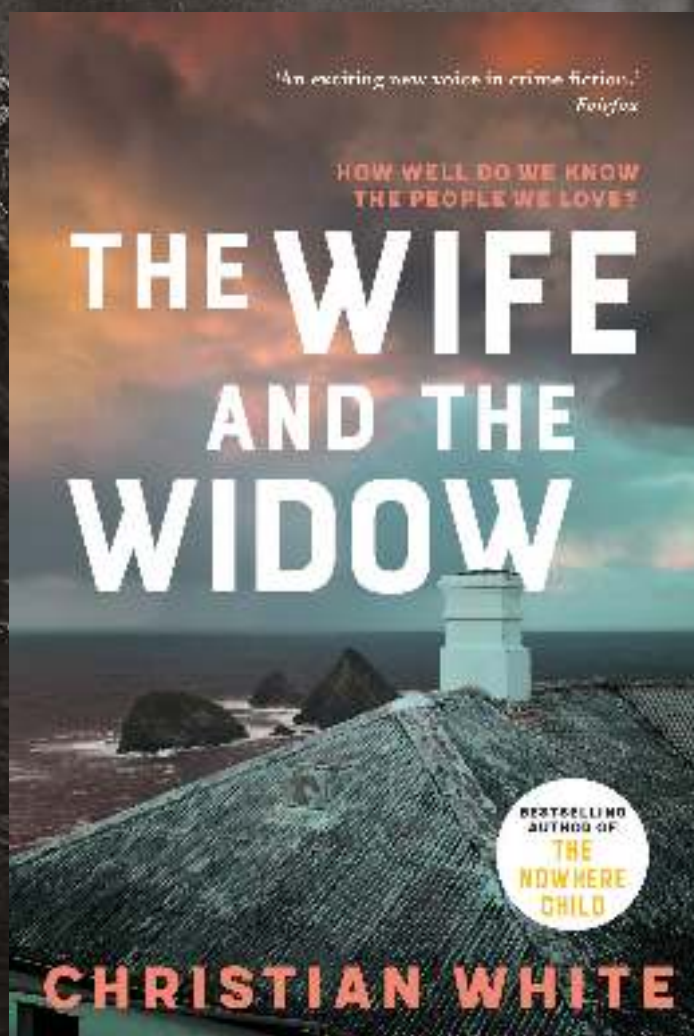


A deadly secret.
An island town.
A storm brewing.



Read the first chapter of *The Wife and the Widow*

Set against the backdrop of an eerie island town in the dead of winter, *The Wife and the Widow* is a mystery/thriller told from two perspectives: Kate, a widow whose grief is compounded by what she learns about her dead husband's secret life; and Abby, an island local whose world is turned upside down when she's forced to confront the evidence that her husband is a murderer. But nothing on this island is quite as it seems, and only when these women come together can they discover the whole story about the men in their lives.

Brilliant and beguiling, *The Wife and the Widow* takes you to a cliff edge and asks the question: how well do we really know the people we love?

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PROLOGUE

John woke with a start and thought, *there's someone in the house*. He'd just heard a noise downstairs, something like the parting of dry, windblown lips. Then, the sound of creeping footfalls up the staircase.

He stared into the darkness above his bed and listened, but aside from the gentle whirr of the central heating, the house was silent again. He rolled over and looked at his wife, ghostly in the dull moonlight falling in through the window.

He'd probably had another nightmare, he thought.

Creak.

The sound came from the first-floor landing, a foot stepping down on the loose floorboard at the top of the stairs. He hadn't imagined it that time. He was sure of it.

He sat up and stared through the layers of darkness. As his eyes adjusted to the low light, the shapes of the bedroom appeared, like a picture shifting slowly into focus. He saw the towering wardrobe silhouetted against a field of black. The dresser cluttered with his wife's

jewellery, glinting dully in the moonlight like dozens of tiny eyes. A pencil-thin sliver of light spilled beneath the closed door, flickering.

He slid out of bed, opened the door and stepped out. There was a Harry Potter night-light in the hallway. His daughter Mia kept it there, so she didn't get scared on her way to the bathroom at night. A fat brown moth fluttered blindly against it, over and over. John watched it for a moment, transfixed. Had that been what he'd heard?

Then, from out of the shadows at the far end of the hall, stepped a man.

John tried to speak but fear cramped his jaw.

