

READING GROUP NOTES

Contents: About the book [1] About the author [1] Reviews [2]
Previous works [3] Points for discussion [4] Suggested reading [6]

About the book

In an increasingly divided and intolerant world, *What the Light Reveals* is a beacon: a novel that brilliantly captures the sometimes devastating consequences of individual belief.

Conrad is falsely accused of passing military secrets to the Russians. His life and that of his family is turned upside down by discrimination and fear. Unemployed, misrepresented by the media, betrayed by relatives and threatened by strangers, Conrad sees no choice but to uproot his family from their homeland to start a new life in Moscow.

It is also the story of Ruby, and of her and Conrad's adopted son Alex, and biological son Peter, and of the tension and intrigue that confronts them and shapes their lives in two countries. Russia lives and breathes in McCoy's superb evocation of it, but Australia is never far away. As Peter says, 'Tell me again why we're still here?'

Told with suspense and rich in characterisation and surprising plot twists, this is a novel of both heart and intellect, a book about the need to belong, about what a family is and why we all need one.

About the author

Mick McCoy holds a Ph.D. in exercise physiology from Melbourne University, and worked for seven seasons as Head of Player Conditioning at AFL Club, Richmond. He was the founder of fitness2live, an online health and wellbeing business.

For five years, Mick had a weekly Saturday morning talk-back segment on ABC 774.

Mick's journalism articles have appeared in *The Age*, *Financial Review Magazine*, *The Sunday Age*, *The Qantas Club Magazine*, *The West Australian*, *Business Review Weekly* and more.

Mick McCoy is the author of *Burning Sunday* [Sceptre, 1999], which was short-listed for the 1999 Age Fiction Prize, and *Cutting Through Skin* [Sceptre, 2001]. He lives in Melbourne, Australia.

Reviews

'A story about an Australian family facing the ruin of both bonds and belief. Atmospheric, intensely original and utterly unforgettable.'

M. J. Hyland , author of *Carry Me Down* and *This is How*

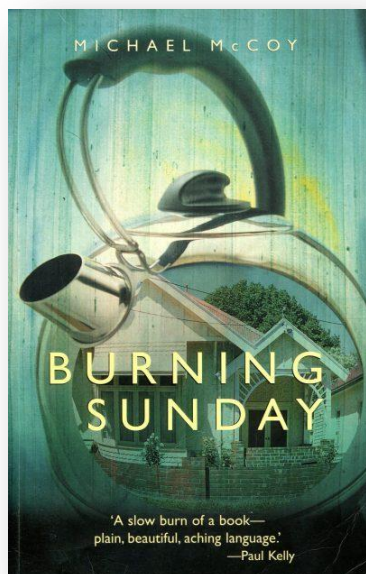
'An Australian family living in Moscow during the Cold War. Where is home, what is a family and what does it mean to belong? What can be revealed and what is better concealed? A novel about secrets and lies, guilt, loyalty and betrayal and the urge for survival. Haunting, compelling and memorable, Mick McCoy's novel has all of the moral complexity and the psychological intensity of an Ian McEwan novel.'

Antoni Jach, author of *The Layers of the City* and *Napoleon's Double*

'McCoy has given us that special thing: a powerful, singular vision of the complexities faced by individuals existing alongside each other as a family. This novel is beyond good storytelling: it is taut, evocative and sensationally unique.'

Sarah Schmidt, author of *See What I Have Done*

Previous works



Short-listed for *The Age Book of the Year*

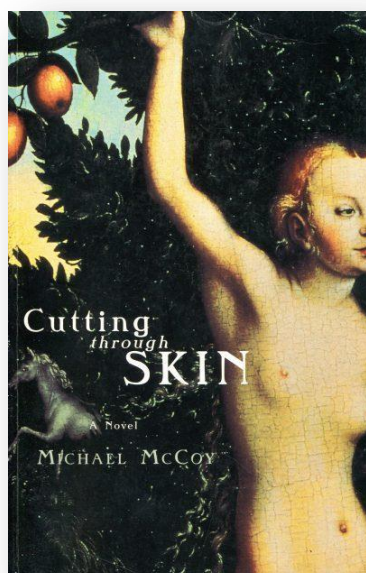
When teenage Mark awakens to find his father has gone, he becomes aware that his parents' marriage is suddenly in crisis. In the process of playing watchful peace-maker in the muted war between them, he leaves behind the innocence of his youth.

