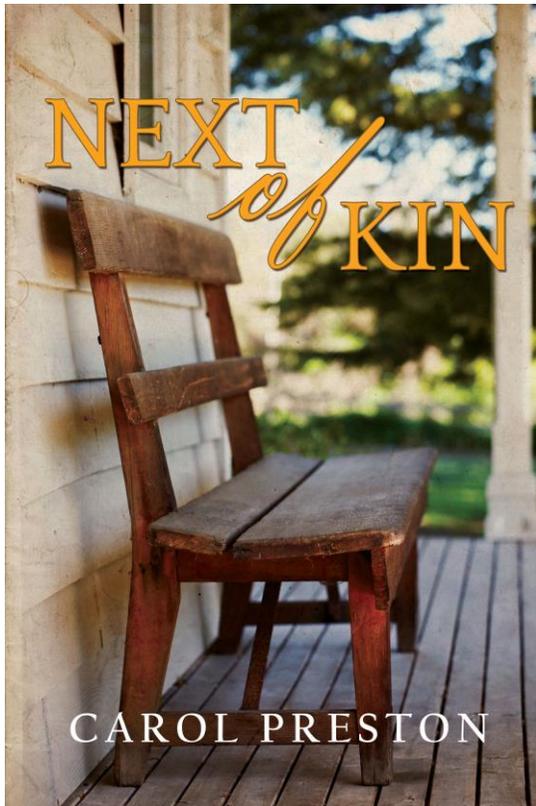




# Rhiza Press Book Club Notes



## Next of Kin by Carol Preston

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Reading level: ages 17+

Rhiza Press, PO Box 1519, Capalaba BC Qld 4157 [www.rhizapress.com.au](http://www.rhizapress.com.au)  
07-32451938 [info@rhizapress.com.au](mailto:info@rhizapress.com.au)

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### **Story Summary**

Fanny Franks was raised to believe in honesty, equality and acceptance of all people, regardless of their background or circumstances. When she meets brothers, Jack and Jim, she is drawn to them by the alienation and injustice which seems to pervade their lives. She is determined to intervene and help them find happiness, until trauma in her own life brings a personal experience of discrimination and shame for which she is ill prepared. It is only as she deals with her own struggle that she comes to understand what Jack and Jim are going through, and they are all able to find where they truly belong.

### **Key Learning Areas**

Prejudice and discrimination in society  
Step families  
Single parenting  
Assimilation into foreign cultures.

### **Themes**

Finding new life in a new culture  
Standing up for those who are discriminated against in society.  
Dealing with shame and guilt  
Overcoming obstacles to love

### **Related Text/Resources**

A history of the Clarence River. Duncan McFarlane, Published by the Clarence River Historical Society Inc, 2005  
National Library histories of early Australian settlers  
History of the German Community in the Clarence River District of NSW, published by Grafton Family History Centre, 1999



### About the Author

Carol lives in Wollongong with her husband, Neil. She is a psychologist and has a part time private counselling practice, as well as being an author and speaker. Carol enjoys spending time with her children and four grandchildren, as well as bushwalking, gardening and holidaying overseas with her husband. One of her hobbies over many years has been family history research. It was this research which started Carol on the journey of writing novels. Her first trilogy is about the Oakes Family; *Suzannah's Gold*, *Rebecca's Dream* and *The Price of Peace*, which takes the reader from 1838 when her great-great-grandmother, Suzannah Casey, was transported from Ireland, through to the end of the First World War. Carol's fourth novel, *The Face of Forgiveness*, is about two young women who are transported to Australia in 1839.

Carol has also written the Turning the Tide Series, based on her mother's family, which begins with the First Fleet of convicts to Australia in 1788. These include *Mary's Guardian*, *Charlotte's Angel*, *Tangled Secrets* and *Truly Free*. *Next of Kin* is her ninth novel. For more information about Carol's books and her other interests she can be contacted on her website:

[www.carolpreston.com.au](http://www.carolpreston.com.au), on her Facebook author page: [www.facebook.com/writingtoreach](https://www.facebook.com/writingtoreach) or her Amazon author page: [www.amazon.com/author/carolpreston](https://www.amazon.com/author/carolpreston)

### Background Notes

The Clarence River area in northern New South Wales is said to have first been discovered by Richard Craig, an escaped prisoner from the penal settlement of Moreton Bay. Later, during the 1830s, the River, called the Big River, was explored by ships sent from Sydney by the government. The cedar trade was established and settlements developed along the river from Yamba to Grafton. Wheat, maize and sugar cane farming flourished, and settlers moved from the south of the colony to build new communities.

It is in this area that *Next of Kin* is set. Fanny Franks is the daughter of Betsy and Francis Franks, who are prominent in the novel *Truly Free* (the fourth in the Turning the Tide Series). As a young woman, Fanny works away from her home on Woodford Island, where her father has a cane farm. She is a domestic servant at one of the local pubs in Grafton for a family who came from Germany in the 1850s to start a new life.

German born William Kirchner, already established in business in New South Wales, persuaded many of his countrymen to leave their native Germany in the 1840s and 1865, and bring their families to Australia to work in various industries, one of which was a soap and candle factory in Grafton, on the Northern Rivers of New South Wales. Phillip Schmidt, his wife, Dorodea and their children arrived on the ship Caesar Godeffoy, in 1856 and became part of a large German enclave in Grafton. They were a close knit community but assimilating into the largely British/Irish community was not easy. Many of the German families eventually changed their names to more English sounding ones, but most married within the community of those who had migrated from Germany. Intermarriage with British born residents was frowned upon.

