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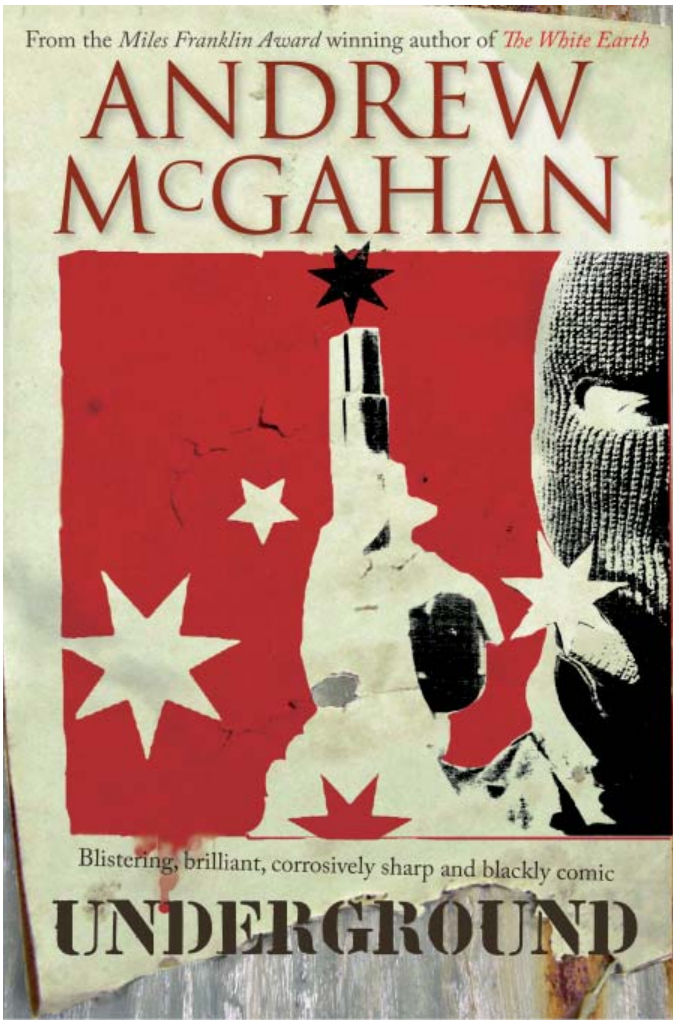

READING GROUP NOTES

Contents:

About Andrew McGahan

Andrew McGahan was born in Dalby, Queensland, but has lived and worked mostly in Brisbane, although he has spent the last six years in Melbourne. His first novel *Praise* (1992) was winner of The Australian/Vogel Literary Award. Since then his writing includes an award winning stage play (Bait) and the AFI award winning screenplay for the movie version of *Praise*. His second novel was the prequel *1988* (1995), and his third novel *Last Drinks* (2000) was shortlisted for multiple awards, including The Age Book of the Year and The Courier Mail Book of the Year, and won a Ned Kelly award for crime writing. In 2004 *The White Earth* was published and went on to win the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the South East Asia and South Pacific region, The Age Book of the Year (Fiction) and The Courier Mail Book of the Year Award. It was also shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards that same year.

On writing *Underground*—Andrew McGahan

Underground was written very much out of disgust with the Howard Government, and out of anger about the direction in which Australia is being taken both politically and culturally, from the War on Terror to the war on history. Of course, there's nothing all that interesting or unique in being disgusted with the Howard Government and its agenda – close to half the country feels the same way, if the past few election results mean anything. But on a purely personal level it seems a better thing, for the sake of my own sanity, to vent some of my outrage in a book, rather than continuing to rant at my friends over beers down the pub, or to keep swearing at the TV screen every time Howard's face appears, hoping against hope that his head will explode one day from all the bullshit, spin and sanctimony that he has crammed inside it. True, normally I'd be wary of being so overtly political with a novel. But this no longer seems the time to be polite or indirect in fiction, or to be artfully diffident. It's time to confront the danger of what's going on here, head on.

