (both as a young man and after the death of Cameron Seymour) he might not have murdered the five boys.

She is also facing the guilt of revisiting the sin of her mother (dying from cancer when needed by a child) on her son Lachlan.

- Discuss the concept of guilt when applied to a past action, often committed in all innocence.
- Discuss the concept of hindsight.

**Concluding discussion:**

- Has **The Kingdom Where Nobody Dies** been a 'good' read. Enjoyment may not be quite the right term for the reading of a book like this, but other, equally valid, terms may be. How would the group identify their reaction to it?
- Does the group consider the book to have been a valid choice for the One Book One Brisbane campaign.

**Extra-curricular activities:**

**The Kingdom Where Nobody Dies** was the winner of the 2003 Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Best Emerging Author. Read the other published winners listed at the back of the book.

- Discuss the effectiveness of such an award in nurturing and promoting new literary talent.