



## In the Company of Strangers

*Liz Byrski*

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## **In the Company of Strangers** Liz Byrski

Ruby and Cat's friendship was forged on an English dockside over sixty years ago when, both fearful, they boarded a ship bound for Australia. It was a friendship that was supposed to last a lifetime but when news of Cat's death reaches Ruby back in London, it comes after a painful estrangement.

Declan has also drifted away from Cat, but he is forced back to his aunt's lavender farm, Benson's Reach, when he learns that he and Ruby are co-beneficiaries.

As these two very different people come together in Margaret River they must learn to trust each other and to deal with the staff and guests. Can the legacy of Benson's Reach triumph over the hurt of the past? Or is Cat's duty-laden legacy simply too much for Ruby and Declan to keep alive?

## **In the Company of Strangers Details**

Date : Published September 1st 2012 by PanMacmillan Australia

ISBN : 9781742611297

Author : Liz Byrski

Format : Paperback 432 pages

Genre : Womens Fiction



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## From Reader Review In the Company of Strangers for online ebook

### Dale Harcombe says

Three and a half stars. While I enjoyed it, it didn't impact me the way some of her other books have done. Still it is a feel good read and I liked reading fiction of women a bit older who have had some experience of life and its ups and downs. Writing for the older age group is a Liz Byrski specialty. I liked the way the group of Ruby, Declan and Alice and Todd were brought together at Benson's Reach. The setting of Margaret River and the lavender farm which Catherine leaves to Declan and Ruby comes across well. Paula and Lesley are two characters that are hard to like, but there are reasons why they are the way they are. The characters are well drawn and young Todd is gorgeous - the type anyone would proud to have as a son or grandson.

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### Lauren K says

Written in the style of a family drama, though the characters are unrelated but their paths all cross at one central point- Benson's Reach in the Margaret River, Western Australia. Benson's Reach is a rundown property that produces lavender products and rent out cottages to tourists. Declan and Ruby have inherited co-partnership of the lavender farm and lodging at Benson's Reach following the death of the owner, Catherine.

Ruby is about 70 years old and has a complex history and friendship with Catherine, after her death she leaves London and returns to the place that stores many hurtful memories.

Declan, Catherine's nephew is middle aged- awkward, nervous and indecisive. He's a little lost by the bequest and so jumps at the opportunity for his old friend, Alice to join him at the farm to provide him with some strength to cope with the circumstances. Alice, recently released from prison is ashamed of her past and trying to overcome the pain she caused her family.

Lesley is the first tourist to arrive at Benson's Reach while it's new owners are finding their feet. She leaves behind her home in Perth, including her newly retired husband who she feels stifled by. Lesley finds herself attracted to Declan, ten years her junior. There's also young Todd who's 15 and has been abandoned by his mum and trying to find his place at Benson's Reach though his insecurities interfere with trying to make it a home.

In the Company of Strangers examines the lives of many different characters that come from various walks of life. At times I struggled to maintain an interest in the story as it was difficult to align myself with any one character. I didn't particularly like Lesley and I didn't really understand Declan. I was intrigued by Ruby, but felt she wasn't developed into an intricate character until the end of the story. I think I may have struggled with the characters because they are mainly in the 40's-70's which made it difficult to relate to.

What I did love about Byrski's narrative is the sense of community she creates and the delightful holiday spot of Margaret River which I have visited in recent times and absolutely loved. I think Byrski also portrayed Ruby's early life experience as a child migrant from England in a sensitive manner. I actually got the impression from the synopsis that this would form more of the plot- Ruby and Catherine's early experience and the lead up to the deterioration of their friendship.

In the Company of Strangers was a slow read but a fascinating look at older adults- their reflections on the past and adjustments to life changes. A character- driven story which lacked the direction and suspense to really enthrall me.

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### **Denise says**

3.5 stars

Several years ago I read Liz Byrski's early novels in quick succession: *Gang of Four* (2004), *Food Sex and Money* (2005) and *Belly Dancing for Beginners* (2006). Whilst they were enjoyable enough, by the time I got through the third one it seemed rather familiar and formulaic, so I decided to bypass her subsequent works. But last week I picked up *In the Company of Strangers* from the library's new release shelf, and drawn to the cover, blurb and setting, I gave it a go.

*In the Company of Strangers* is told from the point of view of several characters – all of them lost souls at a crossroad in their respective lives. They converge at Benson's Reach, a holiday resort and lavender farm in the picturesque Margaret River region of Western Australia. At the core of the drama is Catherine Benson, the former owner of the property who dies before the action of the story begins but whose presence is strongly felt.

