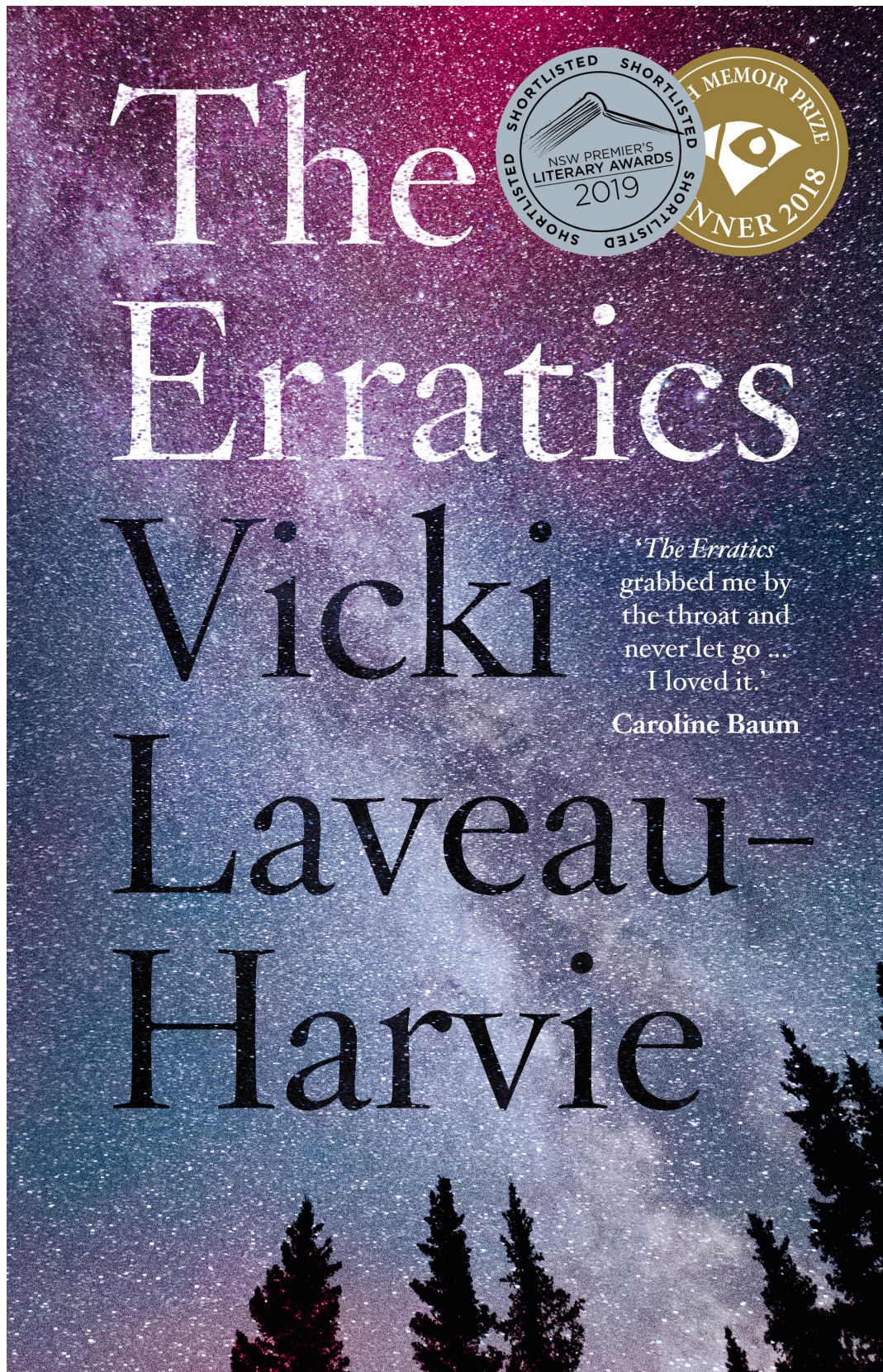
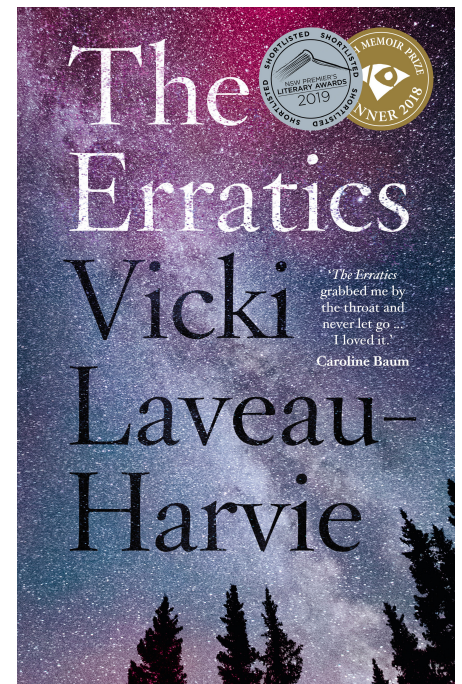

