

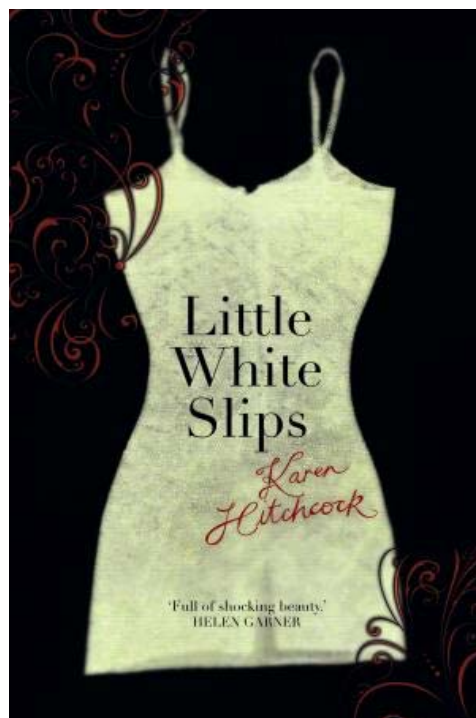
**PICADOR**  
**AUSTRALIA**

**NOTES FOR READING GROUPS**



**Karen Hitchcock**

**LITTLE WHITE SLIPS**



## Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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### THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

#### Thematic & Plot Summary

'We're all in this alone.' *Lily Tomlin*  
(p 171)

'I'm heavy with nothing.' *Sam*

Lives are endured in quiet desperation or enjoyed with unreasonable euphoria—in careless haste or regretted at leisure. There are traps for unwary players in every encounter. Existence is a battle for survival, but still we hope, and still we dream, and still we rage against the dying of the light.

In these thirteen stories, the themes include temptation, loss, grief, love, isolation, betrayal, lost dreams, unreal expectations, trauma, guilt, and all the big things which trouble each of us both night and day. They range across a wide variety of issues too, including parental affection or alienation, sibling rivalry, addiction, postnatal depression, binge drinking, child neglect, animal cruelty and teenage sexuality. They are all seemingly about women, but of course that's a falsity, since women are never without men (even when they live in a closed order). And men and women cohabit in so many ways, both physical and emotional that they are virtually inseparable. These are stories of startling intensity, of brutal wit, and of intimate revelations. But most of all they are stories of extraordinarily luminous beauty and power.

Despite the many issues and themes canvassed in them, perhaps what links each of these distinct stories, is the author's keen interest in the health of the individual and in the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual bonds which unite and divide us. Medicine (its practice and its ethics) is both a passion and a conundrum for this writer, who also practices and lectures in medicine. Her comments on the psychology lecturer: 'And I know now... get out' (p 163) provide one insight into the blurred lines between action and theory which plague this profession. Yolanda's shock treatment (p 172) is another evidence of how practice can be less attractive than theory to not only the reader, but also to the narrator, Jennifer. The operation on Rachel, the transsexual, enrages one of the students (p 209). Each story in some way examines the physical and psychological

traumas which people experience every day, and investigates the ethics and moral decisions entailed in dealing with them.

In the opening story 'Drinking When We are Not Thirsty', a woman studying for her medical exams is fractured, tormented and tempted by a chimera of release from the torments of her stressful life. Troy may be the panacea or a placebo to her problems; the family unit represented by her husband and child may be either her trial or her savior.

In 'Weightlessness' Alice reflects on her relationship with her brother, Chris, founded in their childhood on secret rituals which always involved food. His adult identity as a chef therefore feeds into the story's symbolism. Alice eats obsessively as she recalls watching her brother wasting away in the wake of a failed love affair. His tragic death leaves her emotionally destitute, although she's found solace in the arms of his business partner Peter. But she knows in her heart that: 'He was never enough.'(p 60) This story interrogates what it means to lose the person who is most central in your life, and to feel that something essential to one's being will never be resolved.

In 'Formation' the wife of a psychologist feels him slipping away from her into the twilight zone of a profession which demands total loyalty. Her amusing adoption of a Sigmund Freud action figure as her constant companion reminds them both of what they have been in danger of losing.

In 'Fat Arse' a woman ponders her obsession with weight, and in her encounter with a friend named Tina, she confronts the weight of female friendships and the terrible burden of female insecurity. How our body image is intimately tied up with how we conduct our lives and relationships, is a central theme.

In 'Blood' a girl is repelled by her father and brother's love for hunting and becomes a doctor, almost as a challenge. But her father's terminal illness and her brother's loss make her realise the powerful significance of their hunt. Her brother's desire to hunt a polar bear thus becomes symbolic of something strangely dignified and heroic.

In 'One Down' a twelve year old girl named Fiona decides to deal with the fecklessness of men (as evinced by a father who left and never returned) by opting to work her way through them one country at a time. And in the loss of her virginity at such a very early age she wreaks tragic effects on not only her own life but also on a young man whom she 'deflowers'.

