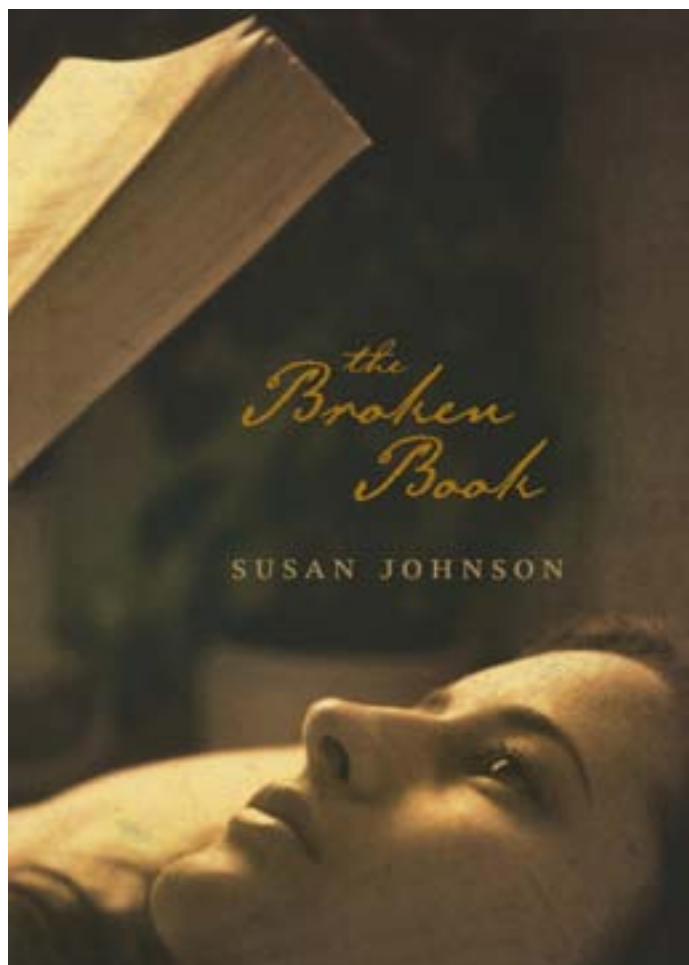


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About Susan Johnson

Susan Johnson was shortlisted for the 1991 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for her novel *Flying Lessons* (Heinemann 1990), shortlisted for the 1994 National Book Council's Banjo Award for the novel *A Big Life* (Pan Macmillan 1993) and shortlisted for the National Biography Award 2000 for her memoir *A Better Woman* (Random House 1999). Her other books include *Hungry Ghosts* (Pan Macmillan 1996), *Messages from Chaos* (Harper and Row 1987), *Womenlovesex* (Random House, 1997 editor and contributor). Since 2001 she has lived in London with her second husband and their two sons, aged nine and seven. Susan's website is www.abetterwoman.net.

On writing *The Broken Book*

After my memoir *A Better Woman* was published a few years ago, people began to ask whether I had thought about my children eventually reading it. I suppose this was because of the memoir's frankness, and more specifically those sections which exposed the rage I felt towards my sons. How do you think your son will feel knowing you once wished to smash his head against a rock?

This set me thinking. Obviously it was an area I had examined before, both during the writing of the memoir and especially in the run-up to its publication. Then a friend started to run into trouble with a friend of hers, about the question of ownership of some material she wanted to use in a piece of fiction. What were the moral implications of writing exactly? Was there a sort of inherent imperialism involved in the act of writing? Did a writer have the right to use everything, or anything, that happened to her in her life when every life involves friends, lovers, family? While always convinced that I had the right to my own life, to my own 'material' as it were, I started to ask myself some hard questions about what happened when my life was closely intertwined with someone else's.

I began to read books by the relatives and children of writers: Margaret Salinger on growing up with J.D. Salinger, the daughters of the poet Anne Sexton writing about their mother's life and death, a memoir by the Canadian Alice Munro's daughter. Margaret Salinger wrote that her father had spent his life busy 'writing his heart out' and that she was not convinced that the way he lived his life was well-balanced, or kind.

I went to the British Library and began reading about mothers and daughters, about infanticide, about rage. Whenever I begin a new book I read everything in a wild, haphazard way, sometimes only vaguely concerned with my emerging story. I knew I wanted to write about the relationship between writers and the world and, in particular, writers and family.

I knew early on that whatever I wrote had to feel as close to life as possible. This was because everything I had been writing in the lead-up to the new book felt somehow 'fake'. After the memoir, which had the authenticity of actual, lived life, any fiction I had attempted since struck me as trivial. I wanted something like life, some lucid work which would bring something of life's authority to it. For me, every book is somehow a response to the last and, in this way, *The Broken Book* is part of a continuing dialogue.

