What has happened to Alice Russell?

Five women reluctantly pick up their backpacks and start walking along the muddy track. Only four come out the other side.

The hike through the rugged Giralang Ranges is meant to take the office colleagues out of their air-conditioned comfort zone and teach resilience and team building. At least that is what the corporate retreat website advertises.

Federal Police Agent Aaron Falk has a particularly keen interest in the whereabouts of the missing bushwalker. Alice Russell is the whistleblower in his latest case. She knows all the secrets: about the company she works for and the people she works with.

Far from the hike encouraging teamwork, the women tell Falk a tale of violence and disintegrating trust. And as he delves into the disappearance, it seems some dangers run far deeper than anyone knew.

The Author

Jane Harper has worked as a print journalist for thirteen years both in Australia and the UK. Winner of the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for an Unpublished Manuscript, her bestselling first novel, The Dry sold to over twenty territories, with film rights sold to Reese Witherspoon and Bruna Papandrea. Jane lives in Melbourne with her husband and daughter.

***Please be aware that the following notes contain plot spoilers***
Themes

Parents and Children

‘I never even met him. I’m just saying that I think most parents do genuinely try to do right by their kids . . . I mean, look at the Baileys and their dickhead kid. He can do no wrong even when it’s caught on camera. And it sounds like even a lunatic like Martin Kovac spent his last couple of years upset that his son had gone AWOL.’

Parents and children, and the unique legacy passed from one generation to the next, is a theme of the novel.

1. Falk has an idea of who his father was; but his colleague, Carmen, has another take on things. Do you think she’s right? Do you think Falk was entirely wrong about his father?

2. ‘Never underestimate how far you’d go for your child.’ Sergeant King is talking about the Sondenbergs, but do all the parents in the novel put their children first?

3. Joel Bailey uploads intimate images of Margot Russell. Margot bullies Rebecca until she becomes anorexic. How do their parents deal with this? And what about Bree and Beth’s feelings of responsibility or guilt towards their parents? How much do you think parents in this novel should hold responsibility for their children’s actions?

Mirror images

‘It was like stepping into a funhouse mirror. Two faces, each a distorted reflection of the other, looked up in unison.’

1. Identical twins Beth and Bree are not the only mirror image in Force of Nature. Margot and her mother are often said to look alike, and their family portraits mirror one another. Alice tells Lauren to ‘buy a mirror’ to understand Rebecca. There are two chapters in the novel that ‘mirror’ one another – they start with the same first paragraph although they appear at the beginning and end of the novel. And of course, the narrative begins and ends at Mirror Falls. Why do you think mirrors are such a potent piece of imagery in the novel?
Aaron Falk and Carmen Cooper

‘It’d be about four years ago that she left.’

‘Four years! I honestly thought you were going to say four months. God knows, I’m not overly houseproud myself, but really. Four years. What are you waiting for? Do you need a lift to Ikea?’

1. During the course of the novel we learn that Falk has been living in a kind of stasis for several years. Why is that, do you think? Has he addressed this by the end of their case? If so, who or what has helped him do so?

Alice Russell

‘I have tried my best to help you, Lauren. Didn’t I recommend you for this job in the first place? And haven’t I covered for you – how many times lately? – when you’ve been distracted and stuffed up.’

‘Because you feel guilty.’

‘Because we’re friends!’

1. Alice Russell is an enigmatic character. We see her being generous and spiteful, insightful and malicious. She may be a victim, but is she entirely innocent?

2. ‘Being around Alice was like owning an aggressive breed of dog. Loyal when it suited, but you had to stay on your toes.’ Most of the characters also narrate at least one chapter from their perspective. But we never directly hear from Alice. Can you trust their accounts of her?

Lauren Shaw

1. ‘Falk didn’t ask what the worst case was. Alone and lost among the perils of the bush, he could think of a string of possibilities off the top of his head.’ Given the number of things that might have happened to Alice Russell, were you surprised at the outcome? Did you suspect Lauren might be responsible, or did you think someone or something else more likely?

2. ‘Not everything deserves to be forgiven . . . Alice said I was weak.’ Do you think it’s true that Lauren is weak? If so, do you think her problems with Rebecca genuinely stem from that flaw?

Jill & Daniel Bailey

‘When Falk looked at people like them, he saw all the other old blokes and struggling women and sad kids, sitting scared and alone in their unwashed clothes far away at the other end of the line. And he hoped that in some way, he could stop the rot before it ever reached them.’

1. During the course of the novel, we learn that Jill and Daniel Bailey are the subjects of an extensive federal police investigation into organised crime. Carmen and Falk even have reason to suspect that they may have caused Alice to come to harm. Do we feel sympathy for the Baileys? If so, how is this achieved?
Characters

Bree & Beth McKenzie

1. ‘How am I supposed to trust you, after everything you’ve done?’ Is this a fair accusation for Bree to level at Beth? Which of the twins do you find more sympathetic, or more trustworthy?

2. ‘We used to be really close, though. We dressed the same every day until we were, like, fourteen, or something ridiculous. Way too long. Like we were the same person.’ Bree and Beth each remark on how dissimilar they are now – how accurate is that, have they really grown that far apart?

Setting

‘You wouldn’t want to be lost out there for too long. It’s the panic that gets you. Everything starts to look the same after a few days, makes it hard to trust what you’re seeing . . . Drives ’em wild.’

1. The characters seem to feel that the setting itself, the fictional Giralang Ranges, is a source of menace: the treeline makes them feel ‘under siege’ and ‘feral’; the trees themselves ‘play tricks’ they ‘whisper’, ‘shudder’ and ‘groan’ and ‘gaze’. Do you think the setting feels ominous in the novel – how is this achieved? How do you think this relates to the title of the novel?

2. The climax of the action takes place not in the bush but around a man-made structure – Martin Kovac’s cabin. Do you think the change in scene between the wilderness and the cabin have an effect on the characters? Are there any other moments where a change of context makes the characters do things they might not otherwise?
1. There are two timelines in the novel – one that begins at the start of the retreat, and another that begins five days later, after Alice has gone missing. What is the effect of the two timelines? How do they shape the reader’s understanding of events, as well as of the characters?

2. As the novel progresses, different characters take over the narration. What effect does this have?

3. The novel begins with a scene that shows a group of women stumbling out of the bush – they are all unnamed apart from Alice Russell. In the last part of the novel, an unnamed figure watches Alice. How does this device create tension? Why do you think only Alice is named?