That said, there's nothing more dull than a stream of invective, even if you happen to agree with it, so I knew that I couldn't just write 'I hate John Howard' fifty thousand times over, as cathartic as that might have been. Nor was I interested in writing a sober and well reasoned work of critical analysis. No, this felt like nothing more complex than a cry of protest – and indeed, if there can be such things as protest songs, then why can't there be such things as protest novels? But a protest song only works as a protest if the song itself is worth singing in its own right. So if this was going to work as a protest novel, than it had to be worth reading as a novel first and foremost. There had to be a story to it all. And after the stately high gothic seriousness of my previous book, *The White Earth*, this time around I was really in the mood for something fast, fun and blackly farcical.

So I launched off into *Underground*, and into Australia's dysfunctional near future. However, one thing the book is most certainly not meant to be is a prediction of what I think will really happen in this country – this is merely a worst case scenario, almost absurdly overstated. After all, we live in an age where the worst case scenario is king. September 11 itself was a worst case scenario come true. And ever since then, western governments around the world have been using worst case scenarios of further terrorist attacks to explain and justify their ever more

stringent security laws and aggressive foreign policies. All well and good, and I'm not for a second denying the need to take terrorism seriously. But it's important to remember that terrorists are not the only threat we face. Our desperate desire for security from terrorists, no matter what the cost to personal freedoms or to the rule of law, is a threat all of its own – and *Underground* is merely illustrating, in worst case scenario fashion, that there are horrible pitfalls into which we could stray, if we aren't careful.

Western governments, of course, would respond that they are being careful. That they'll never abuse the immense new powers they have gathered to themselves. That all we have to do is trust them. It'd be nice if we could. But sadly Howard and Bush and the like have long since forfeited any right they ever had to be taken on faith.

It was a relatively quick book to write. Which was how it needed to be. After all, it's supposed to be the hastily jotted down memoirs of a man facing execution, so the tone had to be simple, straightforward and not overly polished. I started playing around with the early chapters in late 2004, but the bulk of it was written in mid-2005, with the first draft heading off to the publishers in November of that year. There were no great issues in the editing, just the usual tightening and trimming, and the last work on it was all finished by mid-2006.

Of course, the plot itself didn't just pop into my head fully formed. Its roots lie in a whole other story I was thinking about telling – it was going to be about a famous property developer, a close friend of the Prime Minister, who wins the Australian of the Year Award in very dubious circumstance. I was planning to use the Award as a vehicle to express a whole range of doubts and concerns about current trends in Australia. (It's such a weird thing, after all, the Australian of the Year. Does any other country do anything like it?) But as my unease about things intensified, I realised that such a story was going to be too roundabout and vague. I needed something more pointed. And gradually the man from the earlier narrative morphed into Leo James, brother to the PM, not merely a friend; the Award was replaced by a terrorist kidnapping; the setting moved from the Australia of the now to an Australia of the future; and the question of what's happening to this country moved from the periphery of the plot to the dead centre of it.

From there, it was merely a matter of letting my pessimism run wild, as to how bad things could actually get. And of indulging myself with a plot that grew more preposterous with every chapter. I'm a bit amazed actually that I managed to tie it all up in a way that makes any sort of sense at all – conspiracy theory on top of conspiracy theory – although of course the plot is full of holes if you want to go looking for them. But I was determined not to bore anybody, least of all myself, so it was very much a case of the more outlandish the better.

It was nice change for me too to have a story that roamed for once beyond a Queensland setting. Obviously, having resided in Melbourne now for six years, I was always going to use something from my new locale – not that I actually live in Brunswick. As for Canberra and the awful things I do to that town in the novel, well, I've never lived there either, but I've visited friends there quite often … and what can I say? I mean it no real harm, as weird a place as it is.

Reviews

The Courier Mail—Nick Bray

Author's disgust fuels his best yet

The boy from Dalby has done pretty well for himself, of course, winning the Miles Franklin Award for his previous novel, [*The*] *White Earth*, and having seen *Praise* turned into a film and *Last Drinks* into a play. But *Underground* should turn him into a true star.

It's a hard-hitting satire set in an Australia of the not-too-distant future, where Prime Minister Bernard James is intent on building on John Howard's legacy.

Like Howard, he has mastered the 'drab, dour, but honest schtick'. And like Howard, he has turned the war on terror to his political advantage.