As other reviewers have mentioned, it's great to see women of 55+ depicted as vital and interesting people who contribute to society. However, call me cynical (as I write this review on Valentine's Day), but I'm rather bemused at the ease in which some of the characters meet attractive, available men and form relationships, when the reality for women of this demographic is vastly different. But what the hell, Liz Byrski is catering to the romantic fantasies of her target readers – baby boomers – and there's no harm in that.

Overall, I found this novel a satisfying read for a number of reasons. The prose flows smoothly, and even though parts of the plot were predictable, there were enough surprises to hold my interest. Because the author cares about her characters, I cared about them too, especially Alice – a woman just released from prison on a drink driving charge – who forges a new life for herself at Benson's Reach.

Byrski tackles some difficult subjects such as alcoholism, mental illness and child abuse with intelligence and sensitivity. And although these are serious issues, the novel isn't depressing because it's infused with a good deal of heart, humor and hope. I'm pleased that I read it.

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### **Joanne Hyland says**

Liz Byrski at her best. I just love her books and characters and especially the Western Australian settings and themes that she magically weaves through her work.

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## Marianne says

In the Company of Strangers is the seventh novel by British-born Australian author, Liz Byrski. When Ruby Medway, almost seventy, hears of her childhood friend, Catherine's death, she has mixed feelings. Although they were sent to Western Australia in 1947 as child migrants, an experience that made them inseparable, later events saw them estranged. And now Catherine's will dictates that Ruby return to Benson's Reach as the major share-holder in a Margaret River lavender farm with holiday accommodation, something about which she has serious misgivings.

Declan Benson has been left a share in Benson's Reach by his Aunt Catherine, but he's not convinced he's up to the task of bringing this wonderful place back to what it was before she fell ill. He left it too late to return, and now everything is a mess. Decisions need to be made and that is just not his forte.

Alice has served the time for her crime, but she will never be able to forgive herself for its devastating consequences. But now she is out of jail, she is determined to live her life. But it's much harder than she expected. Ultimately, she gives in to temptation and contacts an old friend for help.

Although her husband Gordon has been retired now for a year, Lesley Craddock finds that coping with his constant presence is not getting any easier. Maybe a bit of time to herself at Benson's Reach will help her sort out just what she now wants from life.

Todd is almost sixteen, and considers himself so lucky to have met Catherine Benson. He may have been trying to break into her car, but she took him under her wing, giving him a job and the sort of support his alcoholic mother never bothered to. But now Catherine is gone, and Todd is anxious about his fate at Benson's Reach.

Byrski gathers this disparate bunch (and a few others: a cleaner with mental health issues, a herbalist seriously considering quitting) together and puts them under all sorts of pressure, and lets the reader watch their reactions. Some behave with integrity and kindness, others disappoint, but all are wholly human and flawed.

Byrski explores a few topical themes: the strains that retirement of the breadwinner adds to a marriage; empty nest syndrome and fear of irrelevance; the horrors of forced child migration of the mid-twentieth century; and the vital importance of support for mental health patients and for those released from prison.

As usual, her main protagonists (well, except for the delightful Todd) are of a mature age, ensuring the novel will appeal to the older generation: hen lit rather than chick lit. This novel falls slightly short of her previous excellent books, but is, nonetheless, a very enjoyable read.

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## Kate Loveday says

Another very readable book from Liz Byrski, who explores the problems and issues that can arrive in life as people reach mature age. This is well written with an interesting story line and characters that are very real.

My only criticism is that the ending seemed a little contrived, and in the last chapter I felt the author was espousing her own (very laudable) views, perhaps at the expense of the story. For all that I enjoyed it very much.

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### **Margi says**

I have loved all the Liz Bryski's books I've read and this one will be added to the list. This was a wonderful character driven book that told a great story which had me captured from page to page. I was sad to see it end as I really enjoyed the read.

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### **Alicia Hope says**

I really enjoyed this heart-warming story, and it helped that the book is well written (so I could switch off my internal editor!) & set in one of my favourite parts of Australia, Margaret River in the south-west of WA. I'm looking forward to reading more of Liz's books in the future.

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### **Isobella says**

Getting to the end of this book I was sad because I didn't want it to end. This author develops characters that are easy to relate to, and that the reader cares about. Her writing style is warm and easy to read and she handles complex emotions well.

