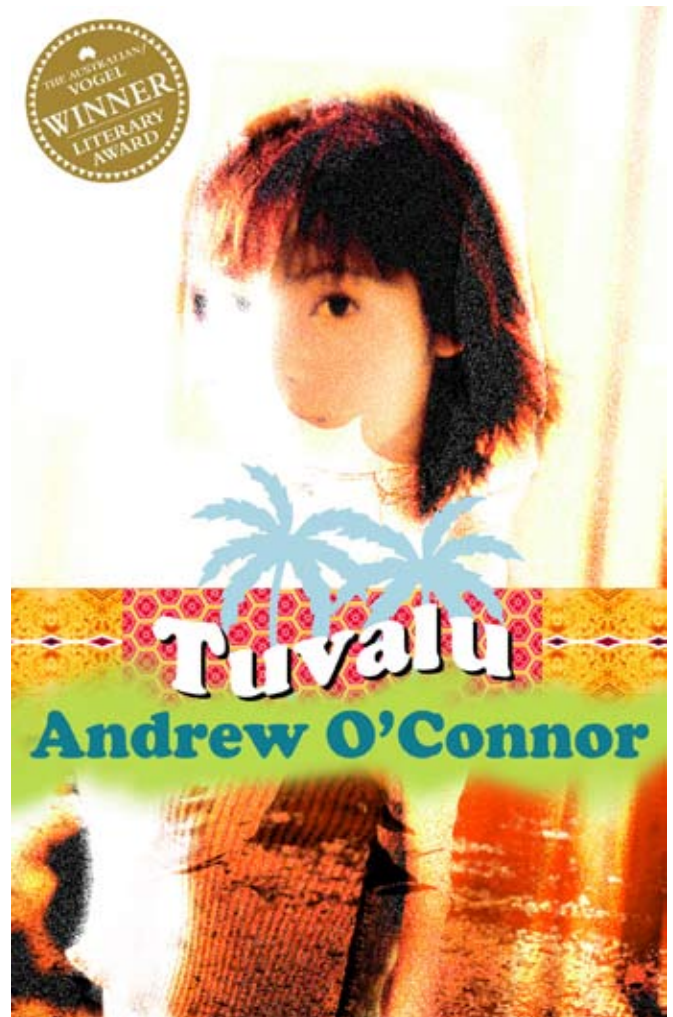


ALLEN & UNWIN



# READING GROUP NOTES

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## About Andrew O'Connor

Andrew O'Connor was born in 1978 in Warragul, Victoria. He studied Arts at Melbourne University before travelling and working in central and northern Australia. For the last four years, Andrew has divided his time between stints teaching English (ESL) in various regions of Japan, and writing in Australia. His first novel, *Tuvalu*, won *The Australian/Vogel Literary Award* in 2005.

## On writing *Tuvalu*—Andrew O'Connor

Shortly before I started work on *Tuvalu*, I picked up a job in Japan rather like that which Tilly takes in order to return to Tokyo. It was a long way from my apartment and required me to sit on trains four hours a day, time I filled by writing. I had been writing a lot since the age of twenty—mostly short stories that friends and family politely laboured through and said 'mmm' about—but this was the first time I had been forced to come back to a story, day in day out. I wrote with a pencil, erasing and refining paragraphs as I went, but drastic changes were out of the question. So I just wrote and wrote until the job ended and I stepped back and saw what a mess it was. Oddly enough, I wasn't upset that 50,000 words had led me nowhere, because I had learnt the way in which characters and stories emerge.

So, unemployed again, I sat down and tried to write the perfect opening of a brand new novel. I had simplified the basic plot outline, but, as I have done so many times before on computers, spent the day on a single paragraph, cutting, pasting, deleting and losing all perspective, until in frustration I gave up and stomped around wondering what had changed. The next day was little better. And the next. I was very close to giving up when I started writing a conversation between two unnamed people. By the end of it they had names and I saved it as 'Mami Kaketa Can Have This' (which, in the final book is the conversation between Noah and Mami about the stolen ticket, running through until the ferris wheel ride).

For a long while that's what *Tuvalu* was called - 'Mami Kaketa Can Have This'. Then it became 'Untitled', while I slowly figured out the greater story. This remained until I wrote the last few chapters.