In 'Skin' Georgie's dermatitis hints at underlying emotional issues to be resolved. Her fear of confronting Ruby, her glamorous childhood friend, who has returned after a long absence to host a party, manifests itself in further itching. But after a visit to a specialist,

she finally resolves (deliciously!) to '*Act like a sentence: let your clothes speak a thousand words; drape your bones in poems*' (p 142).

In 'Poetics of Space' the narrator's thesis proves a hurdle until she retreats to a country cottage where she is joined by her brother, and then by a persistent bird. Her companions eventually help her over her writer's block by illuminating for her what her dissertation is really about.

In 'Shrink' Jennifer and Sam are two contemporary women both of whom are unlucky in love, who become friends after a chance introduction. They have each made mistakes, trapped as they are in the concept of fairy tale romance. Jennifer is unsatisfactorily married to Matthew but her colleague David is her constant friend and companion. Sam routinely chooses unsuitable partners who disappoint her. The story concludes that Cinderella is a bad metaphor for the traps and snares which women often make for themselves.

In 'April is the Cruellest Month' a child discovers her true potential as a writer, a swimmer, and a person. Her chosen intellectual milieu is suggested by her switch from a public pool to the university swimming pool: 'And believe me, no one was talking about gas.' (p 195)

In 'Some Kind of Fruit' two mature age med students - James who is gay and Heather who has serial relationship problems - become close friends. The idea of gender and sexuality is tested and explored, culminating with an encounter with a transsexual whose blurred identity provides them each with some form of fascination, which is seemingly linked to their own relationship.

In 'Tactics' a girl develops various dating tactics and then snares Daniel, only to lose him to addiction, just as she feels she is also losing her best friend Jane to anorexia and obsession. She ultimately re-aligns her life in an effort to attain some form of selflessness; her new tactics are to offer care to those who really need it, rather than to waste it on those who recognize no value in her attention.

In 'Little White Slip', the final story, a young mother sinks into a post natal depression and turns to meaningless routines just to get by. A moment of innate love for the baby seems to rescue her, although the end of the story is ambiguous and contains a hint of her continuing captivity to an ideal of motherhood and wife.

Karen Hitchcock is a poetic stylist of devastating insight. Little white slips and little black dresses are worn (like many costumes) as camouflage. They are little white lies which we tell in order to convince ourselves that we are safe. But none of us are safe. Not ever. '*We're all in this alone*' as Lily Tomlin is quoted as saying, but this can either be an

admission of defeat or a strident affirmation of the individual's will to survive and the potential to surmount the most dire circumstances.

## WRITING STYLE

1. **Short story writing** is a fine art. A short story is a prose work of between 1000 and 5000 words, although there are many much shorter stories which are also known as microfiction or flash fiction. It's said that the form requires an 'epiphany' (a coin termed by James Joyce) which describes a moment of insight or revelation. What other short stories do you enjoy? What distinguishes them from others? You might like to read for example, Australian stories by Nam Lee, Robert Drewe, Helen Garner, Tim Winton and Paddy O'Reilly or by overseas writers Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates, and Alice Munro and compare some of them to the stories in this collection.

2. **Narrative person** is important in telling a story. Each of these is told in first person except for 'Blood' and 'Little White Slip'. Why do you think the author chose to tell these two stories in a more distanced manner?

3. **Literary quotations or quotes from textbooks** are used as key aspects of the narrative in several stories. Discuss the use of such primary or secondary sources in one of these short stories.

4. **Humour** is never far beneath the surface, even in the most tragic of stories. Hitchcock has a facility with words which often includes cunning aphorisms and witticisms. For example: 'What exactly is Queer Theory?' I asked, turning the glossy book over looking for a summary.

'Not what it used to be,' he said and buried himself further in his recipe.' (p 206) OR

'She said it was for cleansing her liver. I told her she was the cleanest liver I knew, but she didn't get the joke.' (p 220) Discuss the use of humour in these stories.

5. **The careful selection of words and their arrangement in sentences is an aspect of writing which is often overlooked when the reader is seeking the story.** In each of these fictions, Hitchcock uses words in a precisely economical but poetically resonant way. eg 'I went to his place - as small and neat as a converted ATM.' (p 217) Discuss a passage which was particularly suggestive for you.

6. **There is a great deal of symbolism and nuance buried in casual references in these stories.** For example, in the final story several words leak meaning like the milk leaking from Louise's breasts. 'I used to be a little-black-dress kind of girl.' (p 227) With this and the ensuing paragraph Hitchcock introduces a character in the process of disintegration. The technique of contrast between two 'types' is symbolized by the dress and the habitual white slips she now wears. This analogy is taken further when she heads one section: '*All This Came From One Little Slip*' (p 244). The breadmaker and the 'dough' (p 244) it makes relate, too, to the soft flabby skin which Louise deplores in her post-natal body, and the fact that her husband buys it for her is both a sinister or a hopeful symbol. Discuss this and other such examples in other stories.

