ALLEN & UNWIN’S
Book Group Guide
Conversation Starters

The True Story of Maddie Bright

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ABOUT THE BOOK

In 1920, seventeen-year-old Maddie Bright gratefully accepts a job as a serving girl on the royal tour of Australia by Edward, Prince of Wales. Maddie’s talents soon earn her the respect of Helen Burns, the prince’s vivacious press secretary, and Rupert Waters, his most loyal man, and Maddie is in awe of Edward himself, the ‘people’s’ prince.

What starts as a desire to help her family, devastated by the recent war, becomes for Maddie a chance to work on something that matters. When the unthinkable happens, it is swift and life changing.

Decades later, Maddie Bright is living in a ramshackle house in Paddington, Brisbane. She has Ed, her drunken and devoted neighbour, to talk to, the television news to shout at, and door-knocker religions to join. But when London journalist Victoria Byrd gets the sniff of a story that might lead to the true identity of a famously reclusive writer, Maddie’s version of her own story may change.

1920, 1981 and 1997: the strands twist across the seas and over two continents to build a compelling story of love and fame, motherhood and friendship. Set at key moments in the lives of two of the most loved and hated figures of the twentieth century, in Maddie Bright, a reader will find a friend and, by novel’s close, that friend’s true and moving story.

‘A thoughtful, multi-layered tale that probes the stories we tell ourselves about family and friendship, power and control. MacColl’s writing deftly—yet gently—explores the nature of courage and kept me guessing to the very end.’—Kirsty Manning, author of the bestselling The Jade Lily

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The True Story of Maddie Bright is Mary-Rose MacColl’s sixth novel. Her first novel, No Safe Place, was runner-up in the 1995 Australian/Vogel’s Literary Award, and her first non-fiction book, The Birth Wars, was a finalist in the 2009 Walkley Awards. Her international bestseller, In Falling Snow, was published to great acclaim in 2012 in Australia and the US. Swimming Home, published in 2015, won the People’s Choice Award at the 2016 Queensland Literary Awards. MacColl’s memoir, For a Girl, was published in 2017 and was shortlisted in the Queensland Literary Awards and the Victorian Premier’s Literary Awards. She lives in Brisbane, Australia, with her husband and son.
FROM THE AUTHOR

How the idea originated

_The True Story of Maddie Bright_ is about women across the span of history, and it’s about journalism, celebrity, fame and lost babies, but the novel’s first dramatic spark was a train crash.

In 1920, Edward, Prince of Wales, visited Australia to thank the people for their support in the Great War. South of Perth, his train derailed. Three carriages tipped over, including the young prince’s. Edward was the one who later abdicated but as Prince of Wales he was enormously popular. I read about the train crash over a decade ago and thought it would make a great scene in a novel.

Writing my last novel _Swimming Home_, which is about the women who first swam the English Channel, I became interested in celebrity and fame and what we do to women in public life. I am also intensely interested in people and how they respond to life’s enormous challenges. I like to take a long view, to have characters who have experienced things, in order to think about what they mean.

Out of all this, I cobbled together what has turned out to be a layered story or stories within a story. Maddie Bright is just seventeen when she gets the job on Edward’s tour and, years later, she is looking back and trying to come to terms with her experiences. She has a letter from Helen, who she met on the tour, and Helen has her own experiences to come to terms with. Victoria is a journalist who has covered Diana, Princess of Wales, and now, engaged to an American film star, is experiencing some of what it is like to deal with fame.

The novel asks questions and follows these characters but doesn’t give firm answers. There are no firm answers when it comes to humans, I am starting to understand. I do love to think about what happens to us though.

Research

_The True Story of Maddie Bright_ is set in three periods. In 1920, Edward visited Australia and the novel follows his tour. I was lucky to have the published diary of the tour written by his cousin Dickie (Louis Mountbatten) and it shows dates and times. Various other sources (biographies, newspaper archives) helped fill gaps. It was such a huge time of adjustment for people, 1920, coming to terms with the terrible toll of the war on families. It was easier to construct events from 1981 and 1997 in relation to Diana’s engagement and death because I had lived in these times.

