

BOOK CLUB KIT



CARDINAL



Reading Group Guide

Contains Spoilers

1. The Book of Guilt is Catherine Chidgey's ninth novel and her first foray into dystopian fiction. How else would you classify it—as fantasy, thriller, historical, and/or realistic fiction?
2. The story takes place in an alternate history where “no one” won World War II. How did this affect your reading of the novel? How did this novel compare with others that concern World War II and its aftermath?
3. How did you feel about the late 1970s England setting? Why do you think the author chose this time and place? Could the novel be set anywhere, anytime, now?
4. Nature versus nurture is one idea explored with the triplets, who have different relationships with each other and hold each other in different esteem. How would you describe each triplet and how did you gravitate toward one over another?



(cont.)

6. What is the goal of Dr. Roach's research?

7. What connections did you make between the world of the novel and real life? To what extent did the events of the novel feel realistic or possible?

8. Were you shocked by the behavior of Nancy's parents? How they treated Nancy and then the triplets?

9. There is a feeling of rising unease throughout *The Book of Guilt*, interspersed with moments of humor, warmth, shock, and sadness. Did you finish the novel with one predominant emotional reaction?

10. How many of the novel's twists did you see coming?



Dear Reader,

Many writers before me have reimagined the ending of the Second World War – it's fascinating to consider how the planet might have looked if those massive shadows had fallen differently. Often such stories explore a German victory, but I wanted to try something more nuanced – what if nobody won? What if peace came only through a truce, with grudging concessions on each side? And what if a condition of that truce was the sharing of research conducted during the war? That's one place my story began.

I didn't want to labour the fact that my 1979 England departs from history – rather, I wanted it to feel uncomfortably close to reality for you. So, I decided to drop just a few clues – Hitler assassinated in 1943; the moon landing happening earlier, with America, Britain and Germany working together. Around these I wove real historical details to ground you in the claustrophobic world of Nancy and the triplets. The television programmes, right down to particular episodes, are the exact ones screened in 1979; the news events are accurate, as are the terrible clothes and food! And I lifted certain details from my own 1970s childhood – the adoration of sultry French pianist Richard Clayderman, for instance, or the soothing repetition of drawing Spirograph patterns.



When deciding where Vincent, Lawrence and William should live, I remembered a 1990s visit to family friends who lived in the New Forest – and I remembered the New Forest ponies. Mysterious, possibly dangerous, apparently wild but never free, they seemed a powerful symbol for my story of confinement and manipulation.

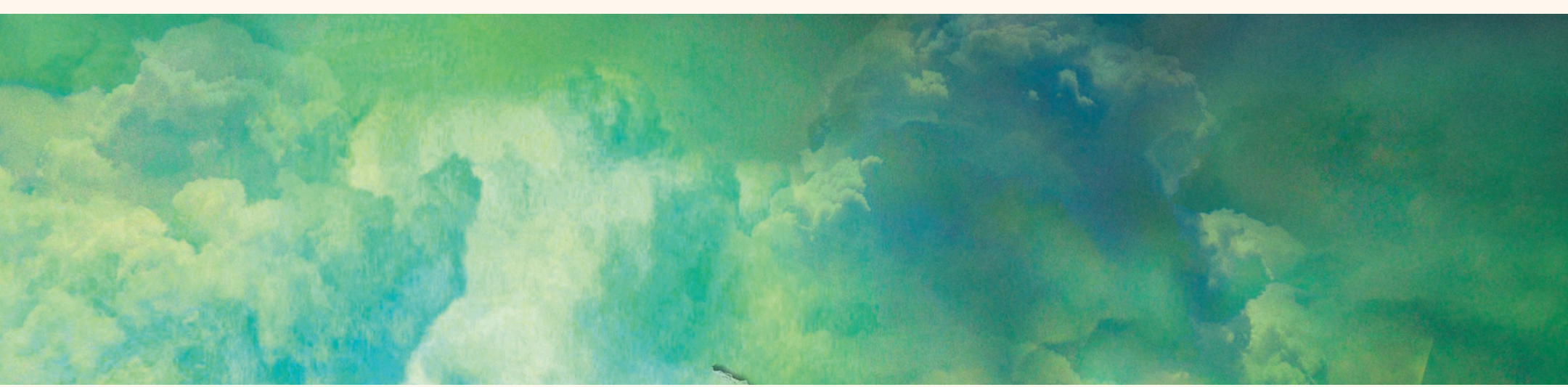
The idea for the Minister of Loneliness came when I read a news story about a Japanese politician with that title – immediately I knew it belonged, somehow, in my work. Weirdly, while I was writing the book, that same position was created in the UK.

I loved plotting the twists that lead you through dreamy unawareness, through dawning knowledge, and on into the dark landscapes of guilt. I hope some of those twists catch you by surprise – and that others make you feel clever for spotting them. What do I want you to take away? For me, one of reading's greatest pleasures is imagining myself in a character's shoes – so I'd love to think you were asking yourselves how you would act in the face of the injustices described. Would you speak up? It's a question I asked myself constantly as I wrote *The Book of Guilt*.

Warm wishes from New Zealand,

Catherine Chidgey





Book Recommendations from Catherine

***The Dream Hotel* by Laila Lalami**

A daring, claustrophobic novel centred around a future that feels disturbingly close at hand.

***Delirious* by Damien Wilkins**

Winner of the fiction prize at the 2025 New Zealand Book Awards, this slow-burn novel explores both old and new grief and is as moving as it is funny.

***Kairos* by Jenny Erpenbeck**

The collapse of a country echoes through the collapse of a relationship, with the disintegration of private passion reflecting the downfall of East Germany's entire political world.

***Butter* by Asako Yuzuki**

A thriller served up as a darkly seductive banquet – based on the true story of a female chef turned serial killer.





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