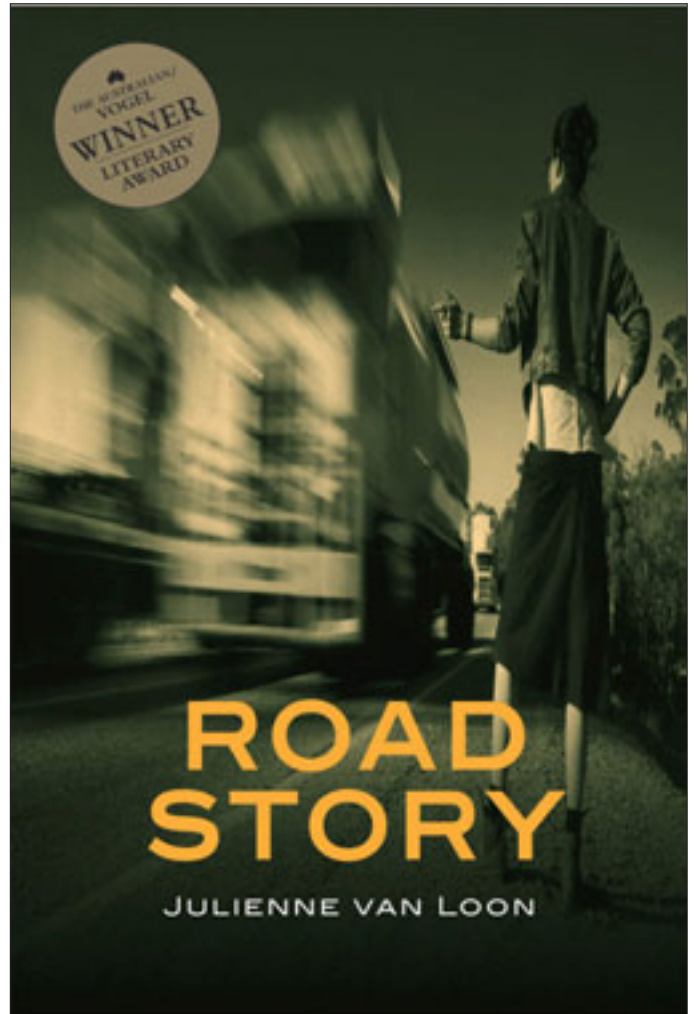


ALLEN & UNWIN



# READING GROUP NOTES

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## About Julienne van Loon

Julienne was born in 1970 and grew up in country New South Wales. She studied creative writing at the University of Wollongong and later at the University of Queensland where *Road Story* was completed as part of her PhD (Creative Writing). Julienne's work has been published in a variety of journals in Australia including *TEXT*, *Mattoid* and *Verandah* and has been broadcast on ABC radio. In 2004, *Road Story* was the winner of *The Australian/Vogel* Literary Award.

Julienne now lives in Perth, where she is a lecturer in the Faculty of Media, Society and Culture at Curtin University of Technology. Julienne's website is [http://au.geocities.com/julienne\\_vanloon/](http://au.geocities.com/julienne_vanloon/)

## On writing *Road Story*—Julienne van Loon

A new story doesn't just appear out of a vacuum; there are other texts that form precursors to the new story, and with which the new story exists in a kind of perpetual dialogue. My novel, *Road Story*, as the title suggests, makes a direct reference to the genre of the road story and therefore to all those road movies as well as road narratives in the form of the novel or poetry or song that have come before it. Mine is an ironic title, though, because in this case the story takes place largely at the side of the road. Diana, the main protagonist of *Road Story*, is not moving, but rather she's stuck working in an isolated truck-stop. She's stuck at the road's edge for most of the book.

While the book is a response to the road narrative as a genre, there are also some specific texts this book responds to. One such text is a song written by Tom Waits. The song is called *Ninth and Hennepin*. You can find the lyrics in full on his official website ([www.officialtomwaits.com](http://www.officialtomwaits.com)). Waits writes about a place on a street corner where all the rooms smell like diesel and where as a visitor, 'you take on the dreams of the ones who have slept there.' His narrator eyes off the girl behind the counter. She has a 'razor sadness' and a tattooed tear. 'Such a crumbling beauty, ah,' he says, 'there's nothing wrong with her a hundred dollars won't fix.'

I first heard those lyrics probably twelve or thirteen years ago, not long before I first started to pen the notes that later became the novel. One line in particular—*nothing wrong with her a hundred dollars won't fix*—stayed with me for years. It made me laugh, for one thing. I was so often very poor as a teenager and as a student, living in the big city of Sydney, a good four hundred kilometres from the town I grew up in (in central-west New South Wales). And as I stayed on and stayed on at university—seven years straight as a full time student—that poverty stretched out and ever onwards, at least it seemed to me at the time. I often laughed and thought, yeah, nothing wrong with me a hundred dollars won't fix. I would have smiled non-stop for three days if a hundred bucks had fallen out of the sky back then.