With quiet authority and deep understanding, McCoy gives voice to the sensitive but inarticulate inhabitants of suburban Australia.

A masterful depiction of ordinary masculine frailty, *Burning Sunday* celebrates the courage of vulnerable families.

'From the opening pages McCoy paints a tense, gripping domestic drama ... McCoy's fiction is beautifully crafted – a very real and moving story.' Matt Condon, *Sydney Sun-Herald*

'Its consistency of tone, its preciseness and faultless structuring combine to create an unforgettably tense atmosphere. McCoy is utterly confident, writing with a conviction and ease that suggest more years at the typewriter than he could possibly have had.' Tegan Bennet, *Sydney Morning Herald*



'Sometimes I would close my eyes with the tip of the scalpel poised and ready and just feel its progress as it cut through the skin. I'd hold the blade in my hand and press, expectantly and sightlessly through the skin. Feeling the release. Feeling the joy.'

Not long finished his Ph.D, Matthew Bass is adrift in his work as a prosector in the Department of Anatomy. He becomes attracted to the well-practiced sexuality and strange religion of Zoe, a fellow 'cutter'. Almost willingly, Matt lets slip his grip on reality until, with Zoe's encouragement, he pushes his newly charted beliefs of life and death to their ultimate extreme.

The author of the acclaimed *Burning Sunday* has written an extraordinary novel in which conflicting systems of faith clash against each other with frightening consequences.

'McCoy's second novel is remarkably powerful and evocative. Cutting Through Skin is not only a sophisticated novel, but an entertaining one as well.' Sarah Hudson, *The Herald Sun*

'It is rare to find a novel written from the viewpoint of four unique voices, and even rarer to find one written with such passion. This is another compelling and affecting read from the acclaimed author of Burning Sunday.' Todd Alexander, Dymocks Category Manager

For discussion

- Discuss the title – *What The Light Reveals* – in relation to the themes of this story.
- The novel is divided into four parts, with each of these parts depicting the unfolding of events from individual points of view. What effect does this have on the story? What other stylistic techniques did you notice in reading this novel?
- What importance do the characters place on their political beliefs? Compare those of Ruby, Conrad, their families, Valentin and Alex. Are there characters that distance themselves from any belief? Is it possible to do so? Discuss.
- Consider McCoy's choice of the name 'Conrad' for his protagonist. Why do you think he chose this particular name?
- The Petrov Affair dominated headlines in Australia in 1954, and McCoy uses it as the inciting incident that thrusts Conrad and Ruby into the main action of the story. How important do you think it is for a reader to know the details of such events for their enjoyment of a story? Discuss.
- How correct do you think Ruby is when she says, '*They need someone to be guilty.*' [p 24]. In your opinion, does the importance of a case directly influence the need for the powers-that-be to be proven right, and for an accused to be proven wrong/guilty? Discuss.
- Consider the wording of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* editorial [pp 55-57]. What effect would it have had in regard to how the public viewed Mrs Lacey and Conrad. Which words in particular create those effects?
- In relation to high profile legal cases, most people are only really aware of what newspapers chose to print, and are influenced by the words used in these articles to sway opinion. Can you think of any other high profile case in Australia where the accused was seen as guilty by the general public, though later proven innocent?
- What does the conversation around the dinner table at Christmas [pp 59-61] tell you about the family's religious practices/beliefs? Do Conrad's and Ruby's differ from other members of the family? In what way? Whose is more sincere, in your opinion?
- Conrad believes there is no future for himself and his family in Australia. Do you agree? Could things have changed in time? Discuss.
- Compare and contrast Ruby's personality with Conrad's. Did your opinion of them change as the story developed? Why/why not?
- The 7 November Revolution Day [p 93] actually commemorates the Revolution of 25–26 *October* 1917, because Soviet Russia did not adopt the Gregorian [Western] calendar until February 1918, using instead the Julian calendar, which was 13 days behind. But what, briefly, was the October Revolution of 1917 about, and why is it important in relation to world events?
- Compare and contrast the different ways Conrad, Ruby, Alex and Peter approach their emigrant status and their ability to deal with their new lives as the book progresses.
- Compare and contrast Alex's personality with Peter's. What factors influenced their differences?