Writing real historical people—Edward is a character in the novel—is a big responsibility and my rule of thumb is that while I am a novelist and not a historian, I must try to remain true to the spirit of the character in terms of what’s known about them. In the 1990s, a collection of Edward’s 1920 letters to his lover Freda Dudley Ward was found quite accidentally and then published. These were invaluable in understanding Edward and what motivated him. They are fascinating, and great fodder for a novelist.
I have written novels set in the mid-1920s before, as well as one set in World War I, but with this novel, I liked writing that moment when the war was over and life had not quite got going again for folk. I loved writing 1981 and 1997 as periods, both times not all that long ago when we had no mobile phones, no internet as we know it today. Also, having a job where your research includes surfing the internet for pictures of Prince George and Princess Charlotte is a good job in my opinion.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

• The novel lives across three time periods—1920, 1981, 1997. Do you feel that the author was successful in moving the reader through these different historical periods to more contemporary times?
• How did you feel towards Maddie during the different time periods?
• Why do you think the Prince struggled with his role? Do you think he had any redeeming qualities?
• On page 50, Maddie mentions that Andrew Shaw reminded her of Mr Waters. Why do you think that was and do you agree?
• On page 264, we read Maddie’s letter to Helen. What did you learn? And what was your response?
• Did your impression of Mr Waters change from the beginning to the end of the novel?
• Throughout the novel we learn more about the relationship between Helen and Mr Waters. Was the ending what you expected?
• How did the war impact Maddie’s family?
• Do you think Helen’s or Maddie’s choices contributed to their suffering? What would you have done if you were Maddie?
• Does Victoria make good choices in her life?
• There’s a strand of this book that links back to Mary-Rose MacColl’s bestselling novel, In Falling Snow. It’s the setting of Royaumont Abbey in Paris which was, in World War I, a Scottish Women’s Hospital. What is it about that setting, do you think, that made the author want to revisit?
• At one point in real life, Mary-Rose had a job writing correspondence and speeches for a university vice-chancellor. She gave that job to the young Maddie Bright, whose role it was to learn to be the voice of Prince Edward while he was touring Australia. Could you imagine doing Maddie’s job?
• The women in The True Story of Maddie Bright find themselves trapped sometimes by what the society of their times demanded of them. It’s interesting and enlightening to look back on this, in particular society’s expectations surrounding mothering. Compare the differences in their opportunities and choices.
• Princess Diana died in 1997 yet we still see articles written about her influence, documentaries made about her and her photograph on the cover of magazines. Why do you think that we cannot let her go?
• How have things changed in terms of the way we deal with fame, celebrity and women in the age of the internet?
JUST FOR FUN . . .

• Who would you cast in a screen adaptation of *The True Story of Maddie Bright*?
• If you could have a chat with any character from the novel, who would it be and why? What three questions would you ask them?
• Pick out a passage that strikes you as particularly moving or interesting and read it to the group.

ALSO BY MARY-ROSE MacCOLL

IF YOU LIKED THIS BOOK . . .

May we suggest the following?
There’s no better way to talk about books than over a plate of something delicious with a glass in hand. Our selected recipes ensure your dishes bring as much conversation to the table as any great romance or dark thriller.

For *The True Story of Maddie Bright*, we turned to foodie artist extraordinaire Bernadette Gee and her amazing concoction of taste sensations in *Magnolia Kitchen*. Well known for her artistic cake designs, Bets of Magnolia Kitchen is a force to be reckoned with. From humble beginnings, she now runs a sweet cafe, wholesale distribution business and online shop delivering her retail products worldwide, while maintaining a strong following on Instagram @magnoliakitchen.

As well as her amazingly creative custom cakes, Bets is celebrated for her macarons, doughnuts, brioche, gourmet s’mores and many more mouth-watering treats. In her first cookbook she shares her journey and her widely sought-after recipes so that you can enjoy the deliciousness at home. With step-by-step instructions for cake decorating and making macarons, and a full range of allergy-friendly recipes, this is a must-have book for anyone interested in baking and eating.

Check out some of Bernadette’s mouth-watering creations online!

- Decorated macarons
- Allergy-friendly brioche doughnuts
- Cake popsicles
- Orange and date mini cakes
**BANANA LOAF**

**METHOD**

Preheat your oven to 170°C (325°F). Grease your loaf tin (a standard-sized one) with a bit of butter and line it with baking paper.

Beat—yeah buddy, BEAT**—the eggs and sugar with a mixer until thick and fluffy. Add the mashed banana and beat to combine.

