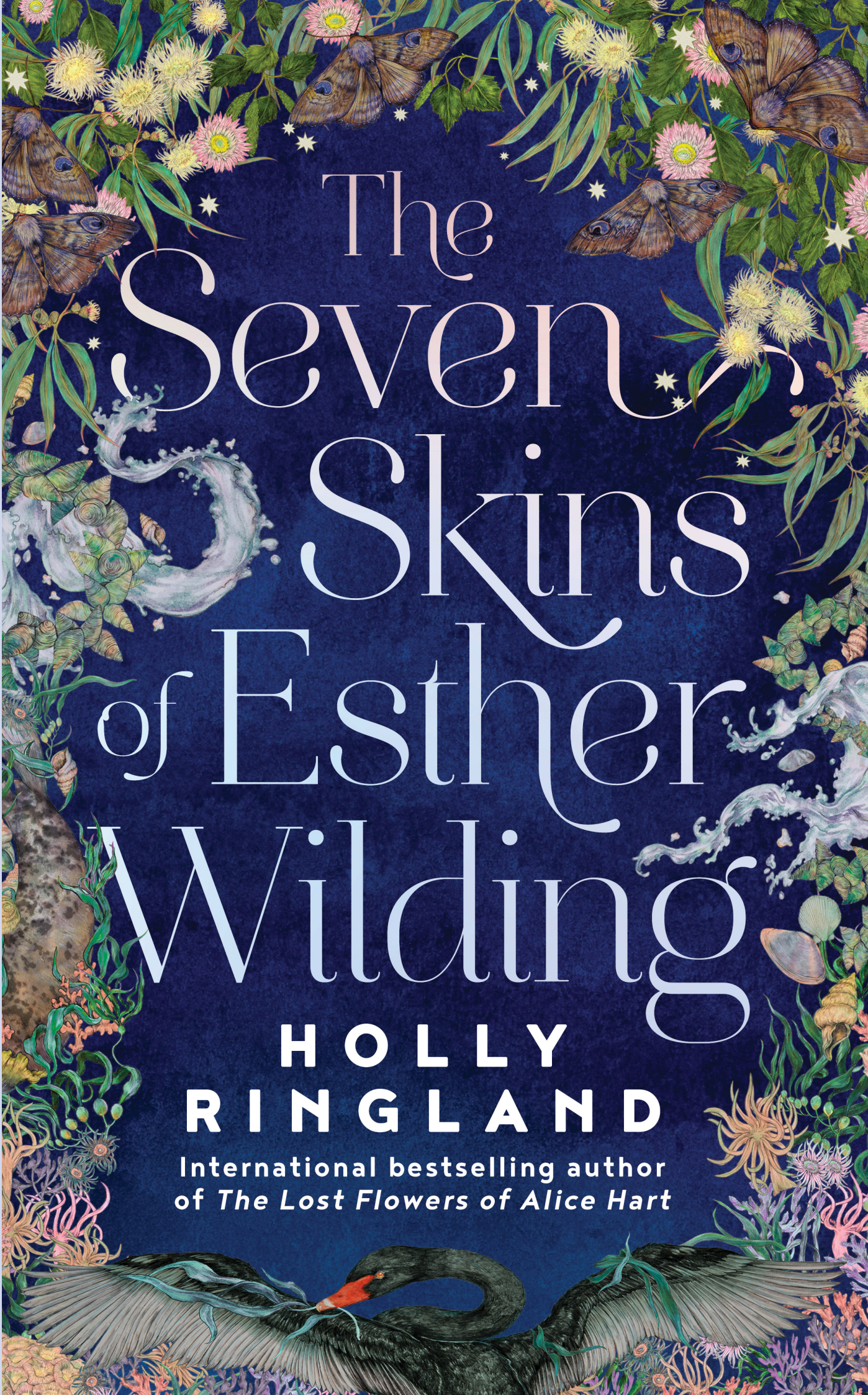


Reading Group Notes



The
Seven
Skins
of Esther
Wilding

HOLLY
RINGLAND

International bestselling author
of *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*

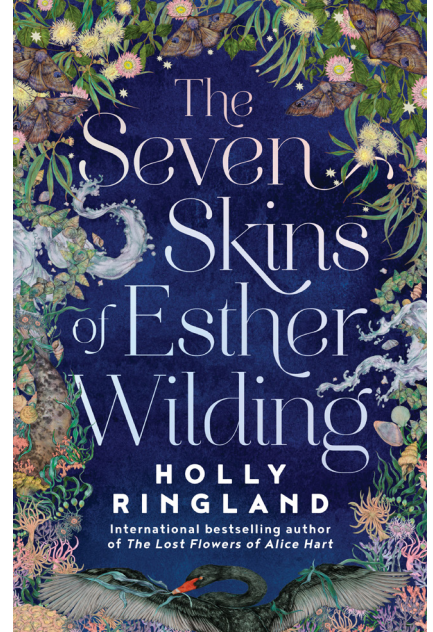
The Seven Skins of Esther Wilding

BY HOLLY RINGLAND

From international bestselling author of *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*, Holly Ringland, comes a haunting and magical novel about joy, grief, courage, and transformation.

