

*The Last Day in the Dynamite Factory*  
Reading group notes

*Blurb*

Silence, Chris discovered, is easy. If nobody asks, you never have to tell.

Christopher Bright is a well-respected conservation architect, good neighbour and loyal friend. He has a devoted wife, two talented children and an old Rover. He plays tennis on Saturdays and enjoys a beer with his business partner after work.

Life is orderly, yet an unresolved question has haunted him for as long as he can remember: who is his birth father?

Devotion to his adoptive parents has always prevented Chris from inquiring too deeply, but when one of them dies, explosive information from the past triggers a chain of events that rocks his closest relationships.

As light is cast on his father, attention turns to his birth mother. But when Chris goes in search of the person behind her photo, he encounters a conspiracy of silence. Determined to expose the truth, Chris finds the price of knowledge becomes increasingly costly.

Nevertheless, the truth must be told...

Or must it?

*The Author*

In 2011, *The Beloved* won the Queensland Premier's Literary Award for an Emerging Queensland Author. In 2013, it was commended for the FAW Christina Stead Award, shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award and won the Nita B Kibble Award. Annah and her husband live on Queensland's Sunshine Coast and spend extended time in beautiful Tasmania. *Last Day in the Dynamite Factory* is Annah's second novel.

*A Complete Plot Summary appears at the end of these Reading Group notes, and contains spoilers.*

*Themes*

**Marriage**

Several marriages, both successful and problematic, are depicted in the novel, though the focus is on Chris's and Diane's, and Ben's and Jo's.

1. 'You don't destroy a perfectly good house without a perfectly good reason.' (p. 35) What is it that makes Chris decide that his reason for leaving his marriage is a legitimate one?
2. Ben and Jo remained in their imperfect marriage while Chris and Diane do not, though both marriages suffered from a lack of passionate connection from at least one partner. Do you

think Chris would have left his marriage if he had not discovered the truth about his mother, and the circumstances of his birth?

3. There is mention throughout the book of presents Chris and Diane have exchanged over the years that missed the mark – the white silk pyjamas Chris finds a little disturbing, the wallet he has never used in favour of one he bought in London, the electric shaver, the antique drawing of the Brisbane church, the rather emotionless presents they give each other for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. In what way do these presents inform us about the couple's marriage?

### **Parenthood**

1. There are several parallels between Ben and Chris's relationship and that of Chris and his children. In what ways do the events of the novel highlight how Chris's upbringing has informed his own parenting? What do you think of Chris's handling of Phoebe's unplanned pregnancy?
2. *Wouldn't you work in a dynamite factory for your kids?* (p. 205) Most parents would agree that they would do anything for their children, but *should* they? Do you think Ben and Jo should have told Chris the truth about Alice? Alice's decision to work at the dynamite factory was clearly a noble one, but was it a necessary one, given the dangers it entailed?
3. Diane's lonely and loveless childhood has cast a very long shadow over her life. In what ways did she try to ensure this would not happen to her own children, and what price did she pay for this in her own life?

### **Secrets and Lies**

At the core of this novel is the idea of secrets and lies, and the reasons why people keep them.

1. Discovering the truth about his father and about the way Alice died hurts Chris, but it is knowledge that changes the way he plans to live his life. And yet, he keeps the full truth about the broken glass a secret from Ben. Is there such a thing as a good secret? Can secrets protect people, or should people always have a right to the truth?
2. Diane's secret – her history with Adrian, and her miscarriage – has far-reaching consequences for Chris and for her family, and ultimately for Diane herself. In what ways might Diane's life have been different if she had been open about this when she met Chris?

### *Characters*

#### **Chris**

1. 'Chris takes a black pen and draws a circle over Mrs Stanton's living room. A smaller circle on top, but not so small it can't accommodate a brain far smarter than his own, ears sharp enough to detect bullshit and glasses strong enough to see what is hidden. Still Fletcher, but an older, wiser Fletcher. He gives his little man a bow, a quiver of arrows and a mental

directive: kill.' (p. 63)

In what ways does Fletcher illustrate Chris's character? Why is it significant that he is a fletcher, not an archer? What is the significance of Fletcher's reappearance at this point in Chris's life?

2. There are several references in the novel to the difference between creating something new and merely renovating or restoring. What is the connection between Chris's discovery of the truth about his past and his ultimate decision to give up architecture in favour of his first love, woodworking?

### **Diane**

1. The reader never sees Diane's point of view directly. Did you feel sympathetic towards Diane? Does it make a difference to the way you feel about her that she is only ever shown through Chris's eyes?
2. Diane's deep fear of being hurt, as she was as a child and in her relationship with Adrian, prevents her from attempting to find true happiness. Although it appears she would not have voluntarily left her marriage, what suggestion is there that her separation from Chris may in fact be the catalyst for a happier future for Diane?

### *Setting*

1. It is at Coolum Beach that several of the novel's pivotal events take place. Why, in spite of his personal history with it, do you think Chris is drawn there, again and again?
2. Although Chris is an architect, he admits there are drawbacks with his own home: the shape of his den, the contentious dunny on the landing. Why is Chris so reluctant to address these problems? What parallels can be drawn between this reluctance and the state of his marriage to Diane?

### *Writing Style*

1. Annah Faulkner has chosen to tell this story in the present tense and through the eyes of a single character in the third person: Christopher. What is the effect of this? How does it shape the reader's understanding of Chris himself, as well as of the other characters in the novel?
2. The novel begins with a quote by Michael Leunig. In what ways does this quote allude to the themes of the novel?

### *Plot Summary*

To all appearances, architect Christopher Bright has the perfect life: a lovely wife and beautiful home, two successful adult children, loving adoptive parents and a thriving business. His life has not been without its tragedies, however; his mother was killed in an accident when he was a baby, and when he was eight, his cousin and childhood companion, Liam, was tragically lost on a sunny day at the beach.

When Jo, Chris's beloved aunt and adoptive mother, dies, Chris helps his adoptive father, Ben, sort through her things. He finds a journal that reveals a shocking truth: Ben is Chris's real father, and Chris's birth was the result of an extra-marital affair between Ben and Chris's mother, Alice.

With the uncovering of these secrets, Chris's world begins to fall apart. The parents he thought he knew seem like strangers. The cracks in his own marriage, which he has been papering over for years, begin to deepen. His dissatisfaction with aspects of his work life becomes unbearable. He suspects there is more to know about Alice than Ben will reveal, and he is determined to know the truth. He must also face the fact that he is keeping secrets of his own...

1. What is it about the true nature of Alice's death that gives Chris the strength to make the changes to his life that he has, until now, been unable to make?
2. How do the reappearance of Roberta in Chris's life and the discovery about Diane's history with Adrian Locke contribute to Chris's decision-making about his life?