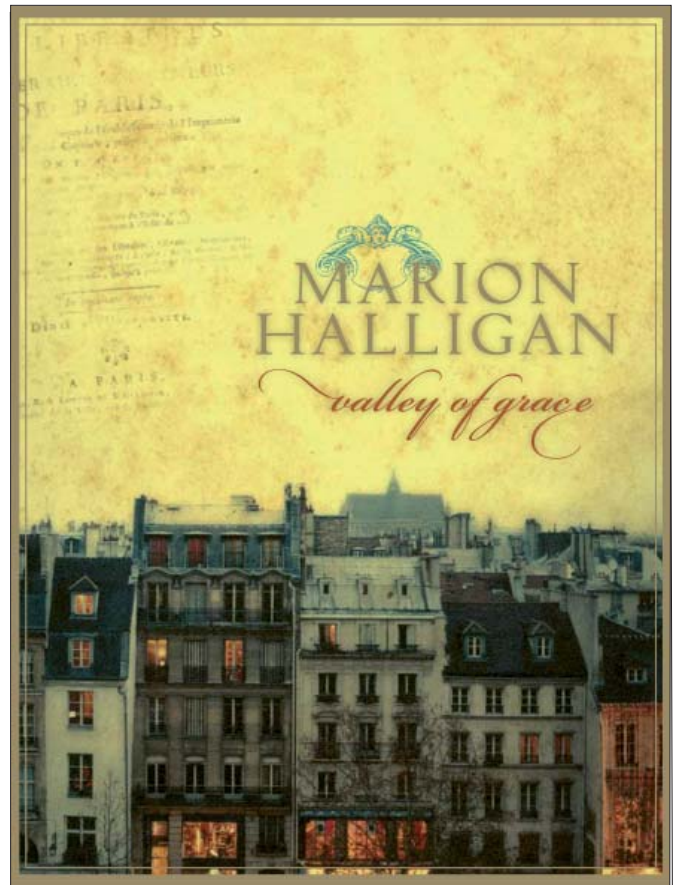


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

Much loved, award-winning author returns with a lyrical work full of hope and children set in modern-day Paris.

Valley of Grace is an interwoven narrative of modern day Paris.

Fanny and Gerard fall in love in a way that surprises even them as their lives fill with good sex and loving companionship. But they long for a child to complete their happiness. Two of Fanny's lesbian friends feel similarly driven by the need to have a child. But how to make that possible?

Jean-Marie is an internationally regarded professor of philosophy whose adoring students are willing sexual partners fulfilling the tenets of his libertarianism. But perhaps philosophy can't bear the weight of human emotion.

When Gerard buys a beautiful old house in the suburbs, the disturbing contents of the attic binds the stories into an intriguing and darkly disturbing knot.

Valley of Grace is a lyrical work full of hope and children, written by one of Australia's most loved novelists at the height of her powers. Savour it.

About the author

Marion Halligan is an award-winning novelist, essayist and short-story writer with many prizes to her name, including The Age Book of the Year, the ACT Book of the Year, the Nita B. Kibble Award, the Steele Rudd Award, the Braille Book of the Year, the 3M Talking Book of the Year and the Geraldine Pascall prize for critical writing. She has also been shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, the Dublin IMPAC Prize and the Miles Franklin Award. Her previous works include *The Point*, *The Fog Garden*, *A Taste of Memory*, *The Apricot Colonel* and *Murder on the Apricot Coast*.

Marion lives in Canberra.

Marion Halligan on writing *Valley of Grace*

Some twenty years ago – I know it was 1989 because it was the bicentenary of the French Revolution - I was living in an apartment in Paris, in the rue St Jacques, and as always sitting in the window gazing into the street was a favourite pastime. Diagonally opposite was an eighteenth century building being gutted and renovated, and a beautiful young man used to swarm all over its façade with grace and skill. I could never see enough of this building, however much I peered its insides were veiled by clouds of dust or sheets of plastic. Diagonally the other way I could see a fragment of the great church of the Val de Grace, which in those days was usually open for visitors to walk in. There I found the story of Anne of Austria, who promised God that if he gave her a baby she would give him a church; he did and she did. Louis XIV was the baby, the Val de Grace was the church. Also opposite was an exquisite little shop selling baby wear and children's clothes; it was Christmas and it was garlanded with true evergreen branches which smelled sweetly as they aged.