‘On the afternoon that Esther Wilding drove homeward along the coast, a year after her sister had walked into the sea and disappeared, the light was painfully golden.’

The last time Esther Wilding’s beloved older sister Aura was seen, she was walking along the shore towards the sea. In the wake of Aura’s disappearance, Esther’s family struggles to live with their loss. To seek the truth about her sister’s death, Esther reluctantly travels from Lutruwita, Tasmania to Copenhagen, and then to the Faroe Islands, following the trail of the stories Aura left behind: seven fairy tales about selkies, swans and women, alongside cryptic verses Aura wrote and had secretly tattooed on her body.



The Seven Skins of Esther Wilding is a sweeping, deeply beautiful and profoundly moving novel about the far-reaches of sisterly love, the power of wearing your heart on your skin, and the ways life can transform when we find the courage to feel the fullness of both grief and joy.

About the Author



Holly Ringland is the author of the award-winning, international bestseller *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*, which has been translated into thirty languages and is streaming globally as a seven-part series on Prime Video, starring Sigourney Weaver. The series broke records with the biggest opening weekend viewership globally for any Australian launch, reaching the top five in 78 countries, and top 3 in 42 countries.

The Seven Skins of Esther Wilding, Holly's second novel, was published in October 2022 and became an instant national bestseller in Australia and New Zealand.

It was named Booktopia’s 2022 Book of the Year, and has been voted by readers into Dymocks’ Top 101 Books, and the Better Reading Top 100 Books.

Prior to the pandemic, Holly divided her time between Australia and the UK, where she had Australian native flowers growing in both places. In 2020, grounded in Australia, Holly bought a 1968 Olympic Riviera caravan, named ‘Frenchie’. Based on Yugambah land, southeast Queensland, Frenchie became Holly's Plan B writing office, in which she wrote Esther Wilding’s story.



On Writing

THE SEVEN SKINS OF ESTHER WILDING

In some ways, I think I've been carrying Esther Wilding with me all my life. One of the inspiring forces behind her story is my ancestry: I descend from Celtic and Scandinavian people. My Danish ancestors were farmers who left Denmark in the late 1800s and sailed for three months to Australia. They never returned to Denmark. The journeys of the women in my ancestral line are stories I grew up hearing my family tell around Granny's kitchen table.

In 2017, after I'd sent my publisher the structural edit of my first novel, *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*, those stories of my ancestral grandmothers started calling me. As I often do when I'm curious about the connection between people and a place, I turned to folklore and fairytales, and one afternoon I sat with a pen and my notebook and scribbled an idea down about selkies, or seal people ... then followed that idea to another. Family mythology and Scandinavian fairytales about selkies led me to the work of a nineteenth-century writer named Helena Nyblom, which led me to the roles women had in the seafaring history of tattooing in the western world, and to the ancient relationship between women and seals in Lutruwita/Tasmania. My body tells me when ideas that come are alive: I get goosebumps and prickles down my spine. That happened on this day, when ideas of the sea, fairytales, women, tattoos and storytelling swirled around me. And a young woman named Esther Wilding appeared at my desk and dared me to follow her.

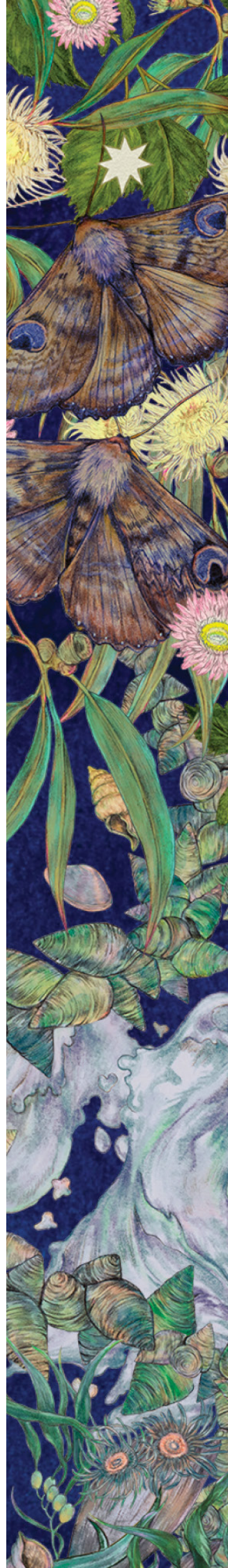
That was in 2017. Three and a half years later, I started writing the first draft of a new novel in frantic chunks during the disruption and distress we all lived with from early 2020 onwards. Working on this novel through pandemic lockdowns challenged, sustained and saved me in countless ways. I finished my first draft of *The Seven Skins of Esther Wilding* at the end of March 2022 in what felt like some kind of fugue state – as if I'd been temporarily absent in another time and place. It was only after I'd completed the final draft in August 2022 that I could see clearly how driven I had been to write this book as a love letter to love, to stories, to the families we have and the ones we choose, and to joy – including the kinds of joy we might not think of as joyful. Such as the quiet joy that can come in deep grief when we experience connection, belonging, and support, and realise that we are rarely as alone as we think, and so braver than we often know.