The man took another step forward. He was tall, bulky, and his head was shaved. He wore white canvas tennis shoes and a heavy black coat that John recognised.

'Hello, John,' the man whispered. 'Do you remember me?'

'... Yes,' John managed to say, his voice barely audible.

'Do you know why I'm here?'

'Yes,' John said softly. 'I think I do.'

THE WIDOW

Kate Keddie stood in the airport bathroom, practising her smile in the mirror. She hated her mouth. It was several teeth too big for her head, so grinning usually made her look maniacal and deranged. She tried gently curling up the corners of her lips. She was going for confidently demure. She got Shelley Duvall on bath salts.

‘What are you doing with your face?’ Mia asked. Kate’s ten-year-old daughter had skipped out from one of the bathroom stalls to wash her hands. She’d tied the string of a heart-shaped *Welcome Home* balloon to her wrist, and now it bobbed above her like a buoy.

‘Nothing,’ Kate said.

‘How much longer until Dad gets here?’

‘Ten minutes until he lands, then his plane has to taxi in, he has to collect his bags, clear customs ... all up we’re looking at about sixteen hours.’

‘You’re killing me, Mum!’ Mia slapped her feet against

the polished concrete floor, buzzing with the sort of nervous excitement she usually reserved for Christmas morning. She'd never spent this long away from her father.

John had spent the past two weeks in London for a palliative care research colloquium. Kate had spent most of that time striking days from the calendar with a fat red texta, longing for his return. She hoped that old cliché about absence making the heart grow fonder was true of John, but a dark part of her feared it might work the other way too. She had read somewhere that it only took two weeks to break a habit, and what was marriage if not a habit?

Kate took her daughter's hand and led her out into the terminal. The arrivals lounge at Melbourne International Airport was surging with people. Families gathered beneath hand-painted banners, watching the big frosted-glass doors outside customs. Behind them, drivers in black suits scribbled names on little whiteboards. There was a collective energy to the crowd that made it seem like one big entity rather than a hundred small ones, all moving in gentle, nervous harmony, like the legs of a caterpillar.

Any second now, John would emerge through the doors dragging his little blue American Tourister behind him, eyes sunken and weary from the long flight. He would see them and beam. He wouldn't be expecting

them. He had insisted on catching a taxi back home, and Kate had insisted that was totally fine by her, knowing full well that she and Mia would drive out to the airport to surprise him.

She was eager to see her husband, but more eager to hand him back the reins. She was a good mother, she thought, but a nervous one. She had never taken to the role as easily as other women seemed to – her mothers' group friends, or the capable, busy-looking mums at school pick-up. Kate felt much more comfortable with John's backup.

'Do you think Dad remembered my pounds?' Mia asked, staring over at the display screen outside a currency exchange kiosk. Lately she'd grown obsessed with collecting foreign money.

'You reminded him at least two thousand times,' Kate said. 'I doubt he'd have the nerve to come back without them.'

'How much longer *now*?' she groaned.

'Five minutes. Watch the flight board. See?'

Qantas Flight QF31 from Heathrow (via Singapore) landed on time and without incident. A silence hung over the waiting crowd that soon enough gave way to shouts, tears and laughter as the first passengers exited into the lounge. Some people poured into the arms of their loved ones, while others beat a path through the crowd to their waiting drivers or the taxi rank beyond.

A pretty woman with a corn-coloured ponytail collapsed into the arms of her waiting man. Then, temporarily forgetting where she was and who was watching, she kissed him passionately on the mouth. Nearby, an elderly Asian couple waved frantically as a man pushed a pram towards them, twin boys dozing inside. Kate watched them, waiting for her turn.

She was a little surprised John wasn't among the first passengers to arrive. He always flew business class, which gave him access to express lanes and priority service.

Mia went up on tiptoe to scan the crowd. 'Do you see him?' she asked.

'Not yet, monkey,' Kate said.

They watched the big glass doors keenly. They slid open again. This time, a smaller group of passengers paraded out.

'I see him, I see him!' Mia squealed, pulling her balloon down and facing its message towards the door. Then her shoulders sank. 'No. Wait. That's not him.'

The second wave of passengers dispersed. There was still no sign of John. The glass doors closed, opened. An elderly gentleman hobbled out, holding a cane in his left hand and a dusty old Samsonite in his right. The corridor behind him was empty.

Kate checked the flight board, double-checked they were in the right place at the right time, then triple-checked. Surprise gave way to concern.

