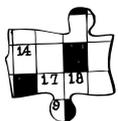


# *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson*



**A STUDY GUIDE BY KATY MARRINER**



**Snodger Media and Ronin Films**



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## Introduction

This study guide to accompany *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson* has been written for senior secondary students. It provides information and suggestions for learning activities in English, Literature, Theatre Studies and Drama.

*What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson* is a short film about Australian playwright Hannie Rayson. Dr Tess Brady interviews Rayson and provides a critical introduction to *Hotel Sorrento*, *Inheritance*, *Life After George* and *Two Brothers*. *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson* also includes a discussion of many of Rayson's other plays and an investigation of her approach to writing for the stage.

*What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson* is one title from a four-part series spotlighting Australian playwrights. The series offers students information about the ideas and processes of the playwrights as well as the opportunity to hear what the playwrights have to say about their work. Other titles available in the *What I Wrote* series include:

- *What I Wrote: Matt Cameron*
- *What I Wrote: Louis Nowra*
- *What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson*

Further information about the series can be found at <http://www.whatiwrote.com.au>.

### Hannie Rayson

Hannie Rayson is a graduate of Melbourne University and the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) and has an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from La Trobe University. A co-founder of Theatreworks, she has served as Writer-in-Residence to the Mill Theatre, Playbox Theatre, La Trobe University, Monash University and Victorian College of the Arts.

Rayson is recognized as one of Australia's most significant playwrights. Her first major success was *Hotel Sorrento*, a Playbox/Theatreworks co-production, which won several prizes including the Australian Writers Guild Award. Her next two plays *Falling From Grace* and *Competitive Tenderness* premiered at

Playbox. Rayson has also written the highly acclaimed plays *Scenes from a Separation*, *Life After George*, *Two Brothers*, *Inheritance* and *The Glass Soldier*. Her television writing credits include *Seachange* and an episode of the ABC series *Seven Deadly Sins*.

Rayson was the joint recipient of the Sidney Myer Performing Arts Award in 1996 and has won both the Victorian and NSW Premier's Literary Awards. In 1999 Rayson received the Magazine Publishers' Society of Australia's Columnist of the Year Award for her regular contributions to HQ magazine. Rayson made playwriting history when *Life After George* became the first play to be nominated for the Miles Franklin Award.

## About the filmmakers

### Dr Tess Brady – Presenter

Dr Tess Brady is a highly respected editor, researcher and teacher of writing at university level. She was the co-founding editor of the international online scholarly journal *TEXT* and has published children's picture books, adult radio drama, crime fiction, short stories and popular non-fiction. Her most recent publication is *Creative Writing: Theory beyond practice*, with Nigel Krauth.

### Catherine Gough-Brady – Director

Catherine Gough-Brady is a documentary filmmaker. She has made works for a variety of media. Gough-Brady has produced and directed educational videos and web sites. Her 'docugame' *Docks Dispute* <http://www.docksdispute.com> is currently used in tertiary management and industrial relations courses.

## Using *What I Wrote:* *Hannie Rayson* in the classroom

Teachers may select from the following activities to support students' viewing and close analysis of *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson*.

### The writer's context

'Ordinary people's lives are incredible material for art.'

– Hannie Rayson

'Being curious about the way that the world works and the way people live is important.'

– Hannie Rayson

- As you view *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson*, compile a list of statements that describe Rayson's place in society.
- *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson* claims that Rayson writes about familiar territory – inner urban landscapes. Is this true of the play that you are studying?
- Use the internet, critical essays and commentaries to compile a detailed summary of the contexts that shape Rayson's work as a playwright. Discuss your findings with others in the class.
- Drawing on one of Rayson's plays, determine how Rayson's experi-

ence of and attitudes to the world in which she lives have influenced the construction of the text. Work in a small group to complete the analysis. Develop a PowerPoint presentation to communicate this information to the class.

- A writer's relationship with his or her environment is a central concern of *Hotel Sorrento*. What does Meg Moynihan claim she writes about?

