

THE GHOST OF GRACIE FLYNN

JOANNA MORRISON

ABOUT THE BOOK

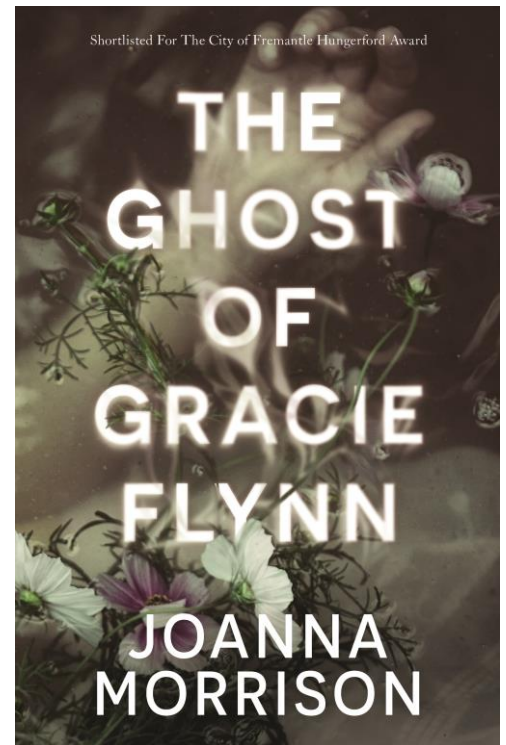
Three university friends are divided by a tragic death. Eighteen years later, chance reunites them. Robyn is still haunted by memories of her best friend Gracie, and Cohen's heart has never healed. Only Sam seems to have moved on and found success and happiness. But death rocks their lives again when Sam's body is found in mysterious circumstances. And the ghost of Gracie Flynn has a story to tell about the night that changed their lives forever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joanna Morrison lives in Perth, Western Australia, with her husband and two sons. Her debut novel, *The Ghost of Gracie Flynn* was shortlisted for the 2020 City of Fremantle Hungerford Award (under the title *Still Dark*) and received a WA creative development grant in 2021. Joanna's short fiction has appeared in literary journals and competition anthologies and has been shortlisted or nominated for various prizes, including the Margaret River Press Short Story Competition and the Pushcart Prize. Joanna has a background in journalism and a PhD in Creative Writing, and now works in her local independent bookstore, Open Book, where she sells books, moderates author talks and hosts book clubs.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the author chose Gracie Flynn as her narrator, and why do you think Gracie chooses to tell her story to Isla?
2. What difference do these two choices make to the unfolding narrative?
3. Do you see Gracie as a passive narrator, or does she have a role in the way the story develops?
4. What kind of a man is Sam? What kind of a man is Cohen? Which flashback scene do you think best characterises their relationship?
5. How would you describe the friendship between Sam and Gracie?
6. Why does seeing Sam with this baby daughter feel 'uplifting' and 'enchanted' to Robyn when she sees them by the river? Has Tori really 'tamed' Sam? (p. 76)
7. How would you characterise what happens between Sam and Skye? What do these interactions tell us about him?
8. All else being equal, do you think that things between Tori and Sam may have eventually returned to the way they are when the book opens?
9. What is Robyn's role in the novel's present-day narrative? Why do you think it was important for the story that she came home?
10. In what ways do you think that Robyn is a different person to the young woman who left Australia?
11. Why is Jon an important secondary character?
12. Do you think the absence of Gracie explains the emptiness at the heart of Cohen's life?
13. *The more things change, the more they stay the same.* Do you think this aphorism can be applied to the characters in this novel?
14. Is this a novel about free will? Do you think that the actions of these characters are determined by actions that have come before, or are they freely made?



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What was the genesis of this story, and was Gracie always its narrator?

The genesis of *The Ghost of Gracie Flynn* was a scene in which a woman discovers the body of a man, alone, on a boat. I was writing quite a different novel at the time, one that lost momentum for various reasons, but I kept coming back to that lifeless man out on the water. His situation took hold of me as an intriguing mystery around which to build a story. Did the woman know him? What happened to him? Why and how? Who was responsible?

