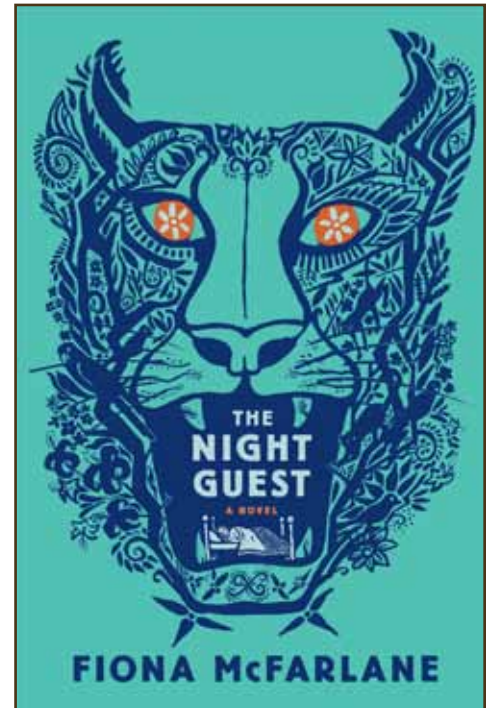


# Reading Group Gold

## *The Night Guest*

*A novel*

by **Fiona McFarlane**



ISBN: 978-0-86547-773-5 / 256 pages

In this mesmerizing psychological thriller, an aging widow contends with questions of trust and fear when a stranger moves into her home. Seventy-five-year-old Ruth Field lives alone in an isolated house on the Australian coast. At night she hears a tiger prowling nearby, far from its jungle habitat. Is it a true threat or a figment of her increasingly potent imagination? Ruth's solitude is ruptured when a vibrant, headstrong woman named Frida Young appears and appoints herself the caretaker of all aspects of Ruth's life. Then Ruth receives another visitor—a man from her past who stokes long-simmering memories of her girlhood in colonial Fiji. Unsure of herself yet determined to remain independent, Ruth enters a world where it's hard to distinguish the past from the present, and her conception of her life is turned on its head.

A transformative meditation on love, dependence, and the powers and frailty of memory, this novel is a masterful debut from a tremendously gifted writer. This guide is designed to enrich your discussion of Fiona McFarlane's *The Night Guest*. We hope that the following questions will enhance your reading group's experience of this haunting novel.

### QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what ways do Ruth's memories keep her company? In what ways do these same recollections mislead her?
2. What were your first impressions of Frida and George? How did your opinion of them shift throughout the novel?

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3. When Ruth and Frida clash, what strategies do they use to try to get what they want? What motivates them? What are their greatest vulnerabilities?
4. Discuss Ruth's relationship with her son Jeffrey. In what ways do they both behave childishly sometimes? At what point do sons and daughters have the right to start parenting their elderly moms and dads?
5. Like Ruth, Harry had a missionary childhood. What else did they share? What were the joys and shortcomings of their marriage? How might it have compared to a marriage with Richard?
6. Frida is surprised by Ruth's career in elocution. How does Ruth's love of language enhance her experience of the world? How do class and ancestry, including the ability to "speak posh," come into play in the novel?
7. What does the tiger mean to Ruth at various turning points in *The Night Guest*? What role does she give the other cats in her life? What makes the felines appropriate to her story?
8. Discuss Ruth's experience as a meditation on the aging process. How does she balance her loneliness with her wish for privacy? How does she reconcile her fierce independence with her fears and her frailty, which make her dependent on others?
9. What does the novel illustrate about the process by which trust is gained? Who is the shrewdest character? Who is the most naïve?
10. How is Ruth's identity shaped by the places she has lived? What is the impact of her years in Fiji? And how is she affected by the isolated landscape of her final home?
11. In the end, Ellen considers Jeffrey and Phillip to be irresponsible. Do you agree? Who will be obligated to look after you in your final years?
12. Just as Ruth gets to reconnect with Richard, is there a chapter from your past that you would like to have a chance to reopen?

## PRAISE FOR *THE NIGHT GUEST*

"[A] rich and suspenseful debut . . . McFarlane gives a flourish to even the smallest observations . . . This book is at once a beautifully imagined portrait of isolation and an unsettling psychological thriller." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

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“An enrapturing debut novel that toys with magical realism while delivering a fresh fable . . . McFarlane’s rendering of Ruth’s interior is quiet and exacting, and she builds suspense so gently that the danger is, at first, hardly noticeable.” —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Fiona McFarlane** was born in Sydney, Australia. She holds degrees in English from Sydney University and Cambridge University, as well as an M.F.A. from the University of Texas at Austin, where she was a Michener Fellow. Her work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Zoetrope: All-Story*, *The Missouri Review*, and *The Best Australian Stories*. She lives in Sydney.

Guide written by Amy Clements