Stone Yard Devotional

Charlotte Wood

Source: New York Times 10 Best Books of 2025

Originally published on October 3, 2023, by Allen & Unwin, *Stone Yard Devotional* is Charlotte Wood's seventh novel. It was shortlisted for the 2024 Booker Prize and later named to the New York Times and Washington Post Top 10 lists for 2025 and the Los Angeles Times Top 15. Wood is already well known in Australia for *The Natural Way of Things*, which won the Stella Prize, and for *The Weekend*, a sharp and tender novel about friendship and ageing. With this book she turns inward, to a quieter and more demanding question: what does it mean to try to be good when you no longer believe the world can be saved, and you are not even sure you believe in God?

The Book in 60 Seconds

An unnamed, middle-aged woman walks away from her life in Sydney. She is burnt out from years of work at a Threatened Species Rescue Centre, worn down by the daily accounting of loss in the natural world, and her marriage to Alex is failing. Without a grand plan and without religious faith, she retreats to a small abbey on the Monaro Plains in New South Wales, not far from the town where she grew up. There, under the steady guidance of Sister Simone, she becomes an oblate — someone who lives alongside the religious community, sharing its rhythms of prayer, work, and silence, without becoming a nun and without professing belief in God.

She cooks. She gardens. She learns the timetable of bells and meals and offices. And she remembers. In the stillness, the past does not stay quiet. Her parents, both dead young, return to her thoughts again and again, especially her mother — a self-sufficient, eccentric, private woman who gardened and composted and kept her inner life to herself. Grief that was never finished begins to press for attention.

Then, during the strange suspended years of COVID and a devastating mouse plague across New South Wales, three visitations disturb the abbey's fragile calm. Thousands of mice invade every corner. The skeletal remains of Sister Jenny, a nun who disappeared decades earlier while working with deprived and abused women in Thailand, are flushed out by floodwaters and returned for burial. And with those remains comes Helen Parry, a former classmate of the narrator's who is now a famous nun and radical climate activist — a woman the narrator once failed, as a teenager, when Helen was poor, abused, and bullied at school. The novel is not about dramatic conversion. It is about attention, guilt, forgiveness, and whether a life of contemplation is an escape from the world or a different way of facing it.

The Story / Central Argument

There is, deliberately, very little plot in the conventional sense, and that is part of the book's argument. Wood is interested in what happens when a person steps out of the story she has been telling herself about her life — the busy, useful, despairing story — and finds there is no replacement story waiting. Only days. Only tasks. Only weather and memory.

The narrator arrives at the abbey exhausted in a way that sleep cannot fix. Her work at the Threatened Species Rescue Centre has placed her, day after day, in front of evidence that care is not enough. Species vanish despite effort. Habitats shrink despite protest. The language of crisis becomes routine, and routine becomes a kind of numbness. At home, her marriage to Alex has thinned into disappointment and distance. She does not describe a single catastrophic betrayal. The failure is slower than that: two people who can no longer reach each other, living inside a shared knowledge that something essential has gone.

Leaving, then, is not presented as brave or romantic. It is almost sheepish. She drifts back, across visits at first, to the abbey near her hometown on the Monaro Plains — that high, open, wind-scoured country in southern New South Wales, all pale grass and vast sky. The sisters there live a small, ordered life. Sister Simone, who leads the community, does not demand faith as the price of staying. The narrator becomes an oblate, a lay associate of the order. She makes a commitment not to doctrine but to a rule of life: to show up for prayer she does not fully believe, to work with her hands, to keep silence when silence is called for, to stay.

This distinction — oblate, not nun; participant, not believer — is the hinge of the whole novel. Wood refuses to give her narrator the consolations of a conversion narrative. The narrator does not find God at the abbey. She does not even find certainty that the abbey is the right place. What she finds is a structure that holds her when her own willpower does not. The hours are marked. The meals are simple. The garden needs weeding whether she feels hopeful or not. Devotion, in this telling, is less a feeling than a practice of attention: doing the next small thing carefully, again and again.