Around the same time that I was researching in the British Museum, I was re-reading *My Brother Jack* (for no other reason than I often re-read my favourite novels just before I am beginning a new novel myself: it revs me up, raises the bar, shows me how far I have to go. *The Great Gatsby*, *Madame Bovary*, *Jane Eyre*, these are my images of perfection).

Who knows how novels arrive? Mine arrived, whole and at once, and I suddenly understood that I was going to re-write *My Brother Jack* and its sequel *Clean Straw for Nothing* from the female character Cressida Morley's point of view. In the Australian novelist George Johnston's famous trilogy, his fellow novelist (and fellow Australian and wife) Charmian Clift is transformed into the Cressida Morley character, all green-eyed beauty and subterranean silences. What if I wrote her version of the story? What would any story by Cressida Morley herself be like?

In the same way that F. Scott Fitzgerald transformed his wife Zelda into the shining Daisy Buchanan character in *Gatsby* and into crazy, beautiful Nicole in *Tender is the Night*, Johnston transformed Clift, a serious writer, into a beautiful, betraying housewife.

The truth was more complex: Clift was dedicated to her work and always wanted to write her great book. She died without completing it but right up to the end her unfinished novel was there 'like an owl on my shoulder'. With two writers in the family, who owned the joint material? Who got to write the book? Here was a perfect way to write around my subject: the moral duty to one's family versus the moral duty towards one's work, the fall-out for children. Could I write Clift's broken book for her?

Like Sylvia Plath, Clift died by her own hand but, unlike Plath, suicide was not a leitmotiv throughout her life. Clift's strength, both as a writer and as a person, was her vitality, her great muscular joy in feeling the sun on her skin, the breath in her lungs, the transcendent beauty in a poem or a piece of music. She was for life, the way Plath was married to death, and even Clift's suicide at the age of forty-six fails to cast too long a shadow over her luminous prose.

Soon, I was up and away. But soon, too, I realised that I didn't want my emerging book to be a literal translation of Charmian Clift's life ('She wasn't like that'; 'She didn't do that'). Wasn't there more murky moral territory here too, stealing from the dead? And how could I possibly hope to emulate such luminosity?

Co-incidentally, a biography of Clift appeared (Nadia Wheatley, *The Life and Myth of Charmian Clift*) which made me even more determined to create something new. (I didn't read the biography at the time but have read it since and can recommend it.)

Eventually, I found myself developing an entirely new character altogether: the writer Katherine Anne Elgin. While she shares many biographical details with Clift, Elgin emerged as a character in her own right. She freed me up, allowed my imagination a wilder flight. Cressida Morley is still there, but she has always lived only as an invention.

Of course, much of Charmian Clift's background, and many of her preoccupations, happen to be strikingly similar to my own: journalism, expatriation, the on-going struggle between creativity and motherhood, the push-pull relationship with Australia. Greece, too, where Clift spent many years, also happened to be the place where I first started writing, where I began to unstitch myself, as it were, from my past. It was also the place where I got married for the second time, a country which has long exerted a pull over my imagination. I lived in Greece for a year when I was twenty: one

of those periods in a life which stand out, still, and which I see now as acting as a kind of crucible in which my adult self was formed.

So, there you have it: life and art, art and life. After two years, *The Broken Book* was finally done and I was free. Charmian Clift's imaginary autobiography may be found there now, as well as Cressida's and Katherine's, and traces of my own. What I hope is that you may find a trace somewhere too.

Q&A with Susan Johnson

When did you start writing?

I've written since I was a child, mainly poetry and stories. I began to write poetry, for publication, at high school. Then I started to get interested in short stories and began sending them off for publication in my early twenties. I tried to write a novel then but couldn't get properly started. I published my first short story in a small literary magazine published out of a university in 1983 when I was twenty-six. But this question is really about how one becomes a writer, or rather what conditions makes someone a writer. I was struck recently by a response that the American artist Jasper Johns gave to this question of becoming an artist. He said: 'In a sense you don't "start out". There are points when you alter your course, but most of what one learns, if that's the word, occurs gradually ... what made "going to be an artist" into "being an artist" was, in part, a spiritual change.' In the same interview Johns said that he thought of talent in terms of, 'what was helpless in my behaviour—how I could behave out of necessity.' In my own life, writing is how I behave out of necessity.

Who or what was the biggest inspiration for you to become a writer?

Books. *Jane Eyre*. *Heidi*. *What Katy Did*. *David Copperfield*. *Farewell to Arms*. *Pride and Prejudice*. I was reading everything I could lay my hands on by the time I was twelve.

What are you reading at the moment?

A Month In The Country by J.L. Carr. *The Master* by Colm Toibin. Henry James *A Little Tour In France*. I've just finished a biography of Patricia Highsmith, *Beautiful Shadow* by Andrew Wilson.

Who are your three favourite authors and why?

Charlotte Bronte, for the quality of her characters; F. Scott Fitzgerald, for his language and its elegiac beauty; Charmian Clift for her great gift of rendering the feeling world.

