



ALLEN & UNWIN

AUSTRALIAN. INDEPENDENT. FOR READERS.

READING GROUP NOTES
GOOD BOY



MICHELLE WRIGHT ON GOOD BOY

Could you tell us a little about *Good Boy*?

Good Boy is set in September 1997 in Middleborough, a fictional minimum-security prison. It tells the story of an inmate Cookie who'll be up for parole in four months after serving a twenty year sentence, and who signs up for a last chance rehabilitation program for abandoned dogs.

Cookie is assigned an anxious and destructive Lab-Staffy cross who he optimistically renames Good Boy. All the dogs will need to pass a behavioural assessment at the end of the program if they're going to find a new forever home. However it quickly becomes evident that Good Boy is firmly on track to fail the test and be put down. As the day of reckoning approaches Cookie decides to do whatever it takes to save Good Boy. This quest will force him to confront his past, the people that shaped him as a person, and the events that led him to prison.

Good Boy is above all an exploration of the bonds between dogs and their humans, and about the power of connection, compassion and redemption.

How did the idea for *Good Boy* originate?

The inspiration for this novel dates back to 1982 when, as an eighteen-year-old, I spent four months in Melbourne's notorious Pentridge Prison, acting with the prisoners' theatre group in their production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. During this time, I got to know some of the men very well and gained an incredible insight into life inside a maximum security prison. In the conversations I had with the men both during the play and in the letters we exchanged afterwards, they shared their personal insights into what had brought them to prison, their backgrounds, their crimes and their experience of the prison system. These conversations led to my lifelong interest in notions central to criminal justice and incarceration, such as regret, remorse, retribution, rehabilitation and redemption which I explore in the novel.

While my characters are purely fictional, some of the personal stories I heard and the personalities of the men I got to know back in 1982 and over the past few years inspired the story of Cookie, his fellow inmates and his family background.

Both the dogs in my life have been rescue dogs. Harvey, who died a few months ago, was my constant companion as I wrote *Good Boy*. The bond I had with him inspired me to write a novel which explores the connection between two unlikely companions, their growing understanding of each other and the ability of relationships (both with humans and with dogs) to heal deep wounds.



Image Credit: Emma Roussel

Did you have to do any special research for the novel?

In researching *Good Boy* I travelled to various parts of regional Victoria, exploring settings for the areas where Cookie and Good Boy would be on the run. I also did research on minimum security prisons, especially those that run dog rehabilitation programs similar to the one portrayed in the novel. I was lucky enough to be able to speak to several correctional officers and staff from animal welfare organisations who shared very useful details about the logistics of running these programs, as well as insights into daily life in a minimum security prison (including how to escape from one!)

In my current role as a tour guide for the National Trust in Pentridge Prison I've discovered numerous details about the conditions inside maximum and minimum security prisons between the 1970s and 1990s. I've been able to access areas of the former prison, some of which aren't accessible to the general public. I've also been able to connect with many former prisoners, their family members as well as former prison officers and get valuable information, including feedback on the sections of the novel that take place in the inner workings of the prison.

What would you like readers to take away from *Good Boy*?

I've always been a little wary of having expectations about what readers might or might not take away from my writing. The biggest pleasure for me is to hear how readers respond to my fiction, to discover the meaning they make of it. And there are as many different 'takeaways' as there are readers.

If I had to name something, I'd say I hope readers might reflect on some of the uneasy, complex, sensitive issues around crime, punishment and those involved in our prison system. And to question what we think we can know about other people and what has brought them to the place they're in.

And final question – other than *Good Boy* – who is your favourite fictional dog?

I'd have to say Snoopy. I love that he escapes his mundane existence through his fantasised identities – the World War 1 Flying Ace, Joe Cool and especially the World Famous Author. (I'm still tempted to write a novel that opens with 'It was a dark and stormy night'. Snoopy is intelligent, articulate, worldly and independent. He doesn't consider himself to have an owner and refers to Charlie Brown as 'that round-headed kid'. He possesses an amazing degree of confidence and self-sufficiency, and yet can be extremely loving and caring when needed.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

- How does Cookie grow and change over the course of the novel? To what extent is this transformation shaped by his bond with Good Boy?
- What parallels can you draw between Cookie's life and Good Boy's?
- What does the novel suggest about the rehabilitation of animals compared to humans?
- Did the story change your perspective on the criminal justice system and rehabilitation?
- How do Cookie's past experiences shape the way he trains Good Boy and approaches his future?
- Was Cookie 'doomed' from the start, or did he opportunities to change the course of his life?
- In what ways did his father's behaviour and the stories he told him affect Cookie's sense of self?
- What was your opinion of Cookie's mother? Do you have any sympathy for her?
- Despite the cruelty of his father, Cookie has a kind heart. Why do you think that is?
- Why does Cookie make the decision he does to escape prison with Good Boy? Do

you think he is motivated entirely to save Good Boy, or by fear and uncertainty about his own future?

- Was Cookie right when he said you can never be a former murderer? Could he have gone on to become something greater?
- To what extent was Cookie's fate shaped by the failures of individuals around him, versus the failures of the system itself?
- What do you believe the novel is trying to say about nature vs nurture, and our capacity for change?

JUST FOR FUN

- Who would you cast in a screen adaptation of *Good Boy*?
- If you could be friends with any character from the novel, who would it be and why?