

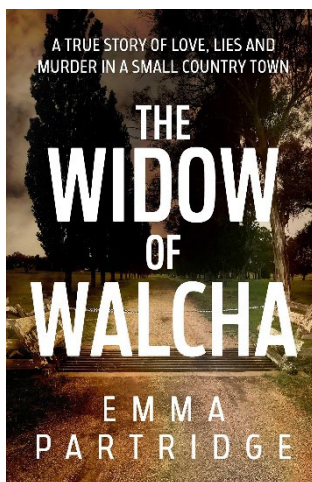
## Book Reviews

- ***The Widow of Walcha : A true story of love, lies and murder in a small country town* / Emma Partridge. Non Fiction 2022**
- ***Exiles* / Jane Harper Fiction 2022**

### ***The Widow of Walcha : A true story of love, lies and murder in a small country town* / Emma Partridge.**

**Non Fiction 2022**

<https://1girl2manybooks.wordpress.com/>



*The Widow of Walcha is a shocking true story about death, love and lies in the small NSW town of Walcha.*

*All farmer Mathew Dunbar ever wanted was to find love and have a family of his own. That's why, just months after meeting Natasha Darcy, the much-loved grazier didn't hesitate to sign over his multi-million-dollar estate to her.*

*When Mathew died in an apparent suicide soon afterwards, in a stranger-than-fiction twist, Natasha's estranged husband – who she was once charged with trying to kill – was the first paramedic on the scene after the murder.*

*Journalist and author Emma Partridge travelled to the cool and misty town of Walcha in the Northern Tablelands of NSW in the months after Mathew Dunbar's death, drawn by the town's collective worry that Natasha was going to get away with murder. Partridge spent months researching the case, interviewing Mathew's friends, family and Natasha herself in an attempt to uncover her sickening web of lies and crimes.*

*The Widow of Walcha is about one of the most extraordinary criminal trials in Australia's history and reveals Natasha's sickening crimes against those she claimed to love, fuelled by her obsession with money.*

This was wild.

Audible recently lured me back (I swapped my Audible sub for a Kindle Unlimited sub late last year I think) by offering me 2 months with the first one being free and the 2nd for 0.99c. My favourite thing to listen to on audio is non-fiction and as soon as I saw this book, I knew it had to be the first one I'd get. I remember this case really well, mostly because I grew up a few hours east of Walcha and had one memorable trip there when I was 18, with 2 of my close friends, where we stopped there for lunch on our way to Armidale to check out the University of New England as a study prospect. One of the friends I was with ended up getting her degree there but the other one and I opted for other choices. Hearing Walcha make the news in this way was incredibly jarring and I kept an eye on the case the whole way through.

But this is just.....so much more than I remember reading about in the newspapers at the time of Matthew Dunbar's death and also the trial of his partner, Natasha Darcy. Honestly, the deeper you get into this story the weirder it is and the more you wonder how the absolute heck Natasha didn't get a longer jail sentence prior to seizing the opportunity with Matthew Dunbar, a comfortably wealthy grazier, owner of a large property by the name of 'Pandora'. By all accounts, Matthew was shy and not successful in relationships although he longed for a family of his own, his father having died and left him the property and him being estranged from his mother. Natasha, with her three children, provided an instant solution to his longing and at first, all was well. But Natasha's spending and mood swings soon made Matthew unhappy – and when he was found dead in his home (let's not even get into the fact that the first responder was Natasha's "sort of estranged" husband, the first man she attempted to dispatch), Natasha said that he'd been depressed and suffering. Had tried to kill himself before.

Not everyone was convinced.

