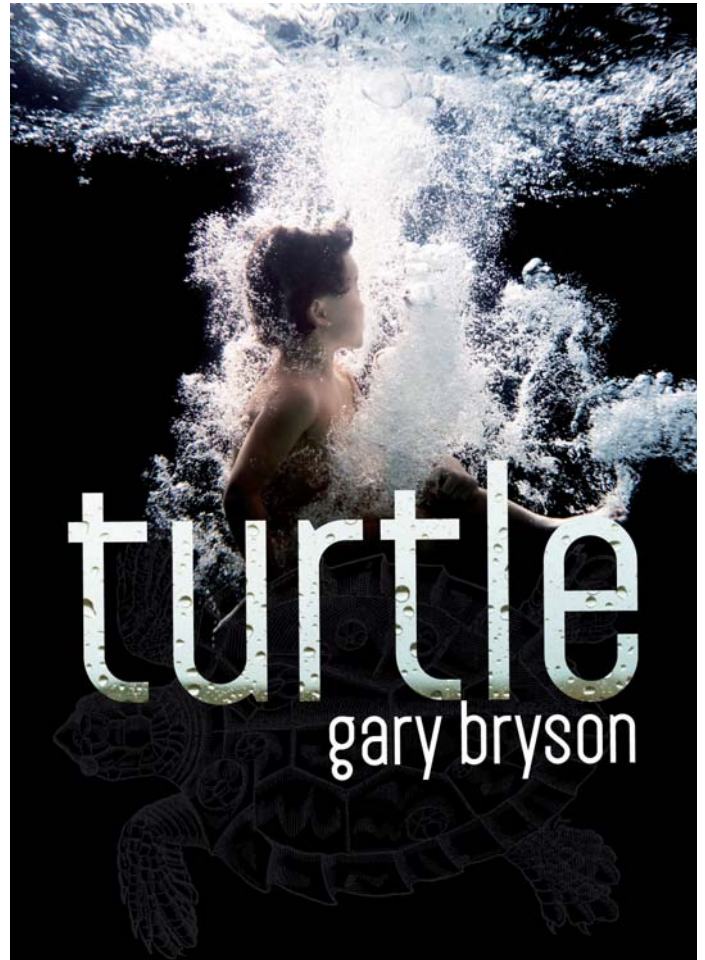


ALLEN & UNWIN



# READING GROUP NOTES

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## About the book

Set in Glasgow, *Turtle* is a blackly comic and compulsively enjoyable story about young Donald, who goes in search of his inner turtle.

So, to get to the point, if it's a ripping yarn you're after you should give up now. Just put the damned book down and find something more satisfying, a love story perhaps, or a thriller. A story where the goodies win and the baddies get what they deserve. Because there are no goodies here, just me, my family, and a turtle that speaks with a Glasgow accent. In other words, complete and utter shite. Or, as I prefer to see it, the truth. Because sometimes they're both the same thing, truth and lies. And you can't have one without the other, can you?

Set in a bleak and rain-bedrizzled Glasgow, this is the story of Donald Pinelli, whose mother Trixie is not only mad, she's psychic too - not a good combination, especially when it means she's convinced Donald is cursed to die by drowning on his eighteenth birthday. As if that isn't enough, Donald has to contend with a gangster father, siblings who hate him and a best friend who betrays him. Life's mince, and no mistake. But an unexpected encounter with a cantankerous turtle in a rundown zoo abruptly sets young Donald on a crash course in survival.

Years later, Trixie's death brings an older but not much wiser Donald back to Glasgow - to attend her funeral, sort through his childhood memories, come to terms with his failures, and maybe, who knows, forge a new life for himself without his carapace of bitterness and resentment.

A novel of great and gritty charm, this is an eccentric, bittersweet and defiant story about family, fate and the slipperiness of truth, with a hero - and a turtle - you will never forget.

## About the author

Gary Bryson is a broadcaster and writer. He began his career at the age of 12, devising radio dramas on an ancient tape recorder and broadcasting them out the window of his Glasgow home. His mother wanted him to be a plumber. His neighbours wanted him dead.

He survived both, and after many adventures, washed up on the shores of Sydney clutching a degree in journalism and a packet of fig newtons, both of which he bartered shortly afterwards for a job at ABC Radio National, where he currently contributes to the long-standing documentary series, 'Encounter'.

He lives in Sydney with his wife and two children. *Turtle* is his first novel.

## Gary Bryson on writing *Turtle*

"Have you talked to your family about this?"

It was the first question Allen & Unwin publisher Annette Barlow asked me when we met to discuss the possibility of publishing *Turtle*. She's all too often seen the fallout for authors who have trouble sorting out fiction from fact: bitter family arguments, friends becoming enemies, lovers parting ways.

A first novel in particular is often autobiographical, drawing on the life experiences of the author, and perhaps basing characters on people he or she knows in the real world. All writers do this to some extent, but problems arise when the relationship is too close, when someone reading the book can recognise themselves or others. Or think they can.

In the case of *Turtle*, Annette was right to draw my attention to the possibility of everlasting enmity with the surviving members of my birth family. When I phoned my father in Glasgow and told him I was publishing a novel, his reaction was, "That's great. What's it about?"