Reading Group Notes



'We've been disowned and disinherited: there's no changing it, I say. When something bad happens to them, we'll know soon enough and we'll deal with it together. I don't realise it at the time, but when I say that, I imply I care. I imply there may be something to be salvaged. I misspeak. But I'm flying out anyway. Blood calls to blood; what can I tell you.'



This is a memoir about a dysfunctional family, about a mother and her daughters. But make no mistake. This is like no mother-daughter relationship you know.

When Vicki Laveau-Harvie's elderly mother is hospitalised unexpectedly, Vicki and her sister travel to their parents' isolated ranch home in Alberta, Canada, to help their father. Estranged from their parents for many years, Vicki and her sister are horrified by what they discover on their arrival. For years, Vicki's mother has camouflaged her manic delusions and savage unpredictability, and over the decades she has managed to shut herself and her husband away from the outside world, systematically starving him and making him a virtual prisoner in his own home. Vicki and her sister have a lot to do, in very little time. And at every step they have to contend with their mother, whose favourite phrase during their childhood was: 'I'll get you and you won't even know I'm doing it.'

A ferocious, sharp, darkly funny and wholly compelling memoir of families, the pain they can inflict and the legacy they leave, *The Erratics* has the tightly coiled, compressed energy of an explosive device– it will take your breath away.

Winner of the Finch Memoir Prize in 2018, shortlisted for the 2019 Stella Prize and the 2019 NSW Premier's Literary Awards.

'If someone had told me this manuscript was by a young Margaret Atwood or Alice Munro, I wouldn't have been surprised. The bleak beauty of the Canadian landscape set against this wry memoir of a daughter's journey with her sister through their parents' decline into ill-health and dementia is an extraordinary read.' Candida Baker

'*The Erratics* grabbed me by the throat and never let go. Its sharp vinegary tone added a thrilling and bracing note to this portrayal of an extreme dysfunctional family. The writing has a visceral quality as well as a terrific sense of timing, irony and place – an unfamiliar and remote location far removed from Australia, but the author's tug back to Australia from this cold, inhospitable setting adds another dimension of contrast. There is a universality to the story, of ageing parents and conflicted children grappling with uncomfortable responsibilities. I loved it.' Caroline Baum, author, *Only*

Vicki Laveau-Harvie

on *The Erratics*

After the Blue Mountains launch of my memoir, *The Erratics*, a lady stood in line to buy a book and asked me this: do you feel your mother gave you anything? I answered without thinking, one word: no.

But as I opened the book to sign it, I reconsidered. My mother's insistence that I excel in the wide variety of tasks she set – school exams, music exams, language classes, art classes, ski school, figure skating – meant that I got a wide education, a breadth of cultural exposure and understanding I would not have benefited from, had she not been living vicariously through me.