What follows is just.....an incredible story. A woman who had already tried to kill one partner. Had fleeced another of his credit card and gone on a shopping spree, spending thousands. Had already had two previous stints in jail. What she said from one person to another could be the opposite. And when, later on, when Natasha was charged with the murder of Matthew Dunbar and faced trial, the crown prosecutor spent multiple hours reading out all the incriminating searches on her mobile phone: things about getting away with murder, making it look like a suicide, how to poison someone without detection, and laughably, after police visited her after Matthew's death and indicated they'd like to see her phone, 'can police see search history'. The answer to that Natasha, is yes. Yes, they can. And they did.

This is just such an example of how someone saw opportunity and exploited a lonely man who wanted something that it looked like she could provide. And the thing is, she could've had a very comfortable life with Matthew. By all reports he was a nice, generous, hardworking man with a beautiful, successful property who seemed determined to give her what he could. But she wasn't interested in that. Quite a short time after becoming involved, she convinced Matthew to make her the sole heir to Pandora, should anything happen to him. During their relationship, she spent indiscriminately, so much so that Matthew, for the first time in his life, was suffering financial stress and wondering how he might continue to pay his bills. You got the feeling that part of her plan was for Matthew to actually take his own life and if that failed, then her plan to make it look like a suicide would be enacted.

Emma Partridge (originally a crime reporter for a NSW newspaper, who switched to reporter for TV station Channel 9 sometime during the evolution of this story) has done an amazing job here, travelling to Walcha and speaking to so many people, fleshing out history, trying to track down people from Natasha's past and sort the truth from the lies. In fact, I listened to this in two days – it's over 12 hours long, so that should tell you just how invested I was. With every new reveal came a new level of incredulity that Natasha was actually still walking around in society. Thankfully, now she is not.

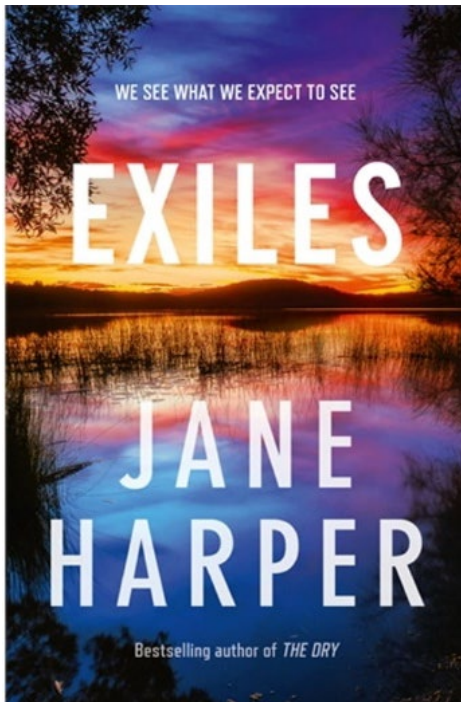
Excellent. Highly, highly recommended.

## Book Review

### *Exiles* / Jane Harper

Fiction 2022

<https://jenmedsbookreviews.com/>



*A mother disappears from a busy festival on a warm spring night.*

*Her baby lies alone in the pram, her mother's possessions surrounding her, waiting for a return which never comes.*

*A year later, Kim Gillespie's absence still casts a long shadow as her friends and loved ones gather to welcome a new addition to the family.*

*Joining the celebrations on a rare break from work is federal investigator Aaron Falk, who begins to suspect that all is not as it seems.*

*As he looks into Kim's case, long-held secrets and resentments begin to come to the fore, secrets that show that her community is not as close as it appears.*

*Falk will have to tread carefully if he is to expose the dark fractures at its heart, but sometimes it takes an outsider to get to the truth...*

### My Thoughts

It will come as a surprise to absolutely no-one that follows this blog to hear that, despite this being the third book in the Aaron Falk trilogy, it's the first one I've read. That said, aside from some alluding to prior events, nothing in this book should act as a spoiler to the rest of the series. It's a testament to how much I was enjoying this book that, before I'd even finished it, I was buying books one and two to catch up and test that theory.

