



Books A random assortment of good books chosen by the *ASR* team and friends

Charlotte's Web

How does a usually mild-mannered writer contain her fury as she deals with the shocking abuse of girls and women in contemporary Australia? By creating a modern-day fable of rural gothic dystopia that is so shocking as to be profoundly disturbing.

By **Caroline Baum**

IT'S A FUNNY THING ABOUT FRIENDS: you think you know someone reasonably well, and then they surprise you, big time. That's what happened to me with novelist Charlotte Wood, whom I first met at Bundanon, the residential artists retreat at Arthur Boyd's former home on the NSW south coast. Neighbours there, we discovered a mutual love of cooking and established a dinner roster to share the domestic load. Our conversations, stripped of city niceties such as clean clothes, make-up or any other attempts at polish and disguise, were made more intense by isolation and purpose. The result was a vigorous and expansive friendship—she even persuaded me to go camping.

Over the past thirteen years I've watched as Charlotte's stocks grew steadily with each new book: *The Children*, a family story about sibling tensions; *Love and Hunger*, a non-fiction work about the feel-good and nurturing aspects of food; and *Animal People*, a novel that earned consistent critical acclaim for its distinctive take on modern life from the perspective of a man who could not relate to the values of contemporary society. Mordantly funny, sharp in its observations of modern-day alienation, its astringent yet playful critique nevertheless failed to find the success writing of such quality deserved.



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The Natural Way of Things

Charlotte Wood, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 2015, 320pp.

Still, it's one thing to go from the odd dash of vinegar to a fully fledged acid bath. Nothing could have prepared me for the shock of her new work, *The Natural Way of Things*, which is not so much a novel as a nail bomb. Different in style from all her previous work, with this book Charlotte confirms her shape-shifting ability, shucking off the safety of realism for a far edgier, modern-day fable of rural gothic dystopia. Think Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter and chuck in a dose of Mad Max's avenging angel Furiosa and you get the idea.

The Natural Way of Things takes us into a warped alternative reality set in contemporary Australia. A group of ten young women, all strangers to each other, are held captive on a remote property. Dressed in coarse dresses and severe bonnets that blinker them, and chained together like convicts, they are exploited like slaves. Gradually they come to realize



what unites them: each has been involved in a separate sex scandal.

Some of the harrowing content of this disturbing imagined scenario has its origins in an all too real episode from our past history: the Hay Institution for Girls, an offshoot of the Parramatta Girls' Home, a state prison for teenage girls that ran from 1961 to 1974, where inmates were treated inhumanely and abused. Girls were not permitted to speak without signalling for permission, and required to keep their eyes to the floor at all times. Their movement was restricted, and while walking was not permitted, they were required to march while undertaking hard labour. Charlotte borrowed these details to make up the girls' cruel routines in *The Natural Way of Things*.

THIS IS STRONG, FIERCE STUFF, unleashing an anger I had no idea Charlotte had about the way young women are exploited by those in power. Who knew she had this brutal imagery swirling inside her head while she hosted genial gatherings around her Marrickville dinner table, or dug in her community garden plot, or agreed to become the Chair of Arts Practice for Literature at the Australia Council? I can't imagine what it was like to contain this material, or to expel it onto the page. More surprisingly, Charlotte's prose resists the downward pull of its subject: her theme is ugly but her words are still beautiful, illuminated by strikingly poetic images and shaped in elegant cadences.

But now I know why she groaned repeatedly like someone with a dose of food poisoning that the book was painful and difficult to extract. I understand why she removed herself regularly from the comforts and society of her city life and home writing studio to go bush, to a remote property near Bathurst, where she could contemplate such things as the trapping of rabbits in uninterrupted solitude.

In the meantime, she maintained her enviable stamina, running writing retreats, mentoring would-be authors, while conducting in-depth literary conversations as *The Writer's Room Interviews*, an



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online subscription series with a small but devoted following.

Charlotte and I had never discussed feminism; it was simply a given. We were women of similar age and convictions who got irate at the same things—we were appalled by the treatment of Julia Gillard when she was Prime Minister, and we signed up to the Destroy the Joint community immediately. On social media, her comments were increasingly tough-minded whenever women were being patronized, but usually tempered with humour. Unapologetic at taking her writing seriously, Charlotte takes herself less so, thanks to a finely tuned sense of the ridiculous.

She was, it turns out, keeping her powder dry.