"Well", I said, "It's about growing up in a dysfunctional Scottish family in the 1970s". Silence on the end of the phone. "Yes", I went on, digging an ever-deeper hole for myself, "The mother's mad and the father's a gangster".

Another pause. "Am I in it?"

"No", I said. "You're not in it".

It was only half a lie. Was I thinking of him when I developed the character of Carlo, an Italo-Scottish gangster and the father in the story? Well, yes, in a loose emotional sense, and in the sense that every father I write about will be based, to some extent, on the only one I've known. It happens that my father was born in Scotland to Italian parents. Though now retired, he was an astute businessman who did very well for himself in the gaming machine and amusements business. He stands for no nonsense from anyone. But there the similarities end.

The greater part of the truth is that my father is not in the book. Neither is my late mother, nor my brother, nor my two sisters. But when my surviving family read this story, set in Glasgow and narrated by Donald Pinelli, an expatriate Italo-Scot, and featuring his gangster father, Carlo, his mad, clairvoyant mother, Trixie, his egocentric brother Mr Disco and his spiteful, vindictive sister Luce, they might think that they recognise bits of themselves and bits of each other. And they might think they recognise bits of me.

Well, they won't recognise our father in Carlo; unlike him, dad is not a criminal and he's not in jail for the murder of two of his associates. He also has much better dress sense.

And they won't recognise our mother in Trixie, a woman who can dream people dead, and who believes her son is cursed to die by drowning on his 18th birthday and that he is, effectively, lost to her. Mum had a difficult life for sure, but she wasn't anywhere near as mad as Trixie, and she was always expressive in her love for us.

And they won't recognise the cocky elder brother who finds fame as a rock star, or the mean, jealous sister who feels sidelined in the mother's affections and takes it out on young Donald. My siblings and I had our moments of rivalry, as siblings do, but we were never vicious – and also, it must be said, my brother's guitar playing was woeful.

Nor will they recognise the narrator, a damaged man who, thirty years before, escaped the curse and has now come home for Trixie's funeral, and though he doesn't realise it right away, to heal himself. Donald is not me. I survived my family's ordinary dysfunction a bit more successfully, and a lot less dramatically, even if today I still display a nervous tic and a tendency to bark at passing buses.

What they might recognise, strangely enough, is the Turtle. Not that you'll find many in Scotland – a country where you have to wear two pairs of socks most of the year is no place for our flippery friends. But the Turtle in *Turtle* is a sketch of a particular kind of Glasgow character, all front and no-nonsense, whose relations with everyone are enacted through a kind of genial, foul-mouthed banter which sometimes spills over into vindictiveness, but also expresses a kind of love. It's not so far-fetched, really. On the face of it a turtle is about the most un-Glaswegian creature you can imagine, but on the other hand, it hides itself behind this big, tough shell. That's its survival tactic and it's one that's worked well for both turtles and Glaswegians.

So where then, is the fact in fiction, and in the fiction in fact? Well, it's in every novel you read. That, to me, is the beauty of novels. At their best they build fictional worlds which are entirely believable, no matter how dramatic, bizarre or surreal. And to do that they have to draw on reality for characters, settings and stories which speak to us emotionally and universally. The people in *Turtle* are as real as I can make them, and in that sense I hope that everyone who reads the novel will recognise bits of themselves in it, and that the feelings and hopes and motivations of the characters will find an echo in their lives, too.

At least as far as the human characters are concerned, anyway. As for the rest, any resemblance to turtles, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

## Suggested points for discussion

- ☞ How do you understand the role of the Turtle in the story?
- ☞ Did you believe in the Turtle as a character?
- ☞ How do you feel about Trixie? Do you think Donald's picture of her is accurate throughout the book? What about his depictions of Carlo, Mr Disco and Luce. Do you believe the stories that Donald tells about them?
- ☞ Why is it, do you think, that the family members in *Turtle* are seemingly all bad?
- ☞ How do you understand Donald's failure in life?
- ☞ Think back to growing up in your own family. Are there any echoes in *Turtle* about how it was for you as an adolescent? Did you ever feel for example that your mother or father's world-view was wrong, that you were trapped by it and had to escape, or in some other way rebel against it?
- ☞ The story is set in Glasgow, mostly in the 1970s, but the city itself is more of an emotional and cultural backdrop than a physical one. Did this work for you? Did you get a sense of the Glasgow environment throughout the book? Or could it have been set anywhere in Scotland?
- ☞ Did you have trouble with the dialect?
- ☞ What do you think happens after Trixie's funeral? Will Donald get together with Anna, and is he now free of the curse that's bedevilled him all his life?

## Recommended Reading

*I Dream of Magda*, Stefan Laszczuk (2008)

*The Children*, Charlotte Wood (2007)

*The Flounder*, Gunter Grass (1979)

*Young Adam*, Alexander Trocchi (1996)

*How Late it Was, How Late*, James Kelman (1994)

*Paddy Clarke, Ha-Ha-Ha*, Roddy Doyle (1991)