I made notes of these things and put them in one of those handsome cardboard folders that hold themselves together with elastic and stuck them in a cupboard. I didn't think much about them for quite a while until I was in the middle of a book and couldn't see where it was going, so I picked up the cardboard folder. This is my habit; if something isn't working do something else and let your subconscious get on with it. My subconscious had clearly been working on the stuff in the folder. It is interesting how images, sentences, ideas cluster together. When I looked at the notes I had made it was as though they were a small set of magnets that had gathered a collection of iron filings around them in mysterious and unexpected patterns.

They crystallised for me things I have often thought about fertility. What a huge and worrying topic it has been through all of history. Babes never where they were wanted, often where they weren't. Thinking of Henry VIII trying for an heir. Tess of the D'Urbervilles and her baby Sorrow and how her life was destroyed. I remembered how when I was young the thing to do was try to get married before you got pregnant, which a great many people didn't manage to do. In those days girls got pregnant doing it once in the back of a Morris Minor, which was a sign of how agile they were, if nothing else. And now young women (but not so young as we were then) have terrible trouble and go through agonising processes to conceive. Go to a baby shower and the stories told are excruciating; they will break your heart.

My first novel was about a young woman who has an abortion and is empowered by it.

So these were the images that clustered around the old building, the church, and the baby wear shop. I don't know where the antiquarian books came from, or the gay lovers, they all turned up, invited themselves in, you might say. The bakery opposite the church and the tramps merrily drinking outside it, the barges on the river, though not with daffodils, with geraniums, because it was summer, the markets, the stories of the Resistance, the trickling copper fountains, all those I came across; my imagination put them together with things it invented. The wild child sadly isn't an invention, not generically; they exist in various forms, as a child tied up in a chookhouse in a poem by Jean Kent, for instance.

The book was originally going to be a long short story, the first chapter, Valley of Grace. But by the time I'd written that I realised it was the start of something much bigger. I wrote five more long short stories, chapters you could call them. This is a form of constructing a novel that I love, the discrete stories that loop and tie themselves together, thickening as they go. It is not entirely without some linear progression, there is a beginning and there is an ending, but the paths between them are devious. I think this is the way life works; we are all the protagonists of our own stories, and bit players in other people's. I think this is a very interesting way to read about people.

There are ideas and issues in the book, but that is not what it is based on. Essentially it is about people, and how they manage to live their lives. This is for me what novels do; they pose the question, how shall we live? Though they do not necessarily answer it, they help clarify the asking.

Suggested discussion points for Valley of Grace

- ☞ Fertility is an important theme in Valley of Grace. How is this reflected in the lives and relationships of Fanny and Gerard, and Jean Marie?
- ☞ Discuss the idea of going on pilgrimage to Lourdes and miracles.
- ☞ Images of damaged babies feature prominently in Valley of Grace. What is their significance? What do they symbolise?
- ☞ Julien says sex is a game, it hasn't a lot to do with love. What do other characters think about this? Do we believe that what Julien says is true?
- ☞ By an accident of history, Catherine is the daughter of a hero, Jacqueline of a traitor. What do you think of this notion of relativity?
- ☞ The epigraph in Valley of Grace reads :

All things, said Plato, are produced either by nature, or by chance, or by art; the greatest and most beautiful by one or other of the first two, the least and most imperfect by the last.
Montaigne Essays

Book 1, Chapter 31, 'On Cannibals'

How is this idea represented in the story?

Recommended Reading

Self Possession by Marion Halligan (1987)

The Fog Garden by Marion Halligan (2002)

The Red Book by Meaghan Delahunt (2009)

Christine Falls by Benjamin Black (2006)

The Children's Book by AS Byatt (2009)

The Sisters Antipodes by Jane Allison (2009)