When readers finish *The Seven Skins of Esther Wilding*, I hope that they feel like they've just come home from spending a golden afternoon in good company. Writing this novel from 2020 through 2022 kept me believing in courage, joy, love, hope, and transformation. Most of all, I hope that Esther's story inspires readers to feel the same.

Read more about the inspiration behind the book here:
<https://hollyringland.com/the-world-of-esther-wilding>

Discussion Questions

- What do the black swan, and the seven feathers symbolise in Esther's story?
- The 'seven skins' in the novel were written by Aura, in her journal. By the end of the novel we realise the seven skins have also been points in Esther's story. How does each skin reflect what Esther is going through?
What role does music play in the novel, how does it connect and contrast events and memories in Esther's life?
- This is a novel about our stories, the ways we can tell them or hide them, and the power they have in our lives. Which story/myth/fairytale in the novel resonates the most with you and why?
- What do tattoos represent and mean to different characters in this novel?
- Freya and Esther have a complicated relationship, compounded by the things Freya and Jack have never told Esther about their family. Did they do the 'right thing' protecting Aura but withholding from Esther?
- When Esther arrives in Copenhagen, she refuses help and falls into old habits. Why does she do this?
- At her lowest point, Esther remembers a younger version of herself, a memory of a moment when she was alone in nature. What did that memory give Esther as an adult? How did it move her forward?
- Art features throughout Esther's story, in sculpture (e.g. Hans Pauli Olsen's Kópakonan) and painting (Hilma af Klint's Swans). How do these artworks reflect the experiences of the characters interacting with them?
- After Klara has revealed to Esther who Sophus is, Esther goes to the Faroe Islands to meet him, without telling him she's coming. When they meet, and for some time afterwards, Esther is unable to confront Sophus with her questions about Aura's life until she reaches boiling point. What causes her withholding, do you think?
- Ancestral connection is present throughout this novel across different cultures. What deeper meaning does this underpin in the story?
- Multiple characters engage in rituals to connect, honour, commemorate and remember their cultures. What are some of the rituals and what do they mean to the characters?
- Esther and Aura loved She-Ra as kids in the 80s. When you were young which cartoon character, or any fictional character, inspired you to feel strong and brave?
- Flósi's invited you to Flovin's next annual 80's party: who do you dress as and why?
- You've been given a gift voucher to go to Freya's tattoo studio - what tattoo design would you ask her for?





Praise for THE SEVEN SKINS OF ESTHER WILDING

‘Myths and legends are the touchstone to truth in this epic journey through love, loss, courage and kinship. But *The Seven Skins of Esther Wilding* is also an elegant and mesmerising tribute to the places that hold our stories, heart and memories.

Holly Ringland writes with such tenderness, wit and imagination about all these things that it’s impossible to come away from this magical story unchanged.’

Sally Piper, *Bone Memories*

‘Vivid and soaring ... *The Seven Skins of Esther Wilding* is a haunting story of trauma and redemption that is nonetheless compelling and accessible. It’s a great recommendation for fans of Vanessa Diffenbaugh’s *The Language of Flowers* or Elizabeth Gilbert’s *The Signature of All Things*, as well as Ringland’s debut *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*.’

Books+Publishing

‘Another spell is cast by Holly Ringland. I was swept away by this triumphant and luminous story.’

**Myfanwy Jones, Miles Franklin Literary Award
shortlisted author for *Leap***

‘Nobody writes about the pain of being alive more deftly than Holly Ringland. She brings such empathy to the topics of grief, love, family conflict and loss. Some of her sentences took my breath away, and I found myself madly flicking pages, days later, to find them again for safekeeping. Astonishing in its scope, detail and sensitivity, *The Seven Skins of Esther Wilding* is tender, magical, epic, funny and devastating. This is a very special writer at her best.’

Kate Leaver, author of *The Friendship Cure*