

ALLEN & UNWIN

MEME McDONALD



love like water



READING GROUP NOTES

Contents: About the book (2) About Meme McDonald (2)
On Writing the Book (3) The Novel's Ending (3) Reviews (4)
Suggested points for discussion (4) Awards (5)

The book

Love Like Water is a novel about friendship, love, sex and identity at the heart of Australia, where black and white, bush and city collide. It's an honest and sometimes confronting story about a deep, difficult love affair between a young white woman and an Aboriginal man, set in Alice Springs in the 1980s, amidst the excitement and political turmoil of the time.

Cathy arrives in Alice Springs from cattle country, looking for a new way to live. But new is a serious challenge for a girl who's used to being measured by her actions, not her feelings. Feelings are slippery, like water. Hard to hold onto.

Jay is working for the local radio station, far from his own saltwater people, wary of this no-water country. He's searching for something, trying to survive.

Margie is a wild city girl, up for a good time, confronted by a world she's never known and a friend she can't always understand.

When lives collide at the heart of the country, no one stays unchanged.

Love Like Water was published as a 'crossover' book, intended for readers of around 16 to 30 and older. It has been well reviewed by a wide range of readers.

About Meme McDonald

Meme grew up in western Queensland and now lives in Melbourne. She writes for adults and young adult readers, and has published nine award-winning books.

Meme began her career directing theatre and performing in the street theatre group The Essendon Policewomen's Marching Band. Her first book, *Put Your Whole Self In* (Penguin), came out of a photographic course and a chance meeting with a group of women in the city baths.

Meme's books have won six major literary awards including Book of the Year for *The Binna Binna Man* (Allen & Unwin 1999) at the NSW Premier's Literary Awards 2000.

Two prize-winning books Meme co-wrote with Aboriginal storyteller, Boori Monty Pryor, have been adapted for theatre. *My Girragundji* (Allen & Unwin 1998) had two seasons touring nationally with The Bell Shakespeare Company, and *Njunjul the Sun* (Allen & Unwin 2002) - which received the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Young Adult Fiction - was adapted by Kooemba Djarra Theatre Company and produced with QPAC in Brisbane.

In addition to writing, Meme works as an arts consultant for groups and organisations and travels extensively giving talks in schools, tertiary institutions and at festivals. In 1996 Meme received a two year Australia Council Fellowship in Community Cultural Development.

www.mememcdonald.com

On Writing the Book

'*Love Like Water* has been shimmering out there for twelve years. It has come out of terrain familiar to me – country girl leaves home when her brother inherits the land; white girl falls for black guy; shared houses and arguments over the washing up; older man educates younger woman, younger woman learns by testing her female powers; girlfriends arguing the toss as they head in opposite directions while they remain best ever friends; B & S balls that start out well dressed and end up messy; homeland ... wondering if there is such a place.

'Although I'm familiar with the territory of *Love Like Water*, it is not my story. It is a novel, a work of fiction, a product of the imagination. It is about transitions and discovery in new territory, where characters find themselves adapting to landscapes unfamiliar; assessing and reassessing themselves and their values; finding out about themselves.

'It is a book about love in its many forms: sex, friendship, teacher/student love, love across cultures, forbidden love, and the love of self, the hardest kind of love to know.

'It's a book about making choices.'

In March 2008, Meme McDonald spoke about her work on the ABC TV program *Message Stick*. View the video of this program at <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s2261792.htm>

The novel's ending

In 2008, a revised edition of *Love Like Water* was published, with the addition of five paragraphs at the end of the final chapter.

(The revised edition has ISBN 9781741756388. The new paragraphs are included for reference at the end of these notes.)

Meme McDonald explains:

'After the manuscript for *Love Like Water* was sent to the printer in 2007 I realised I was dissatisfied with the end of the novel. I'd cut it short, in my opinion, and hadn't brought the relationship between Cathy and Jay to a conclusion that honoured all that went before. Even before the book was launched in March of that year, I drafted an additional page for the end. When I spoke to my publisher, Rosalind Price, about this, Allen & Unwin being the extraordinary publishers they are, she didn't discount the possibility that I could make this addition if the novel went to reprint. Fortunately, this has now happened and I have been given the opportunity to make an addition of five paragraphs to the end of the book. For me, the relationship between Cathy and Jay at a metaphoric level speaks of the relationship of cultures at the heart of our country. My hope is that we are travelling the same train together.'

Reviews

‘Meme McDonald sees this country in a way that’s both new and old, that’s renewing and respectful and kind.’

Martin Flanagan

‘Meme McDonald has beautifully illustrated the landscape and characters’ relationships to each other...intense and emotionally charged.’

Bookseller & Publisher, February 2007

‘...brilliantly recreates the sense of transience that permeates this town...an unsentimental picture of the chaotic life of the denizens of Alice Springs.’