I had always intended to go back and fill in Mami and Noah's first meeting in the bar, but never did. Instead, the opening that is now in the book seemed to fit better, and after that it was simply a matter of writing forward from the ferris wheel section. Whenever I found myself stuck, I went back to the unfinished novel from the train and stole sections from it, using them to prompt more. At times I wanted to give it away, and at others I hated anything that took me from it. The night I wrote the ending I remember feeling an enormous relief. I went out for karaoke.

The novel is in no way autobiographical. Yes, I was unemployed in one of the most expensive cities in the world while writing much of *Tuvalu*, and I was also home in Warragul for a few stints. I can understand how it looks like autobiography, but it is all made up. The reason for the overlap is no coincidence, however. I was reading a lot of Japanese writers at the time—Murakami, Soseki, Mishima and others, and a bit of Hemingway—and was impressed by the environments

they conjured. I wanted to use what was around me, to set my fictional story in places I knew well and was interacting with on a daily basis. This seemed the most effective way of putting a first novel together, because I could continue it wherever I was without a need for libraries or expert opinions. Characters, on the other hand, came from my imagination. Perhaps little bits of a number of people found their way in, but I didn't have a strict Catholic upbringing, nor do I know a Mami Kaketa.

After the first draft was finished, I started job hunting in earnest and was lucky to get a job in a government junior high school in idyllic Nagano (the basic setting for the Niigata apartment Noah and Phillip share, minus the dope), and here, over two more drafts, I chopped about 30,000 words from the manuscript before finally entering it in *The Australian/Vogel Literary Award*. Winning this was the second stroke of great luck, the first having been my sticking at a new novel long enough to write the 'Mami Kaketa Can Have This' conversation.

Only later, in the redrafting, did I refine the notion of a Tuvalu—an ideal place that we reach in life, from which there is no longer this constant sense of 'it'll be better when...' Without wanting to talk outside my experience, it seems, statistically speaking, a lot of young Australians have found themselves chasing opportunities overseas, almost trying to live every opportunity there is in the world before they at last 'settle'. While living in Alice Springs, Darwin and Japan, I sometimes envied friends who had elected to remain back in Melbourne, and I began over time to think about those things we risk losing whenever we shoot for yet more.


## Reviews


'This is the real thing. Engrossing, original, deft. He's a real find.' Hilary McPhee, Judge, *The Australian/Vogel Literary Award* 2005.


'Always surprising, it maps the complex emotional currents of a young man navigating between two cultures, exploring issues of love, lust, honesty and commitment...' Liam Davison, Judge, *The Australian/Vogel Literary Award* 2005.


'It is a book that is filled with brilliant observations, honesty, wit, insight and a wonderfully comic sense of the absurdity of our chaotic lives. His timing is impeccable. I laughed a lot, to myself and aloud. The ending is one of the best I've ever read. It sent me back through the story and kept unwinding in my mind for hours.' Alex Miller


## Some suggested points for discussion


 Running through the novel is a strong theme of personal and cultural disconnectedness and exile, reminiscent of the film *Lost in Translation*. Do you sympathise with Noah in his disconnection, or are you frustrated by his passivity? Why do you think he is such a lost soul? What is he seeking in Japan? Are there other 'exiles' in the book? Who are they?


 'Tuvalu is ... a dream land or life they're working towards, however vaguely ... a destination ... a place in which you're content ...' What do you think is Noah's 'Tuvalu'?

 Noah says '... in Japan I was an outsider by default. It was automatic. Japan expected nothing from me ... It had taken a year in my cocoon of an apartment to learn to pass through Tokyo like a stray animal, interested only in myself...' Given this reference to himself as a stray animal, what do you think about all the references to stray cats in the book, including the cat-killing scene? What meaning do you think they hold?

 Towards the end of the novel, Noah says that he thinks of Mami as 'the invention of a girl ... an illusion'. What did Noah want Mami to be for him? Why did he want or need to think of himself as in love with her?

 What do you think motivates Mami? Do you admire her or are you repelled by her?

 'I was only ever trying it on,' says Mami, when returning Noah's denim jacket. Was Mami just trying Noah on? Does she just discard him when she's finished, like she discards clothes, possessions, friends? Or was there more to it than that?

 'Sometimes you get given an ending, other times you have to make one,' says Mami. Were you surprised by the ending of the book? What do you make of it?

## Further reading

*Road Story* by Julianne van Loon

*Praise* by Andrew McGahan

*The Corner of Your Eye* by Kate Lyons