In *Exiles*, Federal Investigator Aaron Falk travels to the town of Marralee for the postponed christening of his godson, the youngest child of his old friend Raco. It's an event mired in sadness as one year before a member of Raco's extended family disappeared, leaving behind her two daughters, Zara, Raco's niece, and her baby daughter Zoe. Aaron was present during the initial stages of the investigation, even acting as a witness being one of the last people to see Kim. Now he is back in town, the Festival is about to get underway and about to uncover some dark secrets that one person would rather have remained buried.

I really liked the character of Aaron Falk. He's not what I would expect a police investigator to be, possibly because he works with financial crimes rather than murders or missing persons, but he was a caring and intuitive individual, even if some of his investigative skills were a touch rusty. There was a real humanity and almost vulnerability at times in the way the author portrayed him. I don't mean as in weakness – he is far from that and there is a core strength and focus which is undeniable, but he is also someone who really feels emotion, and seeing how Jane Harper explored that through the course of the book really drew me into the story. It was one of the key reasons I became so invested

in the book, as I became invested in him. I wanted to see those empty parts of his life filled, and was keen to see how the chemistry between him and festival organiser, Naomi, developed. Beyond Aaron, there is a real feeling of family and community throughout this book, and the author captures that spirit of a small, tight knit town, where one person's death or disappearance can create far reaching shockwaves.

The opening to the book is simple and yet effective. The questioning about how the whole situation, Kim's disappearance, could have been avoided. In asking this simple question, Jane Harper not only sets up the whole premise of what is to follow, but creates a kind of melancholic and slightly chilling air that flows throughout the book. The stark implications of what we are reading really hit home, and lead to a myriad of questions that are slowly answered as we move throughout the book.

As it turns out, Aaron is faced with not one, but two puzzles to solve. The first, and by far the one which dominates the whole book, is the disappearance of Kim. Although not officially engaged on the case, his natural curiosity, and the ties to Kim through Raco and his brother, Charlie, Zara's father, lead to him really questioning what happened twelve months earlier. Little niggles over the investigation come to the surface. Things that may have been missed, inconsistencies in stories and witness testimonies. Although mostly set in the present, small moments of reminiscence reveal snippets of clues to readers, and if you are really eagle eyed, some of the, eventually, more obvious elements of the final reveal will be clear. But I like that the truth is very slowly, very carefully revealed. Those moments in between are filled with a vivid and emotive depiction of the impact that the whole situation has had on the family, the repercussions of the what ifs that linger. It might not be a high octane, all action thriller, but the emotional footprint is still keenly felt. Beyond this, Aaron has half an eye on a hit and run from many years earlier that resulted in the death of Naomi's husband.

Mystery flows through this book like a river. The number of suspects in Kim's disappearance is potentially infinite, visitors to the festival coming from far and wide. But there is always that sense that someone close to home knows more than they are letting on. Suspicion over whether this was an act of a third party or whether Kim may have taken her own life remain, but with so much contradiction and uncertainty, the focus and suspicion moves gradually amongst the characters. Towards the end as the full truth is revealed, the stark nature of what came to pass really hits home leading to a shocking, if brief but emotional ending.

A beautifully written book where the narrative really puts you in the heart of the community and the depiction of Marralee is so clear that I felt as though I was walking amongst the festival stalls and the trails that encircled the reservoir. Moving, captivating, full of mystery and brilliant characters this is definitely recommended. I cannot wait to read the first two books now.

### **About the Author**

Jane Harper is the author of four internationally bestselling Australian mysteries, including *The Dry*. Her books are published in 40 territories and have sold more than 3 million copies worldwide. Jane has won numerous top awards including the CWA Gold Dagger, the British Book Awards Crime and Thriller Book of the Year and the Australian Book Industry Awards Book of the Year. The 2021 movie adaptation of *The Dry*, starring Eric Bana, is one of the highest grossing Australian films of all time.

Jane worked as a print journalist for 13 years in both Australia and the UK, and now lives in Melbourne with her husband, daughter and son.