When Fanny Franks begins working for the Giese family at the European Hotel in 1891, she sees first-hand the prejudice and discrimination that is still evident in the local community, not only against the German born residents, but also the Aboriginal and South Sea Islanders who were prevalent in the area, and also against some other small communities of Italian and Spanish born groups. Fanny has strong beliefs about discrimination and a determined personality. When she meets the grandsons of Marlena Giese (nee Schmidt) she is touched by the alienation, prejudice and cruelty which seems to characterize their lives, and she sets her heart on helping them.

However, Fanny faces a trauma which leads to shame, discrimination and some difficult choices in her own life and it is not until she is able to work through these that she fully understands what her friends, Jim and Jack Smith, have gone through.

### Questions and Reflections

1. What impressions do you get of the lifestyle in Grafton in the 1890s? What historical facts are you aware of that would have shaped the lives of those who lived in that area? What are your first impressions of Fanny Franks? What kind of person do you think she is?
2. As you are taken back to the 1850s with Marlena Schmidt what do you imagine it would have been like for immigrants from Germany coming to Australia for the first time? What issues do you think they faced?
3. Consider the conversation between Fanny and her sister, Lizzie. What do you think of Lizzie's advice to Fanny? What do you think are the major differences in their attitudes to life and to people? Why do you think that might be?
4. Consider the situation Jane Clifford finds herself in. What do think led to this? How much choice do you imagine she had about her life's circumstances?
5. Is Fanny's approach to Jack Schmidt helpful, kind or perhaps provocative? What do you think her motivation is? How would you deal with a young man like Jack?
6. Can you identify with Jack's feeling about his life? What strengths and weaknesses do you see in him? Do you think his brother, Jim, understands him?
7. Do you identify in any way with Phillip Schmidt's difficulty in trying to assimilate into a new culture, town or group? How was his attitude helpful/unhelpful? How could he and his family have been helped to make a better adjustment?
8. Would you consider Betsy and Francis Franks 'salt of the earth' people? Why or why not? Has Fanny's experience of working amongst the German community been good for her or detrimental? Has she put herself in unnecessary danger of any kind? Is she unprepared for what she'll face?
9. Jack and Fanny seem to be intrigued by each other. What do you think draws them to each other or causes their conflict? What feelings does Jim arouse in you?
10. Does Fanny in any way contribute to what happens to her behind the European? Are the reactions of Fanny, Lizzie and Thomas different from what you might expect? Are they different reactions from what might happen today in similar circumstances?
11. What do you think about the way Marlena handles Fanny's situation? Should she have done something else? Do you think Fanny's parents should have handled it differently?
12. Fanny makes a choice about how to manage her circumstances. Do you think it's a wise choice? What other choices did he have? Do you think she was unfair to go to her Aunt Rose? If so, why?

13. How do you think society/people have changed in their attitudes to unwed mothers/illegitimate children? Is it for the better? What would be available now for a girl like Fanny?
14. Jack and Jim Smith have strong feelings about what happened to Fanny. What do you think the differences are in their concerns? Do you think the kind of discrimination evident in the European Hotel is still prominent today? In what ways?
15. Jack and Jim are divided in their approach to Fanny's situation, and also in their responses to their Grandfather Preddice. Do you see them being torn apart by these issues? Are they detrimental to their relationship? Can you see any good that might come of their conflict?
16. How wise do you think Fanny's Grandmother Nipperess is? Is her advice to Fanny helpful? Do you think the secrecy around Fanny's baby's birth and his father's identity is helpful or does it make matters worse for Fanny, for the baby and for Fanny's family?
17. What feeling does Jack and Jim's Grandfather Preddice evoke in you? What prospects or protections do you think were available for the elderly in the late 1800s compared with now? Whose responsibility do you think the grandfather was?
18. Fanny's brother and sister are shocked to know the truth of her circumstances. How do their responses differ? Given the society's attitudes at the time, do you think they were more realistic than Fanny? Why do you think Marlina Giese was able to be so understanding and supportive?
19. Some things in society have changed a great deal in the last 100 years, but some issues seem to persist. Do you think our society has learned from past experiences with disasters such as the flooding rivers? How do we handle it differently?
20. What do you think enabled Fanny and Lizzie to reconcile? How do you think Fanny might have reacted differently when faced again with her attacker? Was there a more appropriate way for her to react? Do you see Jack changing in any way? Do you see any growth in Jim? In what way?
21. Consider the lifestyle of young mothers and wives in small farming villages in the late 1800s. What kind of dangers and challenges did they face? What kind of women do you think they needed to be to survive?
22. What do you think it would be like for a woman like Marlina Giese to look back on her life? Would she consider it meaningful, worthwhile, happy? Where do you think her strength came from?
23. Do Percy's father's actions surprise you? What might motivate such action? How would you rate Jack's response? Brave? Stupid? Caring? Did he respond out of his own anger or out of care for Fanny?
24. Were you satisfied with the climax and final outcome of the story? What chance for happiness do you think Fanny and Jack have? Why or why not?