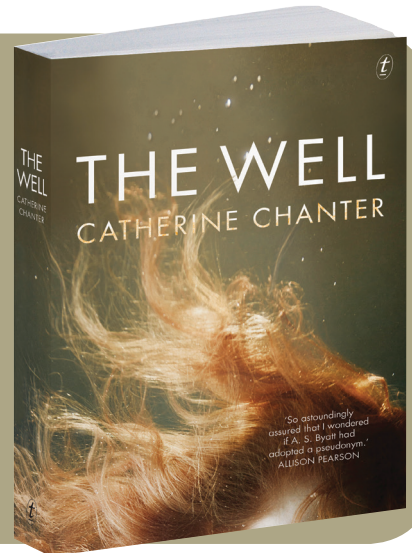


# The Well

CATHERINE CHANTER

Fiction, Trade Paperback



## Praise for Catherine Chanter

'This accomplished debut...is both a futuristic evocation of a Big Brother society and an Ibsenite fable of humans faced with limited resources.' *Guardian*

'Combining gripping mystery, nuanced psychological drama, and striking prose, this debut is a mesmerizing read.' *Publisher's Weekly*

'Suspense-building, supernatural undercurrents charge this haunting novel about ordinary people confronted by extraordinary situations.' *Elle Magazine*

## About Catherine Chanter

Catherine Chanter is a teacher, poet and short story writer. She is the winner of the Yeovil Poetry Prize and the Lucy Cavendish prize awarded by Cambridge University. She grew up in the West Country before attending Oxford. *The Well* is her first novel.

## A reader's introduction to *The Well*

Ruth Ardingly has just been released from prison to serve out a sentence of house arrest for arson and suspected murder at her farm, The Well. Beyond its borders, some people whisper she is a witch; others a savior. For as soon as Ruth returns to The Well, rain begins to fall on the farm. And it has not rained anywhere else in the country in over three years as Britain has been wracked by a terrible drought.

Ruth and her husband Mark had moved years before from London to this ancient idyll in the hopes of starting their lives over. But then the drought began, and as the surrounding land dried up and died, The Well grew lush and full of life. The rain was both a blessing and a curse, bringing new life and the promise of a simpler life built by their own hands, but also bringing envious neighbors and government mandates, and the fanaticism of a religious order called the Sisters of the Rose. Ruth fought to protect her marriage, her home, and her family in the midst of this desperate and confounding time—but in one devastating night, a horrifying crime destroys all that Ruth has sought to protect.

Now back at The Well, Ruth must piece together the tragedy that shattered her marriage, her family, and her dream. Alone except for her guards on a tiny green jewel in a world rapidly turning to dust, Ruth begins to confront her worst fears and uncovers the secrets of what really happened that tragic night at The Well.

## Questions for discussion

1. What makes Ruth's narration of the events at The Well trustworthy or untrustworthy? At what point during the book did you re-examine your first impression of Ruth?
2. What role does setting play in *The Well*? What role does the natural world play?
3. Consider Ruth's reflection after the guard she calls Boy fails to send her first letter to Mark: "It's always been a problem at The Well, knowing whom to trust." (ms p. 153). Does Ruth choose the right people to trust? Why or why not?
4. How did getting married and pregnant young affect Ruth? How does it affect Angie and Lucien? How does it affect Ruth's relationship with Mark?
5. A common theme throughout *The Well* is the effect of the media circus—around the accusations against Mark in London, around the mysterious rain at The Well, around the Sisters of the Rose, around Ruth herself as the Chosen One. How did the media frenzy affect each of these events? How would things have been different at The Well without national media attention?
6. How is Ruth affected by the increasing isolation created by life at The Well? Consider the xenophobic response of their new neighbors, the "catastrophic" loss of Bru the sheepdog (ms p. 56), and the growing rift between Mark and Ruth.
7. Ruth eventually decides to be active in her captivity, using her time to seek the truth and befriend the guard she calls Boy. Would the outcome of the book be the same if Ruth and Boy had kept their distance?
8. Ruth wishes upon a star the night she tries to get Mark to sell The Well. Why doesn't he want to leave?

Why does she decide to stay? How are each of their dreams changed and reversed throughout the course of the novel?

9. When Angie departs with the travelers, she asks Ruth, "Who would come first? Lucien—or the Sisters?" (ms. p 203). Mark later warns Ruth that she'll have to choose between him and Sister Amelia (ms. p. 233). In the end, whom—or what—does Ruth choose?

10. How does the uncertainty surrounding Lucien's death affect Ruth? Angie? Mark?

11. Compare the religious beliefs of the Sisters of the Rose and those of Hugh, the county preacher. Consider when Ruth observes of Hugh's faith: "This is what ministry looks like... The offer of one man to take on the suffering of another... A room full of quite ordinary sorrow, shared" (ms p. 190). What does Ruth believe at the end of the novel?

12. Why is it important that Ruth trusts Mark and never believed the accusations against him in London? Why does she begin to doubt him during her captivity?

13. How does Ruth embrace religious fervor, and eventually descend into madness under the effect of Sister Amelia and the Sisters of the Rose? In this case, is there a difference between the two? How do you explain the phenomenon of what Ruth calls Voice?

14. How did you react to the revelations in Sister Jack's letter? Do you believe her version of events? Does Ruth believe her?

15. What does rain mean to each of the characters at the end of the novel?