But if you put that line in context it's a loaded line—*nothing wrong with her a hundred dollars won't fix*—it's double-edged. It's a line spoken by the male voice. He's gazing at the girl behind the counter and he's making the assumption. It's not just any hundred dollars we're talking about. It's HIS hundred dollars. And you can guarantee it wouldn't come without a certain set of expectations, obligations, troubles.

So I started to think about the girl behind the counter. I was interested, and still am, in representing everyday life, especially everyday working life in a contemporary Australian setting. *Road Story* is the story told from the other side of the counter; the girl who only selectively returns the gaze, the girl who has something transient about her, even though she's trapped in a menial job, caught on the 'stage' of the (mainly male) public bar/kitchen/hotel.

The waitress or barmaid in any public place is symbolically home-bound—tethered to the kitchen. Home-boundedness is so often gendered as feminine—it is the male who journeys, the journey is linked to fatherhood, insemination. But the waitress's kitchen is a public one and so she is caught between worlds, especially in a roadhouse in a remote area, as is the case with Diana in *Road Story*. She is neither home nor away. She represents home-boundedness, but is also (always) a stranger.

I worked intensively on the *Road Story* manuscript for a period of 3-4 years from early 2001 to mid 2004, picking up from those very early notes I mentioned and running on from there. At that time I was thinking more deeply about writing about working life and I re-read Michael Ondaatje's beautiful novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*. There's a passage in that novel (just two or three paragraphs) that I read over and over again. Ondaatje has his main protagonist sitting in a cheap kitchen, watching a waitress. He can't keep his eyes off her and he keeps returning there to eat the food prepared by her and to stare. One day he notices a little rip in her blouse and behind the rip he catches a glimpse of a tattoo. He recognises it as an illustration of a wing. She's a kind of angel, this waitress, then, albeit a fallen one. Again, I felt compelled to write back from the point of view of the girl who is the subject of the gaze. What kind of angel is she, or was she, I wondered, and for whom was she an angel?

Something else I was really pre-occupied with during that intensive writing period was the working class lingo that's spoken in central western New South Wales, where I grew up, and where *Road Story* is set. It's a very masculine language. It's full of oaths, curses, insults, invectives, vulgarities. It's a violent language as well as being plenty of fun to speak. It's full of wry humour. But how do you tell this story, I wondered, this story of the girl behind the counter, the girl caught between one place and another, on the run, carrying out unskilled labour, constantly under surveillance by the male gaze, and silenced by (or at least limited by) the very language she is born into? This is not a language designed for or by girls. This is both her language and not her language. It took me a long time to be satisfied with the voice in this novel, because I was really struggling with this big question of gendered working class language and how to get it down on the page in a way that captures its violence and its gendered-state, without completely disowning it or judging it (it is my language, after all, and I wanted to play with it and I wanted to stand up for it too).

## Reviews

'Compelling . . . the truckers, their habits, their rigs and their nonchalant ferocity come at you. She opens a window into the grit and diesel fumes of road-centred lives.' Stella Clarke, Judge, *The Australian/Vogel Literary Award* 2004.

'Raw, direct and passionate, the assurance of van Loon's novel should distract no-one from the integrity and the intelligence which give weight to it.' James Bradley, Judge, *The Australian/Vogel Literary Award* 2004.

**More reviews to come.**

## Some suggested points for discussion



Is the novel a road story, in the conventional sense? What alternative view of road narratives does the novel offer?



What can you tell from the novel about Diana's relationship with her parents? How do her feelings toward her alcoholic mother and her absent father influence her relationships with others?



To what extent are the two girls—Diana and Nicole—more than just friends? Where is the line between hetero sexual and homosexual friendship between women? Is it possible for the bond between friends to be stronger than familial bonds?



How does the geographical isolation at Bob's place affect the various inhabitants of the truck-stop? Why do you think the author chose such an isolated setting?



Is Bob a good man, ultimately, or not?



Liam Davison, one of the judges for *The Australian/Vogel Award* (2004) describes the novel as having 'an interesting moral stance'. What do you think he means by this? Do you agree?



How would you describe van Loon's prose style? Could it be called minimalist? Is it an effective style for the kind of story she has chosen to tell?



What do you imagine happens to Diana after the end of the novel? How do you imagine she goes on living her life?

## Further reading

*In the Skin of a Lion* by Michael Ondaatje

*Hiam* by Eva Sallis

*Drown Them in the Sea* by Nicholas Angel