

A Line of Sight

Adrienne Jansen

Notes for book groups

A summary

A Line of Sight is a compelling whodunit woven through a story of community, family, and an extraordinary eight-year-old boy.

When Nick and Graeme go rabbit-shooting one August day, they spot a couple of suspected cannabis growers on their land. Both men fire a warning shot, and in a shocking misjudgement, one of the growers is killed. But who fired the fatal shot? And how far will each man go to prove himself not guilty?

The story of a young man facing the biggest dilemma of his life, *A Line of Sight* is a portrayal of male friendship, the links between generations, and Swan – a blind boy whose strange take on events brings great danger and unexpected clarity.

The author

Adrienne Jansen writes fiction, non-fiction and poetry for both adults and children. For many years she taught ESOL and was involved in refugee resettlement and immigration issues, and this long interest in cross-cultural experience is reflected in her writing. She has written several books which record the experience of migrants coming to New Zealand, and has edited a number of publications written by newcomers to this country. In 2009, she teamed up with photographer Ans Westra in *The Crescent Moon: The Asian Face of Islam in New Zealand*, a book intended to present a more accurate 'snapshot' of this largest group of Muslims in New Zealand. *The Crescent Moon* is also a photographic exhibition touring New Zealand and Asia, and has taken Adrienne to Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Penang.

In 1993, Adrienne founded the Whitireia Polytechnic Creative Writing Programme. She now teaches fiction and editing on the programme part-time and does some freelance work. She has written several of the Creative Writing Programme's online courses and for 10 years she was part of the writing team at Te Papa, New Zealand's national museum. She lives in Titahi Bay, Porirua.

Her three previous novels all concerned a multi-cultural community. Her first novel, *Spirit Writing* (1999) is the story of a young woman who is drawn into what is for her a foreign world of Lao refugees and political activism, and discovers the costs of misunderstandings and

misplaced idealism. Her second novel, *Floating the Fish on Bamboo* (2001), described by Sue McRae in the Evening Post as ‘a page-turner with real class, falling squarely between the arthouse and the blockbuster’, is also a story set in a multicultural community. *The Score* (2013) is the story of a grand piano that falls off a crane while it is being hoisted into a council flat. A very mixed group of tenants decides to help Stefan, illegal migrant and piano technician, to rebuild it.

So *A Line of Sight* marks out new territory.

Q & A with Adrienne Jansen

Where did the story come from?

Several years ago there was an incident in a small rural community in New Zealand, where the son of a farmer went out shooting on his father’s farm, and accidentally shot a cannabis grower. Not long after that, I met the neighbours of the farmer. They were very affected by this event, as was the whole community. There were so many issues in it – lack of a police presence in the area, issues of cannabis growers, farmers feeling threatened, a huge community reaction – that the event took up residence in my head.

I wanted to write the story, or a story based on that incident, but I wasn’t sure that it was my story to tell. However I did ask the neighbours who I’d met if they could send me all the newspaper cuttings they had kept. I let that story sit in my head for several years, then finally I decided to write it.

Of course, the story in the novel is now a long way removed from that original incident, but it was undoubtedly the catalyst for this novel.

And the story keeps being retold over and over again, every time a hunter shoots another hunter, which is all too often the story we read in the media. On average, one hunter is shot and killed every year.

What changed as you wrote the novel?

Instead of being a story of an individual (or two individuals, as I decided to write it), it became the story of a family, and generations of that family affected by fighting. So in addition to Nick, the young man involved in the shooting, there is his uncle who was a chaplain in the Vietnam War, and his grandfather who was a conscientious objector in World War II.

As well, I wanted it to be the story of a community, pulling together or being driven apart by these events.

It’s also the story of Swan, a little blind kid. But he was there when I first began to write the story.

What research did you have to do for this novel?

A lot. But that's one of the really interesting aspects of writing fiction. Obviously I needed to know a lot about guns of various kinds. And not only guns, but I needed to work out with a hunter how the scenario in this novel would play out. I needed to learn a lot about police procedure. I needed to learn a lot about the Vietnam War; I'm very indebted to Roger Mortlock who spent a good few hours constructing Jacob's story, and giving me a much better understanding of what that war was really like. And of course there are always the incidental things along the way – how a cheese factory functions, for example.

Background to the novel

Summarised from <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/>

Conscientious objectors in New Zealand, World War II

New Zealanders who publicly opposed the war were in a very small minority. They came from two main groups: communists and pacifists, like Edwin. When conscription was introduced in July 1940, conscientious objectors could appeal their military service, but of the 3000 appeals against conscription on conscience grounds, only 600 were allowed.

Most of those turned down gave in to the law and served as required, but 800 refused to comply. As lawbreakers, with no right of appeal, they were sentenced to detention – a 'scheme of concentration camps designed to be less comfortable than the army, but less punitive than gaol'. The term of their confinement was an indefinite sentence, while the war lasted.

New Zealand's treatment of its conscientious objectors was notably punitive. In spite of lobbying from supporters, more than 200 'military defaulters' were still in camps or prisons at the end of 1945. The last detained conscientious objectors in New Zealand were not released until May 1946, nearly 10 months after the war finished.

The Vietnam War

More than 3000 New Zealand military and civilian personnel served in Vietnam War between 1963 and 1975. Despite the country's modest military involvement in the war, the conflict created enormous political and public debate at home about New Zealand's foreign policy and place in the world.

From the mid-1960s, an organised anti-Vietnam War movement challenged the whole philosophy underlying New Zealand's national security policies. The anti-war movement grew during the closing stages of the Vietnam War, and in the early 1970s thousands in major centres marched in protest against the war.

All New Zealand troops in Vietnam were volunteer regular personnel, so the protest movement did not have an anti-conscription edge, as it did in Australia and the United States.

For those who served in Vietnam, the war left a searing legacy. New Zealand Vietnam veterans, like their Australian and American counterparts, had to adjust to various consequences of fighting in an unpopular war. There has been much resentment within their ranks at perceived official and public indifference to the physical and psychological problems experienced by so many veterans due to exposure to Agent Orange and post-traumatic stress disorder. Another source of bitterness has been the sense that, unlike World War II veterans, they did not receive adequate recognition for their professional service in a demanding theatre of operations.

In recent years, there has been greater official sensitivity to these concerns, and a number of government initiatives to address them.

Questions for discussion

1. The novel ends with Nick clearly being not guilty of firing the fatal shot. There are several possible outcomes beyond the end of the novel:
 - That Graeme was guilty of firing the fatal shot
 - That Graeme wasn't guilty but said he was, in order to protect Nick
 - That Vince Swain did in fact shoot his companion, as Nick suggests on p225.Which do you think is the most likely?
2. Vietnam veterans have talked of the sense of shame they were made to feel for having fought in the Vietnam War, as Jacob was made to feel.
 - Is there still disapproval today of soldiers who went to fight in Vietnam?
 - Is it possible for a society to differentiate between disapproval of government policy (in this case the NZ government's support for the war) and disapproval of those who are required to carry out that policy (in this case professional soldiers who were sent to Vietnam)?
3. Do you believe it was fair that Jacob was held responsible for Andy Chalmers' death?
4. Incidents such as the shooting in *A Line of Sight* can result in calls for the legalisation of cannabis. People argue this kind of tragedy wouldn't happen if cannabis was legalised. Do you support or disagree with that argument?



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