## THE AUTHOR

Karen Hitchcock's fiction has appeared in *The Best Australian Stories 2006, 2007 and 2008, Families: Modern Australian Stories, Sunday Life, Meanjin, Griffith Review* and *The Sleepers Almanac*. She works as a doctor and is also a lecturer in Medicine at the University of Newcastle where she has recently completed a PhD in English/Creative Arts. *Little White Slips* is her first collection of stories.

For further background, you may wish to read: Rosemary Neill 'First Impressions: Karen Hitchcock, author' *The Australian* August 29, 2009 <<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25979915-16947,00.html>> or Richard Aedy 'Karen Hitchcock Little White Slips' ABC Radio National Life Matters 20 October 2009 <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/lifematters/stories/2009/2698324.htm>>

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Medicine is a theme in several stories, and the author has said that there are similarities between the profession of medicine and writing. Discuss. The stress of study is evoked very viscerally in several stories eg 'I have to spread my arms out wide to welcome them and I am full of holes.' (p 7) What does the collection reveal about the pressures of a medical student's life?
2. Relationships are a major theme in these stories— between lovers and friends and family. Discuss a relationship described here with which you particularly empathized.
3. None of these stories invite one single interpretation. Choose a particular story and discuss what you each made of it. For example, in 'One Down' the narrator surrenders her virginity to many boys and men without experiencing any real emotion until the final encounter in the story. What does the end of the story suggest?
4. These stories each feature a woman as a central character. What do they suggest about women's lives and emotions? Nuances about attitudes to women are slipped into the narrative: '*Among Surgeons, A Fat Gut Is Called An Apron.*' (p 245) Female readers might discuss which passages particularly spoke to them as women? Male readers might discuss what they observed in this discussion of women?
5. The author's love of words and their capacity to convey obtuse meanings, is evident in all these stories. The titles in themselves are little jewels of suggestiveness. Choose a title and discuss its possible interpretation in the context of the story.
6. Romance is a central theme. 'I think about brides in glass slippers-it is such an apt metaphor, and yet none of the little girls know it. *Tiptoe away from the ball*, we should tell them. *Mind your step as you make your wary way down that aisle.*' (p 177) Discuss this view of romance.
7. 'It's fine to talk of adventure and of risk, of leaping and striving and ambition, as if we're utterly impermeable, as if all of these abstract, defensible ideas when turned into action, will leave no trace. They are beautiful words that can rob you as they charm, like flashy con men who could never fulfil their promises.' (p 48) This statement and others in this collection imply a deeply felt moral obligation to those we love. Physical health may be referred to here often, but it's the spiritual and moral dimensions of human nature which interest the writer most of all. Discuss.
8. 'Just remember that comedy is only tragedy plus time' is quoted from a Woody Allen film. (p 164) This quote has a lot to say about this series of stories too. Discuss.
9. 'Disaster is complacency plus time, cowardice plus time, and I have been such a coward.' (p 178) This is a powerful statement. Is Jennifer going to join David? Or is the idea enough?
10. 'Social constructivism,' he'd curse. 'The body exists! The body exists!' (p 200) The idea of 'nature or nurture' and the implied conflict between environmental influences and the alternate view that lives are predetermined by the body and its genetic history are suggested by this amusing moment between James and the narrator. Discuss.



11. The ethics of medical treatment of transgender patients is raised when 'Rachel' visits a lecture and one student erupts into criticism of the surgical procedure (p 209). You may wish to discuss this scene and the issues raised in it. Heather and James are fascinated by this hybrid transsexual creature (p 212). Why?
12. A lot of the scenes in these stories imply a thinly veiled contempt for contemporary social taste. 'Daniel asked me to The Lounge to see a band with fringe-type cultural capital....beginners.'(p 217) In what ways is this writer a social satirist?
13. Louise's depiction of the group of mothers she meets for coffee: 'Laced...tongue.'(pp 230-1) is brutally scathing. Is this an accurate picture of contemporary middle class motherhood in your opinion?
14. 'If it's crying it's not dead.'(p 241) Bonding with a baby whilst maintaining a relationship with a partner and a connection with one's past life, is both fraught with pitfalls and potential joy. This story is shockingly honest about the feelings engendered in women by what they sometimes perceive to be enforced confinement to home and child. Discuss.
15. The 'epiphany' in a story is what one looks for in a short prose work. Choose one of the stories and discuss the epiphany as you see it.
16. Life's anarchy is expressed poetically when Jennifer is having a meltdown over Yolanda's disempowerment in the face of medical opinion, the state of psychiatric treatment, and her own life: 'They are all caught up in the swirling wind and thrown into a hypnotic circle...my hatred-burn.' (p 173) Is life depicted as being meaningless in this collection? Or is Karen Hitchcock an optimist? Despite the often tragic moments, are there also moments of uplifting insight or spiritual hope?

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