

## Love Like Water by Meme McDonald

“The Centre is a good place to centre yourself. The heart of it all.”

Indeed, if all roads do lead to The Alice, *Love Like Water* takes us on the journey of three travellers, Cathy Henderson, Margie Andrews and Jason Johnstone (JJ the DJ) who have been drawn to the Red Centre, but who also journey with their emotions, searching consciously or subconsciously for their own true self. It is a journey of survival in a harsh physical environment, against the elements, but also of personal growth and survival, spiritual and emotional, of belonging and identity, set against the cultural divide of friend and lover, city and country, black and white. On their soul-searching travels, wounds are opened red raw, just like the red dust of The Centre, the core of it all.

Cathy and Margie have been friends since boarding school – Cathy from a cattle property outside Gadungga in Western Queensland, grieving the death of her fiancé in a plane accident, resentful she has had to leave the property which will become her brother’s, and Margie is a loud, fun-loving, “no holds barred” city slicker, a “wild child” to be tamed. Different backgrounds, still friends, in search of new beginnings, a new life, an escape – Margie as a trainee nurse, Cathy, with no firm plans, finds work as a barmaid at The Australian Hotel.

To this mix, add the handsome Jay or JJ, a “saltwater boy” from North Queensland, recently arrived in The Alice to work as a disc jockey at the country’s first indigenous radio station. He has lived all over the place, and is once again “a stranger in a strange place”. Then there is Max Philips, Cathy’s boss to whom she is attracted, older, the publican at The Australian for seven years, himself an escapee from a failed marriage, on a similar journey of self discovery.

The stage is set and no one will be unchanged. “You can lose yourself here. There’s no signposts”. But the unique Caution Camels Crossing sign is symbolic of the caution required as other issues are likewise “crossing” – friendships, family relationships, cultures, dreams and hopes. It’s the crossroads of life. Sadness and suffering, sorrow and separation, humiliation or happiness and harmony, passion or prejudice and pain. Chasms as deep as Kings Canyon itself, circumstances changing just like the daily colour changes of the surrounding countryside with changes in the light, stark yet also strikingly beautiful.

The comment “You’re not welcome here” made to Jay at Max’s Spinifex Bar is central to the story and reinforces the personal struggle he is facing. Homesick for his family outside Cairns, his homeland, his heritage, Jay is a walking contradiction, of mixed blood, a “white black voice chewing at him”, angry and fighting to just stay alive, calling on his “inner warrior” and master of The Battle of The Hug, looking for love and understanding. “I’m a man on a mission, not a man from a mission”. He has his music, he has his job.

Jason is attracted to Cathy (his Kat) and she to him. “She wasn’t seeing black. She was seeing heart”. But as their relationship develops and love grows (love that is like water, precious, hard to do without, “what keeps you afloat”), the harsh reality and consequences of such a love, which “straddles” two cultures, also emerge.

*Love Like Water* is a first class piece of writing, powerful and confronting, addressing many “big issues” with honesty and integrity, compassion and sincerity. It is both thought provoking and gut wrenching, a poignant and conscience raising exploration of the landscape of the heart, universal emotions of love and relationships, of family and other cultures, through well crafted, evocative, rich often haunting prose.

There’s much to take in, much to ponder, much to question, much to discuss, both on a personal and on a political level, making this novel a valuable addition to the Senior Fiction shelves in the secondary school library, for recreational reading, and also for inclusion in the Senior English Reading List and as background support material in Aboriginal Studies units at Year 11 and Year 12 level.

It should be read by teachers and students alike. Readers will be shocked by the brutality and bigotry exposed in the story, but encouraged by the wisdom and tenderness as well. Just like the

central characters, adolescent readers will also identify with the familiar search for identity and for self-awakening, for the confidence and personal strength to walk tall and, like Cathy, to “craft her own shoes”.

**Alison Cassell, QLD**

While essentially a story of forbidden love between Cathy (a white girl) and Jay (a black boy), Meme McDonald’s *Love Like Water* is much more than that. She cleverly intertwines the developing relationships of the main characters with an exploration of several issues. The issue of the changing discrimination laws and the difficulties these entail for both aboriginal and white Australians is central to the plot. Without laboring the politics of the times, McDonald sensitively evokes the idealism as well as the insecurities that Australians felt in the 1980s. However, wider issues are also explored. The gap between country and city ideals is considered in depth. The heart-rending decisions to be made by Cathy as she feels herself moving further and further away from the family she loves will evoke memories in many readers. Alice Springs could be any city in Australia, and Cathy any young person moving from home and encountering many hurdles to be overcome in the search for her own identity. *Love Like Water* explores love on many levels and leaves readers with the feeling that, like water, love flows on - often regardless of one’s hopes or plans.

*Love Like Water* is an entertaining read. However, the age of the characters and the experiences they have make this a novel for teachers and senior school readers.