Into that practice, memory keeps intruding. The narrator thinks constantly about her parents, who died when she was still young enough for their absence to shape everything that followed. Her father is present in flashes. Her mother dominates. She was a formidable, self-contained woman: practical, unsentimental, devoted to her garden, to compost, to making and mending and growing rather than buying and discarding. She was also private to the point of opacity. The narrator, as a daughter, loved her and did not fully know her. As a middle-aged woman herself now, she recognises the same reticence in her own character — the withholding, the turning away — and wonders what it cost them both. Grief in this novel is not a wound that heals cleanly. It is unfinished business that waits decades for a quiet enough room.

The abbey provides that room, but the world does not stop at its gates. Wood sets the central movement of the novel in the COVID era, when even a remote religious community felt the unreality of lockdowns, distance, and suspended time, and when regional New South Wales was overrun by a mouse plague of almost biblical proportions. Against that backdrop, Wood arranges what the narrator experiences as three visitations — a word that carries both a visitor and a trial.

The first visitation is the mice. They arrive in their thousands, then tens of thousands. They are in the walls, the kitchen, the chapel, the beds. The sisters and the narrator wage a daily, losing battle: traps, poison, buckets of dead mice carried out each morning, a pit dug for the bodies, lime scattered to blunt the stench and the disease. Wood writes this without flinching and without turning it into mere symbol, although it works as one too. After years of mourning threatened species in the abstract, the narrator is confronted by an animal in uncontrollable abundance, a creature that must be killed daily simply to keep a household habitable. Care and killing sit uncomfortably side by side. So do prayer and disgust. The plague tests the contemplative life at its most basic level: can you keep your attention kind when you are exhausted, repelled, and overwhelmed?

The second visitation is a set of bones. Sister Jenny had left this same abbey decades earlier to work in Thailand, ministering to women who were poor, exploited, and abused. She disappeared there and was presumed murdered, though her body was never found. Now, after flooding, her skeletal remains have been recovered and identified, and they are being brought home to the abbey for burial. For the older sisters, Jenny is a memory and a wound; for the narrator, she is a story she is slowly entrusted with. Jenny represents a life given entirely and violently to action in the world — the opposite pole from the abbey's enclosure — and yet she began here, in this same quiet. Her return asks an uncomfortable question of everyone who stayed: what is a good life for? Is it measured by what you do out there, at great risk, or by the faithfulness of staying?

The third visitation gives that question a living face. Escorting Jenny's remains is Helen Parry. As an adult, Helen is formidable: a nun, yes, but also a nationally known radical climate activist, combative in interviews, effective in campaigns, unafraid of arrest or unpopularity. To some of the sisters — Sister Bonaventure in particular — she is grating, disruptive, too loud for a house of prayer. But Helen and the narrator share a past that has nothing to do with fame. They were schoolgirls together in the nearby town. Helen, then, was the vulnerable one: a child living with poverty and abuse, marked out at school for cruelty and bullying. The narrator saw it. She was not, she tells us, the worst of the tormentors, but she did not intervene, and at moments she joined the laughter or looked away to protect her own standing. That guilt — precise, unglamorous, decades old — has never left her.

Helen's stay is prolonged by another vigil: her own mother is dying nearby, and Helen keeps watch. In that waiting, something in her softens — not into meekness, but into grief that even a fighter cannot argue with. The narrator watches her old classmate move between public defiance and private sorrow and has to revise both the heroine and the victim she had fixed in memory. Helen is not an emblem. She is a difficult, brave, sometimes abrasive woman doing her best with a damaged beginning. Whether the narrator can ask for forgiveness, and whether forgiveness is even Helen's to give in the way the narrator imagines, becomes the emotional core of the novel.

Wood braids these threads — mice, bones, and a living woman — without forcing them into a neat resolution. The burial happens. The plague ebbs and surges. Conversations are started and left unfinished. The narrator does not return triumphantly to Sydney, nor does she take final vows. Instead, the central argument emerges through accumulation: that goodness is not a grand gesture performed once, but a way of paying attention over time; that losing hope may itself be a kind of moral failure, a refusal to keep caring; that contemplation and activism need each other more than either likes to admit; and that forgiving others and forgiving yourself are related but not identical tasks, neither of which can be rushed.

