

SARAH ARMSTRONG

# Promise



READING GROUP NOTES

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## Blurb

How far would you go to protect a child in danger?

When a new family moves in next door, it takes Anna just two days to realise something is very wrong. She can hear their five-year-old daughter Charlie crying, then sees injuries on the little girl which cannot be ignored. Anna reports the family to the police and social services but when no one comes to Charlie's aid, Anna understands that she is alone with her fears for the child's life.

So when Charlie comes to her door asking for help, the only thing Anna can think to do is take the girl and run.

Raising delicate but deeply felt questions about our responsibility for the children around us, *Promise* is a novel that obliges the reader to ask: if Charlie were my neighbour, what would I do?

## Author Biography

Sarah Armstrong's first novel *Salt Rain* was shortlisted for several awards, including the 2005 Miles Franklin Award, the Queensland Premier's Literary Prize and the Dobbie Literary Award. She won a Walkley Award as a radio journalist at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. In 2015 her second novel, *His Other House*, was published by Pan Macmillan Australia and in Germany. She lives in Mullumbimby, on the north coast of New South Wales, with her partner, the writer Alan Close, and their young daughter.

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## Questions for Reading Groups

*Police hold serious concerns for the welfare of a missing Sydney girl, last seen at her Mascot home on Saturday afternoon. Five-year-old Charlie Seybold is believed to be with her neighbour, 37-year-old Anna Pierce. (p128)*

The novel is told from Anna's perspective. We follow her as she watches the people next door move in, as she goes about her romantic life and her work, we see her relationships with her family, and we are with her during the life-altering choice she feels she must make to keep Charlie safe, and while she faces up to the repercussions of that act, for her and the people around her.

1. How might we feel about Anna if her story were told by a detached observer, in a newspaper, or perhaps, from Charlie's viewpoint?

*Oh God, what had she done? She was deep in the forest with a child she didn't know, with half the cops in the state after her, her photo in the news and it was a nightmare that Anna had brought on herself. (p145)*

2. If Anna had realised the way that taking Charlie would affect her life, do you think she would have acted differently? Or was she fully aware of the likelihood of this outcome when she took Charlie?
3. If so, why do you think she is so upset now?

The epigraph that Armstrong has chosen is from Catherine Bateson's collection *The Vigilant Heart*.

4. Who do you think are the 'lost' in this novel, and how might that relate to vigilance?

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*'But Charlie was in trouble. Serious trouble. And they turned a blind eye like we all do when someone's in trouble. We do. We don't want to get involved. . . But we should all be responsible for the kids around us. All of us.'*

*'I know, but you can't have one person, off the bat, deciding to take a child away, Anna. . . is that what you want? Other people just taking kids because they think the child's in trouble or in some kind of danger?'*

*'Is that what you really think? I mean you – Dave? Or is this the crown prosecutor talking?'* (p303-304)

Dave seems to care very much about Charlie's welfare. He is the first to suggest that Anna take action on Charlie's behalf. But Anna cares deeply about Charlie too.

5. Which of them do you think is right?
6. Who protected Charlie best?
7. If Charlie were your neighbour, what would you do?

*'Harlan and Mummy did the wrong thing. Grown-ups are not allowed to hit kids or hurt kids. Never. Okay? I will never hurt you. I promise.'* (p146-147)

8. Do you think this the 'promise' of the title?
9. Can you think of another way the title of the novel might be interpreted, or how that relates to Anna and Charlie's situation?
10. Perhaps there is more than one 'promise' at play in the story?

*Promise* explores many aspects of mothering: what makes a good mother; what it is to be motherless; or to be childless; how to care for a child not one's own.

11. How do you think Anna's loss of her mother might have influenced her decision to take Charlie?

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*'Gabby'll turn up dead one day. I tell myself that, so when it happens it's a bit easier.'*  
(p325)

Sabine's midwife, Jo, is dismayed that Anna could leave Charlie's mother behind. Charlie's grandmother, Prue, seems resigned that Gabby cannot be saved. Anna compares herself to Gabby – in all her dealings with Charlie she tries to act as she assumes Gabby would not. Charlie has yet another view of her mother.

12. What are your feelings towards Gabby?

13. Why don't Anna's feelings of responsibility extend to Gabby, and is she right to feel that?

Anna's thoughts on motherhood are complex. She says she has 'switched off any maternal desire' (p158). She remembers the suffocating pity of the 'kind women' who tried to comfort her after her own mother's death. She cannot comprehend why Gabby might act the way she has, but after only a few days with Charlie she finds herself imagining 'walking away, just walking down the driveway and into town. What a relief that would be.' (p163)

14. Do these mixed feelings make Anna less of a parent to Charlie?

15. Do you think she would feel very differently if she were already a mother?

16. Do you think that there is such a thing as the 'fundamental bond' (p169) that Jo describes?

*Was it because she was exhausted or were things strangely dreamy here?* (p93)

The year Anna spent in the subtropics with Pat have made the area an incredibly significant place for her. Spending time there with Charlie has only increased her feeling of connection to this place.

17. Do you think her actions are in a sense directed or dictated by the landscape around her, either before or after she takes Charlie?