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### **Sally906 says**

I loved the sense of community that author Liz Bryski created at Benson's Reach; what a perfect work environment it would be to work in. I have spent time in Margaret River in Western Australia and felt comfortable in the setting. IN THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS is a complex story where the plot is interwoven with back stories of family relationships, friendship, love, betrayal and loss. It follows a few different characters who have all come from various backgrounds and age groups and are mostly strangers to each other when the story opens. Of the characters I was least drawn to Lesley who I felt needed a good shaking and very upset at Paula's storyline, why did the author not see any salvageable qualities in her life. Still in real life people don't always get on, and often we don't try and understand the reasons behind the behaviour of people we come across, so an unlikable character is not out of the question. One aspect I really liked this Bryski did well was how the shameful story of the UK Child Migrant Scheme is interwoven into the story. Never in your face, or even the main focus, yet has it subtly affected the story from start to finish.

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### **Ali Bush says**

Brilliant as are all of her books. When finished you feel stronger as a person. Makes you feel wiser  
Biggest problem is you wished it wouldn't end

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### **Patricia says**

Absolutely loved this book, stayed up all night and could not put it down until I had finished it. If you are a fan of Liz's books then you will not be disappointed by her latest offerings :)

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### **Shelleystrae at Book'd Out says**

In this engaging character driven novel, author Liz Byrski draws together a group of very different people after the death of Catherine Benson, the proprietress of a lavender farm and holiday park, Benson's Reach. A complex web of old and new connections are examined to reveal an intricate tangle of friendship, love, betrayal and loss amongst strangers, friends and family.

Estranged from Catherine for years, Ruby is stunned to be left controlling interest in Benson's Reach and reluctantly returns to Margaret River, Western Australia, after a forty year absence, intent on tying up loose ends quickly and returning to her life in England.

Wrestling with his guilt over neglecting Catherine in her final months, anxious about Ruby's arrival and struggling to remain sober, Catherine's nephew, Declan, is overwhelmed by the responsibility of being made a partner in his late aunt's business.

Declan's offer of a job and a place to stay at Benson's Reach is a source of relief for Alice who has her freedom after serving five years in prison but does not know how to move on with her life.

Frustrated by her confused feelings about her thirty six year long marriage Lesley decides to spend two weeks alone at Benson's Reach in the hopes of working out what she wants from her life.

Each weighed down by their pasts and uncertain about their future, this disparate group of strangers must also contend with Catherine's legacies including a lonely teenage boy, an abrasive cleaner, and the practicalities of reinvigorating Benson's Reach.

While some of the characters in *In The Company of Strangers* are difficult to like, they are all intriguing individuals. Initial impressions are challenged as the author reveals their past tragedies and disappointments as well as their present hopes and desires. I especially liked how Catherine was revealed to be deeply flawed after she is initially presented as an almost saint like figure. Liz Byrski is one of the few Australian writers whose books feature mature age women, Ruby is in her early seventies and Alice and Lesley are only ten years younger. I think it is wonderful to see these women realistically represented in fiction, defying the age bias so prevalent in society.

While the story focuses on character, one of the interesting elements of the novel is Byrski's references to the UK Child Migrant Scheme during World War II. The program saw thousands of young children sent to Australia, some, like Ruby, were lied to and told their parents were dead, others were relinquished by parents convinced Australia offered their children grand opportunities in the sunshine, while many others, like Cat, were orphans. Shamefully many of the children were subject to exploitation and abuse by the religious institutions charged with their care. Provided with only very basic care, regularly humiliated and beaten for minor transgressions, Ruby and Cat were deeply affected by their experiences and forged a close bond to

survive the adversity. It is a touching moment when Ruby witness the public government apology and is finally able to let go of some of her anger and bitterness over her lost childhood.

Heartfelt, poignant and perceptive *In the Company of Strangers* is a wonderful novel. Though I have enjoyed her previous books, this is perhaps my favourite by Liz Byrski and I look forward to the next.

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### **Phryinne says**

This is the third book by this author I have read so far and with each one I have thought that the author she most closely resembles is Maeve Binchy. Australian rather than Irish of course but still the tales of families or groups of strangers who become like families and work together to solve the problems life throws at them. Books which are easy to read but still deal with big issues.

As the title indicates *In the Company of Strangers* is about a group of very disparate people who are brought together by circumstance and end up as a substitute "family." At times Byrski uses too many words and I skimmed a few paragraphs along the way but overall it was an entertaining and very pleasant read. It all turned out a little bit 'happily ever after' but that's okay too in this kind of book.

It probably deserves an extra star for the beautiful cover showing fields of lavender under an Australian sky.

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### **Janine says**

My second by Liz Byrski and an enjoyable read. It is great to read about older characters.

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