Key Ideas Explained Plainly

Goodness as practice, not personality

We often talk about good people as if goodness were a trait, like height or humour — something you either have or you do not. Wood treats it instead as a practice, like gardening. The sisters are not portrayed as saints glowing with virtue. They are tired, sometimes petty, sometimes funny, occasionally sharp with one another. Their goodness, such as it is, lives in repetition: feeding people, burying the dead, showing up for prayer when they would rather sleep, making room for a difficult guest. The narrator, who does not trust her own motives, finds this oddly merciful. If goodness is a practice, then a person who has failed — as a daughter, as a wife, as a classmate who stood by — is not permanently disqualified. She can begin again with the next bucket, the next meal, the next apology. The novel is quietly insistent that this is not a lowering of the bar. Practising goodness daily, without applause and without certainty that it matters, may be harder than any single heroic act.

Forgiveness — of others, and of yourself

There are at least three forgiveness stories in the book, and Wood keeps them distinct. The narrator needs to reckon with her younger self's treatment of Helen Parry. That is not a misunderstanding to be cleared up; it is a real harm, compounded by silence, and an adult apology cannot rewrite a childhood. Wood is honest about the limits here: saying sorry may matter, and it may also arrive too late or ask too much of the person harmed. Then there is the narrator's marriage to Alex, where blame is murkier. Forgiveness there would not mean pretending the marriage worked. It might mean releasing the story in which one person is simply the villain. Finally, and hardest, there is self-forgiveness. The narrator's harshest judge is herself, and her self-accusation can become its own kind of self-absorption — a way of staying at the centre of every story, even the guilty ones. The abbey's rhythm offers a different model: confess, make what amends you can, and then get on with the work. Not because the past does not matter, but because endlessly rehearsing it is not the same as taking responsibility for it.

Is losing hope a moral failure?

This is the question the narrator circles most anxiously, and it comes directly from her years at the Threatened Species Rescue Centre. When you work daily with extinction, despair can feel like simple honesty. To hope, by contrast, can feel naive or even dishonest — a refusal to look at the data. And yet the novel asks whether despair, however well-informed, quietly licenses withdrawal. If nothing can be saved, why keep trying? If the marriage is over, why be kind? If the mice will return tonight, why clean the kitchen this morning? Sister Simone and the other sisters do not answer with optimism. Their hope is not a prediction that things will turn out well. It is closer to a discipline: a decision to act as if care matters, regardless of outcome. Helen Parry, from the activist side, embodies a version of the same discipline, though hers is noisy where theirs is quiet. Both refuse to let a grim forecast settle the question of what to do today. Wood does not declare despair a sin. But she lets her narrator wonder whether treating hopelessness as sophistication is a failure of love — a way of protecting yourself from disappointment by caring a little less, a little earlier, each time.

Grief that never finished

The narrator's parents died young, and in the way of busy adult life, her mourning was postponed by work, marriage, and the simple need to keep going. The abbey gives grief the one thing it was never given before: time without distraction. Her mother returns to her not as a saint but as a specific person — hands in compost, a fierce competence, a privacy that could feel like rejection to a daughter wanting more. Wood is superb on this particular sorrow: the discovery, in middle age, that you are becoming the parent you could not reach, and that understanding may now be possible precisely because it is too late for the conversation you wanted. There is no scene of posthumous reconciliation, because there cannot be. There is only a clearer seeing, and a tenderness that has to learn to live alongside regret. Many readers will recognise the structure of this grief from their own lives. It is not dramatic. It accumulates, like the small daily offices of the abbey itself, until its weight is undeniable.

Activism versus contemplation

It would have been easy for Wood to set up Helen Parry and the abbey as opponents and declare a winner. She does the opposite. Helen's activism is shown as genuinely effective — she moves public argument, she shows up where it costs something — and also as genuinely exhausting and sometimes alienating, even to allies. The sisters' contemplation is shown as genuinely sustaining — a community that has buried its dead and fed its neighbours for decades — and also as genuinely at risk of becoming a shelter from responsibilities beyond its walls. Sister Jenny's life and death complicate any tidy verdict, because she lived both: formed in contemplation, spent in action, killed (it seems) for the work she chose. The novel's position, insofar as it has one, is that attention is the common root. The activist must learn to attend to the person in front of her, not just the cause. The contemplative must learn that attending honestly will eventually show her suffering she cannot pray away from a distance. Each way of life is a check on the other's characteristic temptation: activism's temptation to contempt for opponents, contemplation's temptation to comfort.