As I pondered my exchange with the book launch lady at leisure, I remembered something my father had said when I told him of the birth of my daughter's daughter. He said: ah, another child to educate and guide. I held my tongue, but I wondered if it was possible he saw his role as a father that way. Looking back, could he possibly be seeing himself as an educator, a guide?

I longed to air an old hurt, to say: you were possibly a man of principles, but what those principles were I have no idea. Your legacy to me was absence. You were not there – you were on a trip, at the office, in the field, on the phone – or, if present, you were short-tempered or lying in a dark room with a migraine.

My mother's legacy, aside from her single-minded pursuit of a demonstrable excellence she could claim as her own, was chaos: the very definition of unreliability, unpredictability, ominous disorder.



So, I ask myself, who raised me?

I realise it's the wrong question. It's not 'who', it's 'what'.

When the cover for my book was decided upon, I requested one thing. The Rocky Mountains and their surrounding foothills were practically a character in the book – they needed to be on the cover.

On my trips to Canada to help my father, once back in that Southern Alberta landscape I had absorbed as a small child, I felt a jolt of familiarity, like changing gears. Even though it was half a century since I had lived there, I slotted back in. I was home.

More than that – I was in the presence of the closest thing to family I had: the reliable, unchanging mountain peaks on the horizon, the immutable rolling hills at their base. In late autumn, this was a landscape that taught you resilience, as the leaves fell, the fields turned dun, and the light failed dramatically at four in the afternoon.

Vicki Laveau-Harvie on *The Erratics*



You learned about fragility and individuality from the falling snowflakes, each one different from all the others, every one exquisite; you learned about beauty as you lay on the pure white surface of the snow to move your arms and legs and create snow angels. You tried not to leave footprints when you got up, but you did – it looked like the angels had decided to depart on foot.

In spring, tiny anemones pierced the snow that took its time melting on the foothills: fragile lime-green shoots, luminous mauve flowers, the Alberta crocus. Life returned with the thaw; nothing was irretrievably lost. And summer brought long hours of golden light, as the evening sun slipped down behind the Rockies, gilding the intricate dance of clouds of tiny gnats.

Bright, brave things bloomed, standing tall on stalks and stems in the brief, hot, continental summer, colouring the hills and the lower slopes of the mountains: goldenrod and fireweed, blood-red Indian paintbrush, tiger lilies, saffron-yellow and freckled.

Sweet clover flourished between the pebbles of mountain streams. The wild Alberta rose, growing on prairie roadsides and in ditches, five fragile pale-pink petals, perfumed the short season of beauty and warmth before the first cold snap shocked the leaves to crimson and amber, completing the cycle. A last burst of beauty against the backdrop of peaks and perpetual snow. The world turns, what is here will be lost but will return.

Mary Oliver, in her poem *Lines Written in the Days of Growing Darkness* said something about living in the landscape that is yours, and learning from it:

*So let us go on, cheerfully enough,
this and every crisping day,*

*though the sun be swinging east,
and the ponds be cold and black,
and the sweets of the year be doomed.*

Reading Group Questions



1. The narrator and her sister are very different. As a reader, do you feel that they each had a different view of their mother and a different way of relating to her?
2. Did they approach the problems they faced in dealing with their parents in different ways? Do you think they complemented each other, or did they get in each other's way?
3. Memoir often turns on family drama, but it is the stuff of fiction too, where sisters may feature as protagonists. How many works of fiction can you think of that feature sisters?
4. Do you think the relationship between sisters brings something unique to a story?
5. Did you personally relate to the story told in *The Erratics*? If yes, which elements chimed with your own experience? (If no, did you finish the book nonetheless?)
6. It has been suggested that we humans have a limited number of stories to tell but that, since each of us is different, there are infinite ways the stories may be told. What do you think of that idea?
7. When it comes to family trauma and secrets, some think these personal things shouldn't be shared. Writers of memoir often run into considerable opposition if they decide to tell their stories. What do you think? Why do you think the author wanted to share her story?