For discussion [continued]

- McCoy writes of Conrad *He'd never been suspicious of anyone he dealt with* [p 116]. Why is that? Considering Conrad's experiences in Australia, then in Russia, how do you view this lack of suspicion?
- Valentin freely admits to being KGB [p116], yet his behaviour is very different to that of other KGB members in this story. Why is that? What sort of a man do you see Valentin as being? Discuss.
- In a country where everyone is suspected of being an informer, does admitting one is so – as Valentin has done [p 116] – make that person more or less dangerous? Can such a person ever be a friend? Explain your opinion.
- Why does Conrad not trust Ruby with the truth about Valentin?
- Why did Alex burn his and Peter's birth certificates [p 171]? Discuss the symbolism of this action.
- Compare Ruby's relationship with Peter to her relationship with Alex. Is she correct that the reason Peter is her favourite is that he 'grew inside her' [pp 203-204], or do you think there are other reasons? Do parents normally have favourites, even if none of their children are adopted? Discuss.
- Consider Ruby's behaviour from the time she finds out about the accident until the time she leaves Conrad in hospital the next day. Was it what you'd expect? Discuss.
- Discuss the symbolism of the photo album Alex gave Conrad for Christmas.
- Conrad tells Valentin that he fabricated some of the troubles he had finding a job back in Australia [p 227]. Had you foreseen this? Did that change your opinion of him? Why/why not?
- The keeping of secrets has been considered detrimental to one's physical and mental health for centuries, and current research reinforces this idea¹. Could Conrad's sudden improvement be due to the giving up of secrets that occurred during the Christmas day hospital visits, or do you think there are other reasons? Discuss.
- Regarding Alex and Sinead's relationship – did you believe Alex wanted to stay in Moscow because of her, or was she simply an excuse?
- What effect did Sinead's abortion have on Alex?
- Why does Alex choose that particular time to tell his parents he saw Karl Wadek – the doctor from the third floor – leave the apartment [p 263]? What is he trying to achieve?
- What interest could the KGB have in Alex? If there is nothing to interest them, why did they continue to behave as they did?
- Consider the ending of this story. Was it what you expected? Why/why not? Would you have ended it differently?

¹ Slepian M.L., Chun J.S., & Mason M.F. (2017) - 'The experience of secrecy', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 113(1), 1-33

Suggested reading

Between the Lines – Bernice Morris [Sybylla Co-Operative Press & Publications Ltd, 1988]

Dismissal – Nicholas Hasluck [Fourth Estate, 2011]

Document Z – Andrew Croome [Allen & Unwin, 2009]

Exposure – Helen Dunmore [Hutchinson, 2016]

The Secret Cold War: The Official History of ASIO, 1975-1989 – John Blaxland & Rhys Crawley [Allen & Unwin, 2016 – non-fiction]

The Book of Daniel – E.L. Doctorow [Random House, 1971]

The Quest For Christa T. – Christina Wolf Farrar, C. Middleton [trans.] [Straus & Giroux: NY, 1970]

Atlantic Black – A. S. Patrić [Transit Lounge, 2017]

The Spy Who Came in from the Cold – John le Carré [Penguin UK, 2010 (1963)]

Is Journalism Worth Dying For?: Final Dispatches – Anna Politkovskaya, Arch Tait [trans.] [Melville House, 2011 (2007) – non-fiction]

Exile: The Lives and Hopes of Werner Pelz – Roger Averill [Transit Lounge, 2012]

The Memory Artist – Katherine Brabon [Allen & Unwin, 2016]

But The Dead Are Many – Frank Hardy [Bodley Head, 1975]

The Riders – Tim Winton [Penguin 2013]

My Brother Jack – George Johnston [Harper Collins: 4th Estate AU, 2008 (1964)]

All that I am – Anna Funder [Penguin Book, 2011]

A Spy in the Archives – Sheila Fitzpatrick [Melbourne University Press, 2013]

What The Light Reveals

Mick McCoy

Transit Lounge Publishing

Trade paperback - ISBN: 978-0-9954098-7-3

These Reading Notes may be printed or viewed for your own private, non-commercial use.
This material is copyright and may not be repackaged, resold or posted electronically on any network without prior written permission from Transit Lounge Publishing

Transit Lounge Publishing

95 Stephen St

Yarraville

Victoria 3013

Australia

© 2018 Transit Lounge Australia