Bernard, however, is fortunate in having the trump card of a nuclear attack on Canberra to use as cover to amass unprecedented power.

A permanent state of emergency is in place, Muslims have been rounded up into ghettos and patriotism is encouraged on an American scale. […]

Underground opens with a bang, with Cyclone Yusuf bearing down on the seaside resort developed by the Prime Minister's black sheep twin brother, Leo, the narrator of this story.

Leo's riding out the storm, but manages to get caught up in a different kind of maelstrom altogether. He's kidnapped by a gang of radical Islamists and from there Leo's life just gets worse, particularly when it becomes clear his brother would prefer him dead.

What follows is a delicious romp through an Australia both familiar and deeply disturbing.

In McGahan's brave new world, citizenship tests for migrants aren't just being proposed . Everyone must know the answer to seven key questions that form the Citizenship Verification Test.

What was Donald Bradman's batting average? What line follows this one from Banjo Patterson's *The Man From Snowy River*, There was movement at the station?

Predictable so far, but then McGahan starts to have a bit of fun.

On what date does Anzac Week begin? Shades of how Queensland Day has recently been turned into a week of chest-thumping Queenslandness.

Next question. Where did the criminal bushranger Ned Kelly murder three innocent policemen?

And so it goes, carefully phrased questions and answers designed to boost jingoism, rewrite history and change the

national character in the process.

While Leo is a Christopher Skase-like character writ small, he's capable of sharp observations. When he bemoans the transformation of a larrikin nation into a country obsessed with money and security, it verges on the poetic.

Occasionally you fear that McGahan has fetched too far, but in *Underground* he manages to reel it all in with style.

The Sydney Morning Herald—James Ley

Andrew McGahan's most political work to date imagines Australia's near future - and it doesn't look good

Andrew McGahan's fiction has long had a political dimension. With the exception of his first book – the Vogel Award-winning *Praise* – his novels have all been built around specific flashpoints from Australia's recent past.

He has developed an accessible style of issues-based fiction, in which the tensions underlying various political disputes are played out through an astute manipulation of different genres and narrative conventions.

In *1988*, he used a road novel to comment upon some of the implications of Australia's colonial history. His next book, *Last Drinks,* interpreted the fallout from Queensland's Fitzgerald inquiry through the lens of a crime thriller. More recently in *The White Earth* – which earned him the 2005 Miles Franklin Award – he used a gothic template to explore the anxieties dredged up by the High Court's Mabo decision.

Underground adopts a similar technique. It is, without doubt, McGahan's most nakedly political work so far, positioning itself as a comment on the 'war on terror' generally and a broadside against the Howard Government in particular. Curiously, it pursues this agenda in the unlikely form of a fast-moving and sometimes outrageous action-adventure novel, parts of which read as if Matthew Reilly had suddenly and miraculously discovered how to write competent prose. Although the combination is not quite as incongruous as it might seem, the result is nevertheless McGahan's most problematic and least satisfying work to date.

Australian Book Review—Kerryn Goldsworthy

Straight for the throat

Several years ago, on two separate occasions, Drusilla Modjeska and David Marr called for Australian fiction writers to address directly the state of the country in its post-9/11 incarnation. 'I have a simple plea to make,' said Marr in the Redfern Town Hall in March 2003, delivering the annual Colin Simpson Lecture: 'that writers start focusing on what is happening in this country, looking Australia in the face, not flinching … So few Australian novels – now I take my life in my hands – address in worldly, adult ways the country and the time in which we live. It's no good ceding that territory to people like me – to journalists. That's not good enough.' Six months before Marr's lecture, Drusilla Modjeska had published in *Timepieces* (2002) an essay called 'The Present in Fiction', which raised, from a slightly different direction, some of the same issues:

Why are so few people writing novels about the lives we are living right now, here in Australia? Why this retreat of fiction into history, I hear people say, naming one novel after another set in the pre-modern past … too much of our

recent fiction has become safe; our novels have lost their urgency, protected by the soft glow of 'history'.