‘Mum?’ Mia said.

‘Keep watching, monkey. He probably just got caught up at baggage claim or he’s being hassled by a fussy customs officer. He’ll be here. Just you wait.’

They waited. Eventually, trying to keep the alarm from creeping over her face, Kate found her phone and dialled John’s number. The call went straight to voicemail. She tried again. Again, voicemail. He had probably forgotten to switch his phone out of flight mode, she told herself. Either that or he had left his charger plugged into the wall of his hotel suite and arrived in Australia with a dead battery.

She began to chew her nails.

The glass doors opened. Kate drew in a tight breath. Three stragglers emerged: a middle-aged couple, who seemed to be in the middle of an argument, and a young backpacker with dirty skin and a tangle of dreadlocks falling across one shoulder. Nobody was waiting for them. The doors closed, opened. This time the flight crew wandered out, chatting casually to one another, happy to have reached the end of their shifts.

Where are you, John? Kate thought.

If he’d missed his flight, he would have called or texted or emailed, wouldn’t he? He may not have known she’d be waiting at the airport, but he did know she’d be waiting. She tried calling him again. Nothing. She looked around the terminal. Most of the crowd had gone,

aside from a few passengers at the car rental stalls and a man in a grey coverall vacuuming the strip of carpet by the front doors.

‘Where is he, Mum?’ Mia asked.

‘I’m not sure, monkey. But he’ll be here. It’s fine. Everything’s fine.’

With her eyes trained on the glass doors, Kate reached out and found Mia’s hand. She held it tightly. They continued to wait. Five minutes passed, then fifteen more.

The last time they spoke was over Skype, the morning John’s flight was due to leave London. Kate and Mia were sharing an armchair in the living room, leaning over the screen of the MacBook. Seventeen thousand kilometres away, John sat on the bed in his hotel room. It was a typical suite, wallpapered in soft greens with a minibar to his left and a room-service menu to his right. His passport, wallet and phone were stacked neatly on his suitcase by the door.

‘Are you all set for the flight?’ Kate asked.

‘I’ve got the three things all seasoned travellers should carry,’ he said. ‘Earplugs, valium and Haruki Murakami.’

‘Is valium drugs?’ Mia asked.

‘Yes, honey,’ he said. ‘But the good kind.’ He laughed, but their connection was weak and time-delayed. The

screen froze and skipped, making the laugh sound like something out of a fever dream.

John was three years older than Kate but looked five years younger. He had a youthful head of hair and neat, symmetrical features. He was naturally trim and athletic. On the screen, his face seemed to have a little more colour than usual. It was summertime in London, after all.

Mia slid forward onto her knees so her face was centimetres from the screen. ‘When you get on the plane make sure you sit behind the wing,’ she said. ‘That’s the safest place to sit if it crashes.’

‘Business class is right up front,’ he said.

‘Uh oh. In most crashes the first eleven rows get *pulverised*.’

‘Mia, your father doesn’t need to hear about being pulverised,’ Kate said. ‘How do you even know what *pulverised* means?’

Mia shrugged. ‘Internet.’

‘She figured out how to switch off the parental lock again,’ Kate said. ‘Our daughter the hacker.’

John leaned back on his elbows and looked over to his left, beyond the screen of his laptop. Kate was struck with an odd and completely unfounded impression that he wasn’t alone. She put it down to paranoia.

‘Leave the safe search off,’ John said, after a moment. His tone had turned flat. Kate couldn’t tell if he was

joking or not. 'Life doesn't have a filter, so why should the internet?'

'Wonderful,' Kate said. 'Well, tonight I can show her *The Exorcist* and tomorrow we'll watch all the *Rambo* movies.'

He didn't laugh.

'We try to protect the people we love from certain truths,' he said. 'But I'm not sure that's always right, or fair. If we don't talk about the monsters in this world, we won't be ready for them when they jump out from under the bed.'

Kate had wanted very badly to reach through the screen and touch his face. What kind of monsters?

'Are you alright, John?' she asked.

'I think so,' he said. 'I think I'm just ready to come home.'

'Kate?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Kate Keddie.'

'Oh, *Kate*. John's wife. Oh, jeez, it's been a while, how are you?'

Chatveer Sandhu was the administrative assistant at the Trinity Health Centre for Palliative Care, where John worked as a physician.