What inspired you to write this book?

Charmian Clift and the story of her unfinished book, always present, like an owl on her shoulder.

Are any of the characters taken from real life?

Clift was the starting point; incidents with my children; Leonard Cohen was in my mind for Katherine Elgin's affair with the poet and songwriter.

Where do you do your writing?

At my hand-carved wooden writing desk, a wedding present from my grandfather to my first husband and myself. I don't have the husband anymore but I still have the desk.

What's the last piece of writing you hated and threw in the bin?

I don't throw anything away. Even if it is garbage (and I write a lot of stuff which I don't use) I keep it. I will be found one day buried under a pile of papers.

When you're not writing what do you do?

Think about writing.

What are you working on at the moment?

I am dreaming my way into a book. I have no idea what it will eventually become.

Reviews

to come

Some suggested points for discussion



'Once I had the energy of a thousand girls at play. I could demolish time, run through space, eat up the world. I kept the pulse of movement along my legs; the backs of my calves were full of waiting motion. I remember my body being perpetually braced, as if everything inside me was primed and ready to spring. My body was my gift, a seam of girlish courage ran through the length of me, lighting my days.

This inexhaustible energy was also in my head, in the ringing cells of my brain. I walked as if floodlit, alive with ideas, blossoming with stories. This energy was a form of happiness, and for years and years I believed it was simply a matter of casting out a shapely net to haul it in. O, once I was a ball of fisted, happy energy, a roar of love.'

The Broken Book

Do you think Susan Johnson has pinned down something universal about female experience in *The Broken Book*? How does her writing capture certain emotional truths about what it is to be a young woman brimming with joy and energy, what it is to be a woman striving to realise her desires and what it is to be a woman moving towards death? Describe the passages that stood out for you.



Consider the three main narrative strands that Johnson presents us with: the young girl's diary, the older woman's reminiscences and the autobiographical novel. What narrative devices does Johnson use to distinguish these voices?



Discuss Katherine Elgin's relationship with her husband.



Do you think Katherine Elgin could be seen as a tragic heroine in the mould of Madame Bovary? Can you draw on any other literary parallels?



In what way does Katherine Elgin's 'autobiographical persona' help her through the often anguishing difficulties of her life? In what ways does the author illustrate the gap between actual life and the writing of a life?



Truth and fiction are blurred in *The Broken Book*. Here, Cressida Morley has been re-imagined, together with a new character, Katherine Anne Elgin, who shares certain biographical details with Charmian Clift. Johnson says *The Broken Book* is a 'kind of homage to George Johnston and Charmian Clift ... the story she [Clift] could not bear to write herself'. Did you find it confusing not knowing what was real and what wasn't? Does a reader need to know in a novel? Are all novels based on truth anyway, and all biographies partly fiction? Do you think *The Broken Book*, as fiction, has been able to find grains of truth about Charmian Clift that biography perhaps cannot?



Do you think in writing *The Broken Book* Susan Johnson is contributing to the pervasive myth of Charmian Clift in the same way that Sylvia Plath's short life has been colonised by academics, writers and suicidal teenagers?



Nadia Wheatley in her biography of Clift asserts that it was the loss of Cressida Morley to George Johnston's autobiographically based fiction that most damaged Clift. If this is the case, do you think *The Broken Book* is like a reclaiming of Cressida Morley for Clift?



'I know my father to be the whetted knife, sheathed.'

'Please let me learn to wake the ocean.'

'For too long I have been a thief in my own life, stealing out of bed before dawn, notebook in hand, slipping into a moment's cold freedom.'

'How cruel to see a lying word alive on my husband's tongue.'

'I am going to sew up my past and put it in a sack. I am already making the finest stitch, so fine no eye will be able to detect that once there was a visible rip.'

What is your response to Susan Johnson's use of metaphor and language? What other descriptions stood out for you?



The Broken Book articulates, in an intensely intimate way, what it is to be a writer and what it is to be a mother. Discuss these two conflicting creative roles and whether you think they are mutually exclusive. Besides childcare and housework, what other issues does Johnson raise which might prevent a woman artist from realising her potential?



'Beauty is for girls and men: it is nothing to a woman who wishes to make art.' Discuss the theme of beauty as a double-edged sword within the novel.



Susan Johnson has chosen three epigrams for *The Broken Book*. How does each one relate to the subject matter and themes in the book?

Further reading

A Better Woman, Hungry Ghosts and Flying Lessons by Susan Johnson

My Brother Jack, Clean Straw for Nothing, A Cartload of Clay by George Johnston

The Life and Myth of Charmian Clift by Nadia Wheatley

Madame Bovary by Gustav Flaubert

The Hours by Michael Cunningham

Stravinsky's Lunch by Drusilla Modjeska

Port Mungo by Patrick McGrath

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Conditions of Faith by Alex Miller

Fire Fire by Eva Sallis