Attention as devotion

The title's word — devotional — deserves attention. A devotional is traditionally a text or practice that aids prayer. Wood broadens it. Cooking a meal well for people you find difficult is a devotional act in this book. So is noticing the light on the Monaro Plains, weeding a bed properly, listening to an old woman without rehearsing your reply, or carrying out the dead mice without either dramatising or denying your revulsion. The narrator does not believe in God, and Wood never tricks her into belief for the sake of a satisfying ending. But the narrator does come to believe in attention: that how you attend to the world is not a preliminary to an ethical life, it is the ethical life, arriving in small units. In an age of fractured focus — doom-scrolling the extinction news, half-listening to the people we live with — this idea lands with unusual force. Devotion without doctrine may be the only kind the narrator can honestly practise, and the novel suggests it is not a lesser kind.

The natural world: abundance and loss

Wood, who has always written vividly about Australian landscapes and creatures, sets two ecological facts side by side and lets them argue. On one side: relentless loss — the threatened species the narrator could not save, the drying and burning continent in the background, the climate crisis that powers Helen's rage. On the other: relentless, horrifying abundance — the mouse plague, life multiplying beyond any welcome, filling houses and destroying stores of food. Together they refuse a simple story in which nature is only fragile or only resilient. Nature in this novel is both, indifferent to which story humans would prefer. That indifference is part of what drives the narrator's despair and part of what the abbey teaches her to witness without turning away. The sisters do not romanticise the mice. They kill them, clean up, and pray. Wood seems to suggest that maturity — ecological and spiritual alike — means holding grief for what is vanishing and responsibility for what is overwhelming at the same time, without letting either cancel the other.

How to Approach Reading It

Come to this book slowly, and do not wait for it to become a different kind of novel. Readers who need a strong plot engine — a mystery solved, a romance resolved, a villain defeated — may find the first fifty pages testing. Wood's method is accumulation rather than escalation. Scenes are short, often fragmentary. Time moves between the present at the abbey, memories of Sydney and of childhood, and reflections that arrive without announcement. The rewards are in the sentences and in the slow deepening of understanding, not in twists. If you let your reading pace match the abbey's pace — a chapter or two in a sitting, perhaps, rather than a race to the finish — the book's design becomes clearer and more moving.

It helps to know, going in, that the narrator will not explain everything. She withholds, revises herself, and sometimes stops mid-thought. That is not a flaw in the storytelling; it is the storytelling. She is a private person, like her mother, trying to be more honest than her instincts allow. Pay attention to what she returns to. Repetition in this novel is information. The mother, the garden, Helen at school, the mice — each return adds a layer of fact or a shift of feeling, the way returning to the same prayer at the same hour each day is meant to change the person praying, not the words.

A word of preparation: the mouse plague sections are graphic and sustained. Wood describes dead and dying animals, smells, and infestation in unsparing detail. It is never gratuitous — the physical reality is the point — but squeamish readers should know it is coming and that it recurs. Similarly, the novel touches on childhood abuse, bullying, and a presumed murder, handled obliquely rather than graphically, but present nonetheless.

This is an excellent book-club choice precisely because it divides people productively. Groups tend to argue, warmly, about the narrator's decision to leave, about Helen, and about whether the abbey life is wisdom or avoidance. It is also a fine book to read alongside nonfiction about attention, monastic life, or ecological grief, though it needs no companion to work. Above all, approach it as you would approach a long conversation with a thoughtful friend who does not raise her voice: the quietness is not emptiness. It is where the meaning is kept.

Memorable Lines

Wood's prose is spare enough that a few lines, quoted briefly, give a fair sense of its temperature.

- The New York Times called it "an exquisite, wrenching novel of leaving your life behind."
- The Washington Post described it as "as extraordinary as you've heard."

Beyond the reviewers, what lingers for most readers is not a quotable aphorism but Wood's plain, exact phrasing around ordinary work — the garden, the kitchen, the handling of the dead — where a single unshowy sentence can carry a whole philosophy of care. This is a novel to underline sparingly and remember in scenes rather than slogans.