### Views and values

'Hannie is a playwright of really big ideas. Her plays engage in the conversations that are on the front page of the daily paper.'

– Dr Tess Brady

'I'm interested in the intimate and the personal and the private ... we're all connected in some way to family.'

– Hannie Rayson

Hannie Rayson's plays are intellectually robust. It is theatre that tackles the big issues and provides a contemporary vision of Australian society. While her plays advocate a particular social or political stance, the drama is never black and white. Through her characters, Rayson articulates a variety of beliefs and while we may disagree with many of these beliefs, Rayson brings us to an understanding of why the characters take such stances.

- Do you think of Rayson as a political writer?

- 'What I find drives me is engaging with the national conversation.'  
– Hannie Rayson

Drawing on *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson* and your knowledge of Rayson's plays, make a list of the issues that Rayson has brought to audiences' attention.

- Do you think Rayson's plays have the power to influence people's response to real world events and issues?

A significant aspect of Rayson's plays is her fascination with family. She uses family as a stage to play out her quest for understanding people's complexities. *Hotel Sorrento* has family at its core, as does *Life After George*, *Inheritance*, *Two Brothers* and *The Glass Soldier*.

- As you view *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson*, compile a list of statements that explain Rayson's interest in family.
- 'Family provides Rayson with a deliciously dysfunctional group of people varying in age and jobs and sometimes social background.' Discuss the validity of this claim by drawing on one of Rayson's plays. Why do you think Rayson uses family as a platform to explore complex ideas and issues?



## Critical perspectives

- Use the Internet, critical commentaries and reviews to arrive at a detailed knowledge and understanding of the critical reception of Rayson's writing. What viewpoints do you support? What viewpoints do you refute?

## The plays

### *Hotel Sorrento*

'At the core of this play is a family struggling with loyalty, loyalty to each other and loyalty to their own story.'

– Dr Tess Brady

In *Hotel Sorrento*, the Moynihan family is the context for Rayson's discussion of personal and Australian identity. Meg Moynihan insists that her second novel 'Melancholy' is fiction but her sisters do not agree. Hilary and Pippa believe that Meg has invaded their privacy and revealed the secrets of their shared past. The sisters claim that Meg may have changed the names but she has still written her family's story.

- Do you agree with Brady's reading of *Hotel Sorrento*?
- Discuss Rayson's anecdote about seeing *Hotel Sorrento* performed in London.
- Drawing on pertinent quotations from *Hotel Sorrento* generate a discussion of loyalty.
- *Hotel Sorrento* was made into a feature film by Richard Franklin in 1995. Information about the film and reviews are available on the internet. Develop a detailed comparison of a scene from the play and the same scene in the film. Describe how Rayson's scene is recreated in the film and evaluate the effectiveness of the adaptation.

### *Life After George*

*Life After George* begins at Peter George's funeral. His wife, two ex-wives and daughter have gathered together to bury him. Through a series of flashbacks, the play narrates George's personal and political journey. George, a brilliant academic, was a flawed, energetic and complicated man who

lived his life with passion and gusto. He was charismatic, careless and sometimes cruel, but he never failed to revel in life's offerings and to celebrate the importance of the life of the mind.

In *Life after George*, Rayson investigates why those studying at universities are no longer students but customers and considers how such a corporate agenda has changed education. Her main character Peter George supports education as Rayson would like it to be, a liberal, classical education for life.

- Do you like Peter George? Or is 'like' the wrong word to use?
- 'I wanted to create a man who was committed and believed truly in scholarship.'

– Hannie Rayson

What moments and statements in *Life After George* show this to be true?

Rayson acknowledges that George is a mass of contradictions. She draws on a poem by Walt Whitman to justify her assessment of George and to explain her interest in creating complex characters.