Add the dry ingredients to your mixer bowl and—yup, you guessed it—BEAT to combine, then add the melted butter... and you know what? Let’s give it another beat just for good measure.

Now that you have exhausted yourself (and your mixer) with all that beating, pour the batter into the prepared tin. Slice the remaining banana in half longways, peel and place on top of the batter, facing up. Sprinkle with brown sugar.

Put in your preheated oven and bake for 30–40 mins until golden brown on top—when you give it a pokey poke with a skewer, the skewer should come out clean.

Remove from the oven and allow to cool in the tin. Once it’s cool, remove from the tin, slice the entire loaf and toast as required. Drizzle with Salted Caramel if desired. ADD BUTTER ALWAYS!

This loaf can be frozen if you like. I recommend pre-slicing and laying pieces of baking paper in between slices—this will mean you can toast as required.

**TIMING**

**PREP** 20 mins  
**BAKING** 30–40 mins  
**MAKES** 1 standard loaf

**INGREDIENTS**

**Loaf mix**

- 2 eggs
- 250 g (9 oz) brown sugar
- 2 ripe bananas, peeled and roughly mashed
- 300 g (10½ oz) plain flour
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 150 g (5½ oz) butter, melted

**Topping**

- 1 banana
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- Salted Caramel (optional; page 129), to drizzle

*Can I just say that there are lots of fun words that make me giggle... so if you like to snigger immaturely at normal words that can in any way be misconstrued as filth, do join me 😊*

Extract from Magnolia Kitchen by Bernadette Gee (A&U New Zealand) available now.
SIMPLE YET SUMPTUOUS

Eager to expand your culinary skills? We have more than a few recommendations that will keep your pickiest guest happy.
To pair nicely with your dish, we’ve selected a fun cocktail that will transport you to the whimsical world of Lewis Carroll!

*Drink Me! Curious Cocktails From Wonderland* by Nick Perry includes concoctions for every palate and occasion that will fill you with wonder and childish glee at the surreal flavor combinations, while amassing the perfect selection of drinks for your own spirit-soaked Mad Hatter’s tea party.

Perfect pre-dinner aperitifs are in abundance, including *The Queen of Hearts*, a sweet, refreshing drink with bitter undertones, and *Painting the Roses Red*, a bubbly highball of sharp raspberry and gin flavours, softened with a hint of rose water. Reminisce over the taste of our childhood with drinks such as *Bread and Butterfly Pudding* and the *Unbirthday Cake Martini*. *The Duchesses Soup* is a refined take on the punchbowl, while the *Caucus Chaser* is a refreshing palate cleanser; a sticky plum and chestnut sharpener low enough in alcohol that you can greedily gulp it without even a hint of regret.

*Drink Me!* includes everything you need to know for throwing your own *Alice in Wonderland* themed cocktail party: techniques for mixing and decorating your drinks, and even tags and labels for glasses and bottles to copy, cut out, and use.

For more information, go to murdochbooks.com.au
Cup of Mad Tea

“It’s always tea-time, and we’ve no time to wash the things between whiles.”

No collection of cocktails from Wonderland would be complete without including a Mad Tea, a drink that keeps the March Hare, Mad Hatter, and Dormouse suitably lubricated as they enjoy their perpetual tea party. Our version consists of Assam and Darjeeling infusions to create a malty alcoholic brew, while the dash of absinthe adds an extra touch of madness to the drink.

YIELD
1 cocktail

INGREDIENTS
- 1.5 oz (45 ml) Darjeeling gin (page 118)
- 1 oz (30 ml) Assam tea syrup (page 103)
- 1 oz (30 ml) blood orange juice
- 1 teaspoon real absinthe
- 1 dehydrated blood orange wheel (page 136)

METHOD
1. Add the gin, syrup, blood orange juice, and absinthe to a mixing glass over cubed ice. Stir the mixture for 1½ minutes, or until the liquid has roughly doubled in volume. 2. Fine strain the mixture into an ornate teacup and garnish with a slice of dehydrated blood orange.

Extract from Drink Me! by Nick Perry and Paul Rosser (Quarto US, Rock Point Gift & Stationery) available now.
CHIN CHIN!

Whether you’re planning a drinks menu or considering a home bar, these delicious concoctions are sure to add more than a little flavour.