**Patricia Andersen, Nanango State High School, QLD**

“*Love Like Water*” joins an emerging genre of young adult fiction, including “*Bye Beautiful*” and “*Swallow the Air*”, that focuses on the complexity of relationships between Aboriginal and white Australians. It simultaneously acknowledges and challenges stereotypes that exist, especially in remote communities.

Cathy Henderson’s connection with Jay Johnstone, “a face she’d trained herself not to see”, is both forged and fraught by their differences. Cathy’s mind becomes “a balloon, expanding beyond its limits” as she experiences life in Alice Springs and learns that “Love is like water ... like floating on a silver skin suspended between heaven and hell.”

Jay refuses to become a “statistic for the Aboriginal industry living off the heartbreak of his people” and uses the “Battle of the Hug” to propel his determination to survive, drawing the strength to become an “inner warrior” from the old people’s teachings.

Cathy also understands the significance of family and tradition, a trait most poignantly realised when she muses over a possible future with Jay, one in which she would not be able to see herself reflected in her father’s averted eyes.

Juxtaposed with the Lounge Bar of the Australia Hotel, a place where cross-cultural interaction becomes an intellectual and often pretentious exercise, the unorthodox nature of Cathy and Jay’s relationship is highlighted. Cathy perceives it as “another country”, having a better understanding of the more conservative Spinifex Bar, while its proprietor Max, a businessman who knows that “the secret to success is to sort the clientele according to type”, describes the Lounge as a “circus”.

Ultimately it seems that Cathy and Jay will “always be facing each other from two sides of a river run dry with the suffering of generations”.

This novel’s consideration of the impact of tradition, family, rituals, rites of passage and self-awareness on young adults makes it ideally suited to support the study of themes such as Australian Identity in Outcome Two of the new VCE English study design.

**Wendy Jackson, Healesville High School, VIC**

‘*Love Like Water*’ is about a journey of self discovery set in the contemporary Australian outback. It depicts many themes, and poses many socially relevant questions such as the importance of

understanding how to define one's identity, whether by physical surroundings or by the relationships they form. At first glance, one can be mistaken for thinking that this is a love story, however the central character Cathy moves from tragedy to guilt to self preservation - learning how to cope with adversity on her own.

Upon the shock death of her fiancé, Cathy is forced to re-evaluate the life she thought she had perfectly mapped out. This leads her to being persuaded to leave country Queensland and move to Alice Springs where her best friend awaits her. Confronted with racial segregation Cathy must learn how to co-exist in such an intense environment. A clash of mentalities between Cathy and the townspeople make for an engaging plot.

Beautifully written, with striking imagery and symbolism, the book should be taught at an upper high school level and would be great to tackle with units based on Australian Identity and Racism.

Overall it is a satisfying read for mature students who search for characters who move beyond clichéd stereotypes of Australian contemporary society.

**Sara Nigro, St Dominic's Priory College, SA**

I had read somewhere that this book stays with you long after you finish reading it. When I read that I thought well! What a cliché! I started reading Meme McDonald's *Love Like Water* before the launch back in March and found myself gushing to anyone who would listen that this was a gorgeous book, and how wonderful of Meme to have written it. Fearing I was a little star struck (Frank Woodley was standing behind me in the queue to get a copy signed) I decided to let the review go.

I have a real love/hate relationship with Alice Springs having been there a couple of times. I thought initially I don't get this place, and of all the things Fiona O'Loughlin has to say, the only thing I don't relate to is her love for Alice. But that confusion about specifically Alice Springs as a physical place and metaphorically at the heart of things, (Australia and our consciousness) was something that each of the characters of the Novel also grapple with. Uniting all characters was that sense that Alice was at once somewhere you run away to, to escape yourself and your life, and are drawn to find yourself.

Central to all of this is the love story of sorts between Jay and Cathy. Jay is an Aboriginal radio announcer who escapes his own country of Far North Queensland and what he sees as an inevitable fate of desperation, self mutilation, alcohol and suicide. Cathy shares Jay's connection to land through her upbringing as a daughter of a large landowner in Western Queensland. However she soon discovers that this connection is not based on any concrete link as she realises the farm will pass to her brother. Her only link was to marry another local landowner whom she convinces herself she loves and who is attracted to her. However when he is killed in a crop duster accident her last link also dies. It's her school friend Margie, a city girl with a dysfunctional home life that drags her away to Alice. Through Margie, McDonald touches on the theme of mental illness though not to any depth, and it seems that Margie has not grown up scarred by her own mother's experience. I would love to see a sequel that concentrates on Margie and her life. Meanwhile Jay and Cathy face many obstacles, not the least their own relationship hang ups, as well as prejudice from the obvious and not so obvious sources. Their courtship is surprisingly realistic, untidy, exciting and frustrating all at once and reflective of the reality of those early relationships where we make discoveries about ourselves, mess up and learn better for next time. This is a really accessible text for seniors, the themes would be better suited to 11s and 12s, and whilst the central story as the title and cover suggest will appeal to girls, Jay's frustrations, along with the sometimes stereotypical behaviour of the younger non-indigenous males leaves plenty for boys to discuss in the text too.