'I'm sorry to bother you,' Kate said. 'But I'm having a little trouble getting a hold of John and thought you'd be

the best man to ask. I'm assuming his flight from London got changed or his schedule moved around and someone forgot to contact me?'

There was a pregnant pause, and Kate had to fight hard against the urge to fill it. She looked over at Mia, who was sitting in a plastic chair next to the information booth. Her eyes were desperate and sullen. Tears were welling in them.

'Are you still there, Chat?' Kate asked.

'Yes,' he said. 'Sorry. I'm just ... I'm not exactly sure what you're asking.'

'I'm at the airport and my husband isn't.'

It seemed fairly straightforward to her, but after another brief moment of silence, Chatveer said, 'I'm going to transfer you over to Holly. Hold the line for me.'

'Transfer me? No, Chat, I just need—'

Too late. She was on hold. While she waited, she continued to bite her nails. She chewed too far, winced at the pain.

Classical music drifted down the line: Henryk Górecki's ominous Symphony No. 3. One of John's favourites. A neglected masterpiece, he called it. Before they were married, Kate had been happy to leave classical music to the pretentious intellectuals. She had felt far more comfortable in the company of Mariah Carey than of Claude Debussy. But after John spent a good part of their first date discussing Wolfgang Amadeus—this and

Ludwig van—that, she had gone out the next day and bought a best-of-classical deluxe double CD collection and forced herself to listen to it. She liked it now – at least, she thought she did.

‘What can I do for you, Kate?’ Holly Cutter asked suddenly in her ear, her tone sharp, already impatient.

Holly Cutter was frustratingly successful. Along with being Medical Director of the Trinity Health Centre, she was also a qualified nurse, spiritual counsellor, medical educator, clinical researcher, an honorary professor at the University of Melbourne and a board director of the International Association for Hospice and Palliative Care. A typical overachiever.

‘Hi, Holly,’ Kate said. ‘I’m not sure why Chatveer transferred me, but I’m at the airport with Mia, and John’s flight has landed but he’s not on it. Is it possible he got caught up at the conference, or his trip was postponed or delayed or—’

‘I don’t know anything about that, Kate,’ Holly said.

Kate felt like tossing her phone across the terminal.

‘In that case, would you mind transferring me back to Chatveer?’

‘Chatveer doesn’t know anything about this either.’

Kate felt flushed and foolish, mad and sticky. And Mia was still crying.

‘I’m not exactly sure what’s going on here,’ she said. ‘But I think there’s been some sort of a miscommunication.’

John has been in London for the past two weeks, at the palliative care research colloquium. He's supposed to be coming home today and—'

'Listen,' Holly said. 'I don't know what you know or don't know, and I certainly have enough on my plate without getting in the middle of anything here, but if John attended the research colloquium this year, we wouldn't know about it.'

'I don't understand,' Kate said. 'Why not?'

'Because John hasn't worked here for three months.'

Meet the author



Christian White is an award-winning author and screenwriter. His 2018 debut thriller *The Nowhere Child* broke the record for the fastest-selling Australian debut, went on to be published all around the world, and will soon become a US/Australian co-produced TV series.

You're part of a huge wave of success for Australian thrillers both here and overseas. Why do people love reading these books?

Australian thrillers bring a whole new tone, landscape, feel and perspective to the genre. They're relatable and surprising, dark but rarely bleak, and often take place in worlds we recognise but aren't used to seeing represented on the page.

What's the book that's influenced your writing the most?

Jane Harper's *The Dry* made me want to write a thriller. Stephen King's *On Writing* showed me how.

Can you share one of your writing routine quirks?

I find most of my characters' names by trawling through obituaries.

*What do you think will surprise people the most about *The Wife and the Widow*?*

The twist. Definitely the twist.

What they said ...

'A born storyteller.'
The Saturday Paper

Hugely entertaining ... a multifaceted, unsettling debut.'
The Age

'A nervy, soulful, genuinely surprising it-could-happen-to-you thriller — a book to make you peer over your shoulder for days afterwards.'

A.J. Finn, bestselling author of *The Woman in the Window*

'Christian White proves to be an exciting new voice in crime fiction with his debut novel'

Sunday Life, Fairfax

'A taut, rattling thriller.'

Readings

'This novel lives up to the buzz.'

Brisbane News, News Limited

'An exhilarating ride and a thrilling debut.'

Books + Publishing magazine