Fair Criticisms

The qualities that make this novel distinctive are the same ones that will lose it some readers, and fair criticism should name them plainly.

First, it is slow, by design and sometimes to a fault. Long stretches pass in which, externally, almost nothing happens: meals are prepared, offices are sung, weather changes. Readers who valued the narrative drive of *The Weekend* may find this book withholding its pleasures for too long.

Second, the plot is minimal and the structure fragmented. The narrative moves in short sections, shifting between present, memory, and reflection without strong signposting. Some readers experience this as meditative; others experience it as drift, and even sympathetic reviews have noted that the threads — mice, bones, Helen — are braided loosely rather than tied off.

Third, the mice are relentless. The plague is thematically essential, but its sheer duration on the page can tip from confronting into gruelling. A few readers will simply have had enough well before the sisters have.

Fourth, much is left unresolved. The marriage, the apology, the narrator's future — Wood declines to settle any of them neatly. That openness is honest to the book's themes, but it can feel, at the final page, less like ambiguity earned than like an ending withheld.

Finally, the narrator herself is withheld. Her guardedness is the point, and Wood renders it faithfully, but it creates a distance that some readers never fully cross. We spend a whole novel inside her consciousness and still, at times, feel we are being kept at the garden gate — which may be exactly her mother's daughter, and exactly the problem.

None of these criticisms is fatal, and several are really descriptions of the book's wager. But they are real costs, and a reader deciding whether this much quiet is for them deserves to hear them stated.

Why It's on the List

Stone Yard Devotional earned its place on the New York Times 10 Best Books of 2025, and its Booker Prize shortlisting the year before, because it does something rare with complete assurance: it takes an unfashionable subject — middle-aged renunciation, religious community, the inner life — and renders it with such precision that it feels urgent rather than niche. At a cultural moment saturated with loud takes on burnout, climate despair, and the search for meaning, Wood offers no programme and no slogan. She offers a woman, a place, and a set of questions pursued honestly to the end of a book.

The timing matters too. This is unmistakably a novel of its recent years — COVID's strangeness, a real mouse plague, an escalating climate emergency — yet none of it dates the book into journalism. Instead, those pressures test an ancient way of life, and the ancient way of life tests them back. Critics responded to that double vision, and to the prose: sentence by sentence, this is some of the finest writing in recent Australian fiction, plain on the surface and exact underneath.

It also completes an arc in Wood's own work worth recognising. From the fury of *The Natural Way of Things* to the companionable ache of *The Weekend* to this still, searching book, she has become one of the essential chroniclers of women's inner lives — especially the lives of women whom fiction often hurries past on its way to younger, louder stories. List-makers honoured that achievement, and honoured, too, a novel that trusts readers to meet it halfway.

What to Read Next

If *Stone Yard Devotional* held you, begin with Wood's own backlist. *The Weekend* is the most approachable next step: three old friends, one beach house, grief and loyalty handled with wit as well as feeling. Then try *The Natural Way of Things*, her Stella Prize winner — a fiercer, more allegorical novel about women held captive in the outback, which shows the anger that underlies the later book's calm.

Beyond Wood, readers who loved the abbey sections often reach for Kathleen Norris's *The Cloister Walk*, a memoir of time spent among Benedictine monks that shares this novel's respect for a rule of life, and for the poetry of Mary Oliver, whose work returns again and again to attention as a form of prayer. If Helen Parry's chapters moved you most, consider Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* for a very different, Indigenous-grounded meditation on care, reciprocity, and ecological grief — contemplation and responsibility held, as Wood holds them, in a single pair of hands.

For another quiet novel about a woman remaking her life at middle age, try Elizabeth Strout's *Olive, Again*, which shares Wood's patience with difficult people and her belief that small kindnesses, late in life, are not small. And if the Monaro setting itself captivated you, Tim Winton's writing about Australian landscape — *Island Home* in nonfiction, or his novel *Eyrie* — offers a companion sense of how place shapes conscience in that country.

Whatever you choose next, give it the thing this novel asks for above all else. Give it your full attention, for a little while, without asking it to save the world. Wood's wager is that this is how every saving actually begins.