**Melanie Williams, Lavalla Catholic College, VIC**

This is an Australian love story, an exploration of 'forbidden loves'; between black and white, boss and employee, a young woman and an older man. The reserved Cathy has been devastated by the sudden death of her fiancé, and the loss of the life she had grown up expecting to live. She is loose in the world, drifting, not even looking for alternatives. They find her, and she blows and drifts with the alternatives as they crisscross her path.

For me the most powerful aspect of this well crafted novel is context: social, cultural, and geographical. The strongly Australian novel is set in Alice Springs in the early 1980's, and there are many clues and pointers to the social and cultural context, in the conversations between characters, in the internal monologues and author's voice descriptions.

The complex DJ JJ is one of the significant markers of context, from his early musical influences, European electronica, the juxtaposition of Bob Marley's death with U2 tracks, to references to songs from past Aboriginal protest movements, which are unknown to his Alice Springs audience, and to which he introduces them. Cathy is the U2 fan, her brother likes Meatloaf.

So too is the geography of Alice Springs, with no mention of Todd Mall as a gathering place. There are other features which do remain today, Telegraph Hill, the river, the heat in the daytime, and the chill of the night. The possibility of Uluru is strongly present, with everyone who goes to Alice Springs ending up driving there.

The language is authentic, with 'tarps', 'chiacking', and 'eskies' and descriptions of life 'outback' that ring true for anyone who has lived it.

There is another aspect to this context, that of the sexuality of the young adults in the novel. This is pre-AIDS, or pre the strong awareness of AIDS which took hold later in the decade. The young people are largely focused on a free wheeling attitude to multiple sexual partners, with the 'hippie' Sarah spending her life 'stoned' on 'weed' and sleeping with whoever is there. Margie frequently falls quickly and violently in love, the mercurial disposition inherited from her mother flinging her between rapture and despair.

But perhaps the most telling aspect of context is the lack of mobile phones and the Internet- no email or SMS. There are few phone calls made. Those that are made are usually highly charged, not just for chatting, despite all of the characters central to the novel suffering from loneliness, dislocation and separation from family. This places the novel squarely in the past.

There are issues which remain relevant, and which could be explored in Australian Studies. With its frequent references to drug use (read marijuana), alcohol abuse, youth suicide, and freewheeling sexuality, I think the novel is more suited to older students, and not to all school contexts, although it may well have resonance with a teenage audience because of these factors. If used for study, I think all of these issues would need to be well covered in teacher led discussion. It would be very interesting, perhaps saddening, to research the current status of some of the issues presented in *Love Like Water*, and the current lifestyle of young singles in Alice Springs. It would also be interesting to read a review from someone who lives in Alice Springs.

**Helen Wilde, SA**

A thought-provoking and intense read, it deals with heartbreak when Cathy, 22, loses her fiancé after a plane crash and moves to Alice Springs. She rekindles her friendship with Margie, a wild city girl who only lives for the day, and flirts with Sarah, who tries to undermine any chance of happiness she tries to find.

Cathy meets up with Jay, a legend in nightclubs, back home in the city. He was coming to work for the local radio station. He was from the saltwater, the coast, and he is wary of the no-water country which was as far away from the coast that he could imagine.

Alice is a place strange to both of them, and the culture divide between black and white is there right in their faces. But it is here, in this dry arid place, that they find a connection, which transcends them past the uneasiness of the Black versus White Australia and the pettiness and prejudices that surround them both.

Recommended for Young Adults plus.

**Pauline Dunn, Mountain District Christian School, VIC**

Let me be honest, this is one of the best Australian novels I have read for years. It is funny, serious and also beautifully written. Literally and metaphorically there is poetry flowing through this work: elegance in the incorporation of symbolism, timelessness in the observations of McDonald's narrative and a good balance of story and fact. Together these qualities produce a deeply satisfying depiction of a contemporary slice-of-life in Australia's desert heart.

Dealing sympathetically with questions of cultural identity, McDonald's frustration and empathetic understanding of the oppressive predicament of indigenous Australians in Alice Springs, and anger at the effects of racism, never becomes an obstacle. Cleverly her narrative maintains the rage, using this energy to provide insights and greater understanding to the conflicts between black and white, male and female, town and country.