Canberra Times, April 2007

‘compelling and intelligent fiction that because of its respect for realism will escape being tagged as either racist or apologist.’

Courier-Mail, 10–11 March 2007

‘McDonald uses Alice Springs...as the setting for this complex story of different sorts of love, identity and belonging... Their complex affair—tentative, deep and revelatory—points to an ideal of deeper understanding.’

Age, 31 March 2007

‘McDonald’s characters hold our attention; she has a knack for casual dialogue and she vividly represents the way emotions shift between people...Most powerful are the glimpses into the terrible pain of tragedy that seems to be passed on like DNA.’

Australian, 14–15 April 2007

‘...a brilliant piece of work with incredible style and language.’

Good Reading, March 2007

‘Although this is definitely an Australian novel in every sense the universal themes make it an experience for all readers.’

Western Advocate, 21/4/07

Some suggested points for discussion



Discuss the impact of the book’s setting:

- While we’re not explicitly told that the setting is the 1980s, there are clues about the time period in the references to music, current affairs and the lifestyle of the characters. Why do you think the book is set in the 80s? Would the characters’ experiences be different today?
- The land is as much of a character in the story as the people. What impact did the geographical location have on your reading of the story?
- A review on the website januarymagazine.com said that ‘From the opening page, the reader can

feel the heat of Alice Springs.' How does McDonald evoke this setting?

☞ A review in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (24-25 March 07) said that this book 'examines the rules of love and how people struggle and sometimes fail to survive the pressure of societal and family expectations.'

- Are there universal rules of love?
- What rules bind and influence the relationship between Cathy and Jay, and would they still apply today or in a different place?
- How is their relationship reflected in the relationship between Margie and Alastair?
- And what role does the relationship between Cathy and Max play in the novel?

☞ How does the Shane Howard epigraph at the beginning of the book contribute to your understanding of the novel?

☞ In 2008 a revised edition of *Love Like Water* was published, with the addition of five paragraphs at the end of the final chapter. (See the notes on this, above.) Discuss the impact of the 2 different endings on the way you read the novel.

☞ Who are Jay's 'different selves' (page 158) and his 'black self' (p85)?

☞ At the beginning of the novel, Cathy leaves home. What does the novel tell us about where 'home' resides? Is it, for example, in a birth place, in another person, or within ourselves?

☞ This novel was published as a 'crossover' book, intended for readers of around 16 to 30 and older.

- Reviewing the book as a young adult read, *Viewpoint* magazine said it 'swirls through themes of belonging, identity, white and Indigenous culture, love and racism—quite a meaty and potentially sensitive group of issues, which McDonald handles with aplomb...She allows you to feel the frustration, disappointment, hope and confusion that face most young people, but especially those who struggle against expectations of a society they were born into. A thoroughly enjoyable and challenging book.'

- And *Junior Bookseller & Publisher* said 'I would highly recommend *Love like Water* to anyone who cares enough to want an insight into some of the problems facing Australia.'

- What do you think a teenaged reader would take away from this book, as opposed to an adult reader?

Awards

Love Like Water was Highly Commended for the Christina Stead Award in the 2007 National Literary Awards. It was shortlisted for Book of the Year for Older Readers in the Children's Book Council of Australia Awards.

lurching . . . She wasn't the only passenger. She was in a train full of travellers. She checked her shoulderbag. The poster was in its tube, beside her, ready for the next wall.

Someone was whistling. She ignored them, hitching her attention instead to distant sounds out of reach of the clicketty clack. The train slid along a songline of steel, sidling through the Gap, rock faces swirling with memory. It was too early for memories. She fixed her sight on the doorway that led to the next carriage and the one after that. The whistling from behind was making mischief again. A smile refused to leave her alone. But she didn't turn round. There'd be no point in turning round. It was no one she knew. Just some joker with a big grin wanting to chat. She wasn't on for chatting.

The whistling was resonant, blowing through lips that were full. Echoes of that sound played in the space between one breath and another, in the pauses beyond thought. Through the gap in her bottom teeth, she began her own quiet version. Touching harmonies on the high notes, dropping down to a hum. Humming felt right. Good company . . .

She spun round and landed in the lap of his smile. His face was open, the anger had fallen away. She steadied herself. This was her journey. What was he doing on the train?

Jay said something about going south. Just for the weekend, only a few days. He wasn't following her, he said. They looked at each other. Then laughed. Laughed together, each for their own reasons, their laughter flowing like water. The radio station wanted him to do an interview. The big man who'd played guitar in the shed that night had released a single. Radio stations down south were giving it plenty of air. People were sitting up and listening.

Their talk became easy. Simple. Details of when and where and how to get to the gig to hear the big man play. Cathy tried

picturing street names on a map that neither of them knew. Adelaide was city. City was way down the track. They were on the same train, that was all. That was enough. Their conversation drifted as they settled into the swagger, the unexpected lurch and then lag of a train picking up pace, pushing through desert, heading for the coast.