It is hard to argue with this when you look at this year's Miles Franklin Award shortlist and see that all five novels on it are historical – and by 'historical' I mean not the generic bodice-ripper but any novel set in the historical past. Many, indeed most, of these novels use scenes from the past as a way of shedding light on the present, but they are still not direct engagements with the reality of our own lives in current Australia. The problem isn't the presence of historically based novels, but the absence of the other kind. […]

For all the bold strokes with which this story is told, and despite the straightforward and pragmatic voice in which the narrator tells it, the narrative is carefully managed. […] This is an intermittently very funny book in which the humour of the satire tends to numb response to the large amount of sudden and violent death. But the ideas behind it are chilling, and so are the points it makes about what you'll see if you pick up the paper or go out into the street … for most of McGahan's futuristic Australia already exists. […] The book has the feral quality of good political cartooning, a willingness to caricature in bold strokes, to make laconically savage fun of solemn hypocrisies, and to go straight for the throat. […]

David Marr, in his 2003 lecture, described Australia as 'a country where mainstream leaders – not nutters from the far right – manipulate race fears to hang onto power, where political opposition has been tepid, indeed complicit, where the press is too often outwitted, the public service cowed [and] the military top brass outmanoeuvred'. So precisely does *Underground* address each of these issues that it is hard to believe that McGahan didn't hear or read Marr's lecture and draw some kind of inspiration from it. But the event that seems to have been the main trigger for this book was the visit of George W. Bush to Canberra in October 2003, when the Americans took over the capital – entry to Parliament House controlled by the president's men; American film crews allowed in where Australian cameras were not – and the Australian government simply rolled over and stuck its paws in the air. […] For a novelist trying to work out the myriad technical problems of probability, recognisability, logistics and imagination that are posed by the writing of futuristic fiction, a setting in the very near future is both harder and easier: harder because your flights of imagination are more firmly tied to existing conditions; easier because much of your material is just sitting there in the daily paper, waiting for you to pick it up. Most of the separate elements of McGahan's dystopian Australia are already in place.

And the truly fearful thing about a dystopia set in the near future is the way it can blend in so seamlessly with real life as it unfolds from day to day. A few chapters from the end of *Underground*, I took a break to check my e-mail and found in it a press release from the Australian Society of Authors, containing an announcement that seemed to be a joke or a hoax but, alas, was not: it said that the South Coast Writers' proposed poetry reading in the Wollongong Mall had been banned by the mall's management, lest anyone should read poetry about politics or religion and thereby break the new sedition laws. Chatting on the phone that night to a friend who isn't a big reader of fiction but knows a lot about the military, I mentioned *Underground*, told him a bit about it and suggested he might like to read it. I then went on to tell him about the ASA press release. To my slight surprise, he laughed.

> 'Yes,' he said, 'that does sound like a book I'd like to read.'
> 'No, no,' I said, 'this bit is for real. This is something that really did happen.'
> 'Oh,' he said. 'Oh, dear.'

Some suggested points for discussion

- *Underground* has been described as a 'dystopic' novel ('dystopia' means an imaginary world where everything is as bad as it can possibly be; the opposite of 'utopia'.) Do you agree that *Underground* fits into the dystopic genre? Or is it more in the tradition of larrikin Australian novels?

- Andrew McGahan has said above that '[This] no longer seems the time to be polite or indirect in fiction, or to be artfully diffident. It's time to confront the danger of what's going on here, head on. [... If] there can be such things as protest songs, then why can't there be such things as protest novels?' Do you think *Underground* is more of a protest novel or more of a romp (as reviewer Nick Bray wrote)?

- Prominent features of the dystopic novel are the loss of personal freedoms and the abuse of a society's trust in its leaders. Discuss how these themes are explored in Underground generally. How do you think we could read Leo James' relationship with his brother Bernard, the Prime Minister, in terms of these themes?

- *Underground* is set in the near future and the society Andrew McGahan has imagined is quite familiar. Talk about the impact such familiarity has on your reading of this novel.

- How far-fetched or believable do you find the events in the novel, and the way Leo reacts to them? Does this make a difference to your enjoyment of it?

Further reading

1984 by George Orwell
Last Drinks by Andrew McGahan
Divided Kingdom by Rupert Thomson
The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood
A Brave New Wold by Aldous Huxley