Best suited to Years 11 & 12, *Love Like Water* could be used in Studies of Contemporary Australia and English Literature Studies. Used in Indigenous Studies the novel powerfully explores the issues of youth suicide, alcoholism and cultural isolation. The novel is also a terrific insight into post-school life – two of the novel's major characters Margie and Cathy often floundering in their newfound freedom, especially so in the uncharted waters of love and sex. Given the novel's storytelling strength, the strong use of symbolism, and the often-frank but convincing dialogue, it is hoped it will also attract an older audience.

With a love story at its heart *Love Like Water* is as delightful and as refreshing as desert rain.

**Catherine McGuire, St Mary's School, North Sydney, NSW**

In *Love Like Water* Meme McDonald has painted a convincing picture of life in Alice Springs as seen through the eyes of the two main protagonists, Cathy and Jay. Cathy is a twenty something young woman escaping a personal tragedy, persuaded into making a new start in Alice by her wild but lovable city friend Margie. She takes on a job as barmaid at one of the local hotels and soon finds there's a whole hidden agenda that she doesn't quite know how to deal with.

Jay is a young indigenous man carrying his own set of emotional baggage. When the two young people meet there is an instant attraction but they soon discover that they have come from very different worlds and it isn't long before there are sparks flying in all directions.

This book is beautifully crafted in terms of language and characters. From the very opening lines, 'Cathy knew heat. Where she came from, heat stood back and laughed at you then shoved a hand down your throat and dried you inside out' the reader is drawn into the imagery and flow that makes the journey of this novel so pleasurable. In your mind's eye you are right there slap bang in the middle of Central Australia.

The characters are also intricately drawn, as are the relationships that are woven between them. Even the minor characters like the blustering Billy and the promiscuous Sarah are realistically portrayed.

There are many themes that emerge from this novel including those of friendship, family, racism, morality and reconciliation. Meme has a gift for incorporating Aboriginal themes into her novels in a sensitive and authentic fashion without in any way appearing patronising.

This novel would be a welcome addition to any school library and suitable for the mature reader. I actually think it would be an excellent choice to put on the Year 12 reading list.

**Kate Schneider, Lilydale High School, VIC**

This novel takes a fresh approach to the idea of a journey to the "Red Centre". It charts both the physical and emotional journeys of the three main characters Cathy, Jay and Margie. Each is running away from life and each is forced to realise they need to confront and deal with the intensity of their emotions before being able to choose their own path rather than taking that expected of them. The novel deals with confronting issues: race, drugs, death and sexuality making it suitable only for senior students. McDonald skilfully deals with issues surrounding

Aboriginals without sensationalising them or patronising her readers. This forces closer examination without reverting to stereotypes.

More than anything, this is a journey of self discovery. Although it does include a love story between Cathy and Jay, this novel is about so much more. It discusses what it means to become an adult and the times when identity and answers are hard to come by. The idea of cultural identity, prejudice and their implications is constantly being discussed and challenged. This is a wise, compassionate novel which should provoke and confront both teachers and students. This would be an ideal related text for the Journeys Area of Study for the NSW Higher School Certificate. I would also love to see my students to read it simply because of the enjoyment it will bring!

**Marilyn Patterson, Tuggerah Lakes Secondary College NSW**

Love Like Water is a novel that provides an in-depth exploration of a range of social issues in a captivating book. The story focuses on the relationships and attitudes of a number of characters, but the key one is between Cathy, a grieving, homeless, white girl who is trying to change her life; and Jay, a transient aboriginal disk jockey who is trying to fit into a predominantly white culture. The novel is set in the red heart of Australia, in the town of Alice Springs, and this forms a dramatic backdrop for the varied and dysfunctional characters portrayed in the book.

Cathy comes to Alice Springs after the death of her fiancé has changed the predicted course of her life. She shares a house with her friend Margie who combines her working life as a trainee nurse with a wild social life and a search for true love. Cathy ends up working as a barmaid which creates a variety of problematic relationships for her throughout the course of the book, and yet, they all somehow help her to heal and to mature. The main relationship she has is with Jay who is her lover for a short time. Although the relationship appears to promise much its brief course is mostly painful for both of them.

Love Like Water is a confronting book because it forces us to face stereotypical prejudices which we probably hope no longer exist in Australia - a country which advocates equality and freedom for all. The primary prejudice portrayed in the book is racism – the relationship between Cathy and Jay, a white woman and a black man is frowned upon by everyone, except her two housemates, and is doomed. The treatment of the aboriginal population of Alice Springs is appalling but none the less true to life.

Other social issues which the book brings out are sexist attitudes, drug and alcohol abuse, youth suicide, sexual issues (such as having unprotected and indiscriminate sex), inter-racial relationships, bullying and violence. This book could be used by teachers with Later Years students to explore these issues as well as our treatment of native Australians. I believe that this is a book for adults as much as for senior school students.

**Deborah Bourke, Professional Learning Leader, Glenroy Schools Cluster, VIC**