The mystery of why Gracie is a ghost is also at the heart of this book, but she wasn't always the narrator; she only took the wheel in the last draft I wrote before entering the City of Fremantle Hungerford Award in 2020. In early drafts of the novel, the narratorial perspective shifted from one chapter to the next, using a third-person, free-indirect mode – meaning that each chapter was infused with the voice of the character whose point of view it took, without leaning fully into a first-person delivery. I've always loved this mode as a reader, but after taking *The Ghost of Gracie Flynn* through three significant revisions and letting the manuscript sit for a while, I found that it really wasn't as engaging as I wanted it to be. I decided it needed a unifying voice to pull all the perspectives together and present them as a compelling story. Gracie was the only character who could be omniscient, and whose point of view I'd not yet explored, so she was a natural choice. It turned out she had a voice, a story to tell and no shortage of opinions, so she immediately brought the story to life in a way that I was excited about.

Did you have to make up the rules of engagement for its supernatural elements?

I probably didn't think about this as much as I should have when I was lending Gracie's perspective to the story. To begin with, I allowed her to have some very subtle, subliminal interactions with some of the characters, which meant she had some agency and influence over unfolding events. This could've worked as a set-up but it was underdeveloped, which meant I was flirting with plausibility issues – dangerous territory if you care about reader engagement. Which I do!

Things fell into place when my editor, Georgia Richter, pointed out that Gracie's supernatural interventions were less interesting than what the characters were doing already in the mortal realm – an insight that helped me to crystallise the rules of engagement in a way that I think best serves the story. The result is that Gracie is omniscient but powerless to intervene in the unfolding narrative, which I think adds to the tension while mitigating those plausibility issues.

What was the most challenging aspect of tending to the mystery elements in this novel?

Every narrative needs tension of some kind to keep a reader interested. Because the tension in *The Ghost of Gracie Flynn* relies on two key mysteries (why is Gracie a ghost, and what happened to Sam?), the most challenging task was finding a way to withhold the answers to both questions for as long as possible.

In very early drafts, key culpabilities were revealed about two-thirds of the way in, meaning that the narrative tension relied quite heavily on *how* those culpabilities were discovered and dealt with in the final third. I was trying to break the rules in an interesting way, but those rules exist because it's very difficult to sustain a reader's attention once they have the answers they want. Turns out it really is best to 'get out of there' as quickly as you can after delivering the goods. This structural rebellion of mine became a legacy issue which, quite close to publication, was causing the tension to leak out too early. Once we'd decided that it was an issue worth fixing, some editorial backflips ensued in a very short space of time (think tables, font-colour fun, and herculean levels of patience on Georgia's part). It was intense, but I like to think we nailed it in the end.

Do you have a favourite character?

I love all of them, but if I'm forced to choose, I'd have to say Gracie. As someone who did not get to live her life the way she'd planned, she can only watch from the sidelines as her friends have adventures, search for

love, make mistakes, and try to fix them. With no agency and no presence in the mortal realm, Gracie is stuck wondering: were her friends more deserving than she was of the lives they got to keep living? Would her relationship with Cohen have lasted? Will anyone ever find out the truth of what happened to her? When she tells the story to Sam's baby girl, Isla, it's because she's drawn to this tiny person who embodies all the possibilities that she never got to tease out herself because she died so young. I think that's what makes Gracie poignant and interesting to me.

What's next for Joanna Morrison?

I'm hoping that *The Ghost of Gracie Flynn* will connect with readers so that I'll get to meet lovely people at book events, book clubs and festivals in the not-too-distant future! In the meantime, I'm working on another mystery novel, this one with historical elements and a nested structure, set in London and Fremantle. The novel explores freedom, motherhood, abandonment, truth and feminism in the context of young love lost and 1970s bohemia. A diary and a lost novel are woven through the main narrative, so there are plenty of structural challenges for me, and hopefully lots of intrigue and immersion for readers. This new project was selected for a mentorship through the Queensland Writers' Centre's Publishable program in 2021, which was a fantastic experience. My current focus is on polishing it up and sending it away so that I can start exploring some new ideas that have been percolating away in recent months.