- Compile a profile for one of Rayson's characters. Use moments and statements from the play to highlight the contradictions that are evident in the character's nature and behaviour.
- *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson* mentions Rayson's resignation from the board of the Victorian College of Arts was prompted by discontent and a difference of opinion. Read and discuss Rayson's public statements about university education:
  - Degrees of Separation: The University and the Spirit of Enquiry (2001): <<http://www.flinders.edu.au/alumni/alumni-community/investigator-lecture-2001.cfm>>.
  - Keynote address at the Regional Arts Australia first national conference, Mt Gambia, 1998: <<http://www.countryarts.org.au/ccd/docs/hannie.html>>

- Were you surprised by Rayson's explanation of how her decision to end Act One was made under pressure and without any real sense of what was going to happen next?

- 'Life After George is a moving and perceptive insight into social change.' Is this how you see the play?

### Inheritance

'Inheritance is a play set over country and over time.'

– Dr Tess Brady

*Inheritance* is a powerful family saga set in the sprawling Mallee District of Victoria. The Delaneys and the Hamiltons gather to celebrate the eightieth birthdays of the families' matriarchs and twin sisters Dibs and Girlie. When it emerges that the family farm may be sold, the battle to decide the rightful heir begins.

Rayson's play deals with divisions. The division between the city and the bush, the division between black and white, and the division between duty and freedom.

- 'Inheritance is about ownership, belonging and our relationship to the land.' Is this an apt summary of the play?
- As you view *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson*, compile a list of statements that explain Rayson's decision to write a play about rural Australia.
- 'Inheritances, who gets what and why, have always been the stuff of great drama.' Do you agree? Draw on moments and statements from the play to support your evaluation.
- Do you think *Inheritance* allows urban audiences to understand the plight of people in rural areas?
- In *Inheritance*, Rayson doesn't support One Nation ideals and values, but she investigates what drives people to support and vote for such values. How does Rayson achieve this intention?

### Two Brothers

'It's about two brothers who are divided politically. A family that's riven by an ideological divide.'

– Hannie Rayson

One brother is a prime minister in waiting. The other is a left-wing community lawyer and activist. Their relationship is one of affection and respect that accommodates their ideological differences. The play opens on a dark and stormy night when James Benedict, the Minister for Home Security, stabs a man to death, in self-defence. The man is the sole survivor from an Indonesian fishing boat packed with refugees that went down in the Indian Ocean on Christmas Day.

In *Two Brothers*, Rayson uses family to discuss evil and power. Is it acceptable to do evil if by doing it we can create a much greater good? Both brothers are caught in the crossfire of this dilemma.

- What does *Two Brothers* tell us about power and the psychology of decision makers?
- What does Rayson claim as the starting points for *Two Brothers*?
- Make a list of the events and issues that are the focus of *Two Brothers*. Use the internet to learn more about the issues that are debated in *Two Brothers*.

Given *Two Brothers* was the story of two brothers on different political sides and debated Australia's attitudes to asylum seekers, many saw the play as a provocative documentary. The play's subject matter was debated in *The Age*. Rayson was compelled to write a defence of the drama. The media hype ensured the play was performed to packed houses.

- Use the internet to find out more about the way critics, commentators and audiences responded to the play. Rayson's reply was published in *The Age* on 19 April 2005.
- 'Two Brothers is a compelling, provocative and entertaining thriller.' Do you agree with this assessment of the play?

### Falling From Grace

*Falling From Grace* is regarded as Rayson's feminist play. It is a play about three women: best friends, who are faced with a moral dilemma. The women must choose whether or not to publish the story of Miriam Roth, a high-profile medical practitioner, and keep quiet about the possibility of flawed research.

- What does *Falling From Grace* tell the audience about female friendships?
- Do you think *Falling From Grace* still has something to say?

### Competitive Tenderness

*Competitive Tenderness* is a farce. The city of Greater Burke is in the frontline of local government reform. Dawn Snow's attempts to rationalize at an irrational speed are very funny.