"I'm pretty anti-confrontation—I was raised to avoid conflict at all costs. This book feels like a primal



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scream. It's a reaction to being nice and not being provocative in the past."

She was seething, squirrelling away the many episodes of humiliation and degradation that had assaulted her consciousness through the media. "The case of Dianne Brimble [the Queensland mother of three who died on a P&O cruise ship of a drug overdose; eight men had preyed upon her while she was intoxicated] haunted me because of the language those men used. One of the men, Leo Silvestri, described her as a piece of rubbish, a thing. I felt murderous rage.

"Then there's the case of Kristy Fraser-Kirk, the David Jones PR who charged her employer Mark McInnes with sexual harassment and was immediately portrayed as a gold-digger. He was shamed briefly, but got another job and everything was OK,

but what about her? I realized that in all these cases, people like Monica Lewinsky, or the women involved with Bill Cosby, the women just disappeared. In a storytelling sense, they vanish."

(Just days after this conversation 35 of the 46 women who have accused Cosby of sexual assault made global headlines when they appeared in a group shot on the cover of *New York* magazine.)

For a long time Charlotte parked her anger about how women were treated and did not know what to do with it. "I think we stuff those feelings down all the time, in the same way as we shut our eyes and ears to stay sane and get through the day while we are assaulted by bimbo ads to news stories about men killing women. But I reached a point where I could not internalize it anymore.

"I'm pretty life-affirming but this material was so



dark that I fought it. Meanwhile it just kept accumulating in the public arena: the case of coach Scott Volkers, accused of sexually harassing three female swimmers, then Professor Barry Spurr, making his outrageous comments about women at Sydney University, and footballer Kurtley Beale, not to mention any number of polities, CEOs and surgeons—people who were educated and trusted members of society.”

The cascade of examples confirmed that Charlotte was disturbingly in sync with the zeitgeist. “It was like being a tuning fork for a sound I was previously not aware of. I also noticed that in most of these cases there was disapproval, but rarely was there punishment.”

Halfway through the writing of the book, Julia Gillard was elected Prime Minister. “And I thought ‘Oh, I don’t need to do this anymore’ but the excitement of that day, seeing her with Quentin Bryce and surrounded by female colleagues, which produced such a surge of possibility, almost immediately took the lid off the utter misogyny of the country. I cried over some of the abuse, the language that was used about her like ‘Ditch the Witch’—that was medieval. It was such a low point for all of us.”

For Charlotte, churning with indignation, the book became more urgent than ever. Resisting the impulse towards a scenario of cooperation, she keeps the girls in *The Natural Way of Things* separate rather than united in their suffering.

“Collective sisterhood would be boring from a narrative point of view. Feminism is about allowing me to be an individual. I didn’t support Bronwyn Bishop just because she was a woman. We don’t all have to love each other,” she says, suddenly waspish.

“I do have a strong sense of sisterhood, but in this prison, in this place, it’s all about survival of the fittest. I often think that if I had been alive during the Holocaust, I would not have behaved very well. Fear does things to people that they’re not proud of.

I wanted to write about women’s self-hatred and misogyny and the way we behave when we are under threat.

“Early readers of the book have asked me ‘Why don’t they rise up?’ To which my response is, ‘Why don’t WE rise up about men killing women and all the social iniquities that women suffer?’ We internalize our own oppression.”

Not all of the book is relentlessly grim—there is dark humour at the expense of reality TV and a certain TV chef, which relieves the tension. Part of it was written back at Bundanon, where Charlotte revelled in the appearance of mobs of kangaroos, which make a fleeting appearance in the book.

“I was able to see the beauty of the bush in the place where the girls are, and to allow them to range a bit further while still remaining captive.” And now the book is born, no longer this roiling sea inside her, is there a sense of peace?

Not yet. There has been a recurrence of acute back pain, perhaps a symptom of anxiety about how the book will be received, although the advance buzz is loud and the book has already been sold to the UK. Ever industrious, Charlotte has begun work on her next novel, an antidote comedy about old age, offering plenty of scope for her wicked wit.

But there is a sense of release that comes with pushing all the pent-up emotion that *The Natural Way of Things* contains out in to the world. She seems recharged, resolved. Her voice, often tremulous with indignation, is firm, her gaze steady.

“I don’t want to live in darkness but I feel proud that I’ve done it. I’ve taken action, and that feels powerful.” ❖

The Natural Way of Things is published by Allen & Unwin on 24 September.




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