- Given the large cast and the humorous subject matter, conduct a class reading of the play.
- Working as a class, research the way the Kennett era of economic rationalism shaped Victoria and in turn *Competitive Tenderness*.
- Having read *Competitive Tenderness* and researched the issues and ideas that drive the drama, do you agree with Rayson's assessment of the play?
- 'I had to write that play before I wrote *Life After George*.' Rayson speaks of *Competitive Tenderness* as a stepping stone play. What does this tell you about the nature of writing?

### Scenes from a Separation

*Scenes from a Separation* was written by Andrew Bovell and Hannie Rayson. It has been described as a marriage in two competing acts. The play presents male and female perspectives of marriage through Matthew and Nina's story of love and loss.

- What aspects of the project proved challenging?

- What did this way of writing allow Rayson to learn about herself as a playwright?
- What attitudes to marriage are reflected in *Scenes from a Separation*?
- Compare the opening of Act 1 written by Bovell with the opening of Act 2 written by Rayson. Make a list of the similarities and differences. Use this analysis to develop a description of Rayson's style.

### The Glass Soldier

'One man's quest to find that light.'  
– Hannie Rayson

*The Glass Soldier* is based on the life story of Nelson Ferguson. In the final months of World War One, Private Ferguson, an ordinary Australian, was wounded in a gas attack. Ferguson, a stretcher-bearer in the medical corps, was almost completely blinded in both eyes. In the years after the war, Ferguson proved himself to be anything but ordinary.

- What does *The Glass Soldier* tell us about mateship?
- Like Rayson, do you find Ferguson's story extraordinary?
- What does Rayson acknowledge as the challenges of telling Ferguson's story?
- Do you think Rayson has done the story justice?

### The writing process

'Story telling, just simple story telling, is quite elusive. And mastering that just takes practice.'  
– Hannie Rayson

*One of the things to notice about Hannie's plays is that at the heart is a family. She doesn't write family sagas but she uses family as if it's a landscape or a large canvas for her characters to play out those big ideas.*

– Dr Tess Brady

- Rayson acknowledges her own writing has been influenced by the



works of Arthur Miller and Anton Chekhov. Research the life and writing of either Miller or Chekhov. Create an A4 document that offers an engaging profile of the selected writer.

- In *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson* reveals that she is indebted to the way Australian playwrights like David Williamson, Alex Buzo, John Romeril and Jack Hibbert put Australian voices on stage and allowed Rayson to realize that the human condition could be explored in an Australian setting. She also claims that her contemporaries, Andrew Bovell, Matt Cameron, Louis Nowra and Katherine Thompson continue to teach her a great deal about how to write.
- Form a Literature Circle with others in your class. Read a play by one of the named playwrights. Share your impressions with your Literature Circle.
- 'Plot comes sort of last.'  
'I'm not good at treatments.'  
'I like to create a circumstance which by that opens out all myriad of possibilities.'

Drawing on Rayson's statements in *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson*, discuss how she creates and structures the drama.

- 'The ideas need to be wrangled.'  
What insights does Rayson provide about the role of her dramaturges Hilary Glow and Michael Cathcart?
- Rayson explains that there must be movement in a scene in terms of

plot, character and theme. Examine a scene from one of Rayson's plays and identify such changes.

- Were you interested to learn about Rayson's commitment to research?
- What is Rayson's view of the rehearsal process?
- 'Being intellectually rigorous is important.'

– Hannie Rayson

Rayson offers her best writing tips in *What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson*. What tip do you think you will follow?

### Analytic responses

The following topics could be used for written text responses, debates, panel discussions and online forums.

- 'Hannie Rayson's plays are topical, complex dramas written with wit and humour.' Discuss. Refer to one or more of Rayson's plays to justify your interpretation.
- 'Hannie Rayson writes middle class theatre about middle class characters directed to middle class audiences.' Is this a fair criticism of Rayson's body of work?

### From script to stage

- Create and present a short solo performance from one of Rayson's plays. Submit a short written report that describes and analyses the processes used to create and present the performance.



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