

EVERYDAY MADNESS

SUSAN MIDALIA

ABOUT THE BOOK

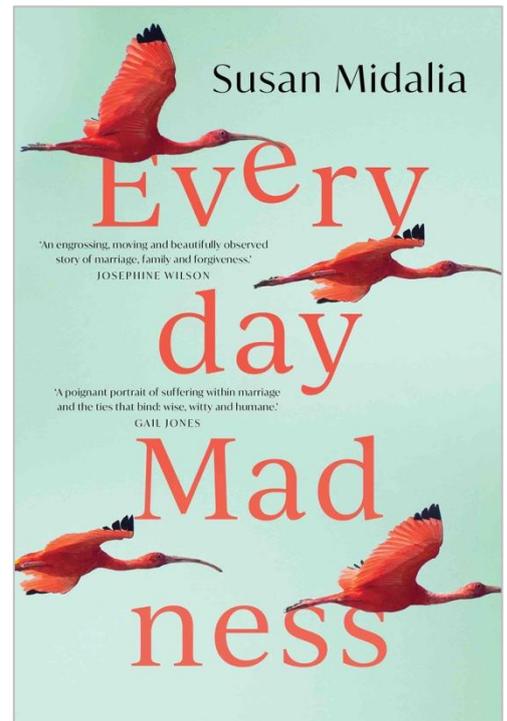
Fifty-nine-year-old Bernard is cynical, disenchanted with his marriage and on the verge of losing his job as a vacuum cleaner salesman. But when his wife, Gloria, is admitted to a clinic after a breakdown, his view of her begins to change. Gloria, an inveterate talker, is finally given the chance to say aloud the things she has never said and to reassess her marriage and the true meaning of love. Their former daughter-in-law, Meg, is an overprotective single mother whose instinct is to stop herself and her daughter, Ella, from making connections with the outside world. This includes the mysterious Hal, a handsome man she literally bumps into in a coffee shop. Eleven-year-old Ella is lively and funny and trying to learn as much as she can about the world despite her mother's attempts to keep her safe. This story of four different lives and their intertwining affirms the capacity of individuals to grow in self-understanding and in the acceptance of others, as it celebrates the value of family and friendships.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Midalia is the author of three short story collections, all shortlisted for major Australian literary awards: *A History of the Beanbag*, *An Unknown Sky* and *Feet to the Stars*. Her debut novel, *The Art of Persuasion*, was published in 2018. She also works as a freelance editor, mentor and workshop facilitator, and has had articles published on contemporary Australian women's fiction in national and international journals.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think this novel is called *Everyday Madness*?
2. How does the title relate to each of the characters in this story?
3. How does this book portray people in rehab or recovery from long-term health issues, such as alcoholism and depression?
4. This novel has been structured in a particular way. Does it mean that your sympathies are spread evenly between the characters?
5. Would you describe each or any of these characters as lonely?
6. Do you see Hal's role as that of the 'knight in shining armour'?
7. To what extent do you think the author plays with reader's expectations of romance as it is rendered in fiction?
8. It's clear that Meg has had experiences that make her protective of Ella. How does Ella navigate the bubble her mother attempts to keep her in?
9. How would you describe the relationship between the two?
10. In her acknowledgments, the author says Bernard offered 'the challenge of making an unlikeable character capable of change'. Do your responses to Bernard shift over time? What about to Gloria?
11. What does Ella learn from her 'outing' with Naomi?
12. What would you see as the main themes Midalia is exploring in this novel?
13. How do different characters enable her to explore them?
14. What kind of picture does this story paint of Perth, Australia? Could this story be set anywhere?
15. Bernard mentions the unlikelihood of people changing when they're over thirty years old. What does the book suggest about what makes us the way we are? Do you think that we have any say in what we can and cannot change?
16. Which character do you think changes the most in the course of this story?
17. What does the book suggest about the institution of marriage, healthy and otherwise?



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What was the genesis of this novel?

I was motivated to write this novel because I was haunted by a repellent character in my third collection of stories, *Feet to the Stars*. I found myself asking: what might have made him such an embittered, arrogant, self-pitying man? And might he be capable of redemption? Knowing that exploring such questions requires the much longer space of a novel, I set myself the challenge of making a highly unpleasant character experience the difficult process of self-reflection and self-criticism in an effort to become a better person. I also knew from the outset that I wanted to use different perspectives: to vary the plot, mood and pace of my novel, and to show that while we are all locked into our minds, we can also change our perceptions and forge meaningful connections with others. And because, quite simply, I enjoy imagining what it might be like to be someone very different from me. I also had a strong sense of thematic focus; for while writing a novel often entails changes of heart and mind over the course of many drafts, I always knew that my novel would fundamentally deal with what the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud called ‘the two cornerstones of our humanity’, love and work. As he put it, in non-medical terms: ‘Love and work ... work and love ... what else is there, really?’ Another motivation for writing my novel was my fascination with the ways in which usually rational people can become irrational, sometimes extravagantly so, under the pressure of personal and social circumstances. I’m reminded of the Australian novelist Christina Stead, who was brilliant at finding the extraordinary in apparently ‘normal’ people. She said that if we listened to any ordinary, sane housewife attentively, and for long enough, we would hear a raging Medusa!

Would you describe this book as having feminist themes?

Yes, in what I hope are nuanced ways. While my novel acknowledges the destructive effects of what’s come to be called toxic masculinity – aggression, entitlement and a sense of superiority, often directed at women – I also wanted to show how men, too, can suffer because of reductive ideas about gendered roles and identities. I show the character of Bernard slumping into depression after losing his job because a traditional version of masculinity claims that success in the public world of work is a measure of a man’s worth. Hal is also a victim, grievously misunderstood by Meg because of her tendency to stereotype men as sexual predators. And while women as a group continue to be disadvantaged – socially, economically, politically – in every culture, they can also be self-victimisers. Meg’s investment in an ideal of maternal devotion results in her neglecting her husband and smothering her daughter with care; and while she’s a good feminist who knows that a woman shouldn’t be valued for her sex appeal, this doesn’t stop her feeling anxious about her appearance. Gloria is similarly confounded: for many years of her married life, she doesn’t understand that she’s a victim of her husband’s emotional and psychological abuse. I also wanted to give those two female characters a meaningful life beyond the conventional romance plot; Meg’s studies and Gloria’s belated return to the workforce show their refusal to be defined merely as the object of masculine attention. I was careful, too, to avoid easy moral judgements about male–female relationships. Meg’s ex-husband, for example, is an adulterer, but Meg acknowledges her own responsibility for the failure of their marriage. In short, my novel’s feminist themes are underpinned by a belief that any theory, including feminist theory, cannot always adequately explain the complexities of human behaviour and identity.

The book refers to Harold Pinter and the ‘theatre of the absurd’, where not a lot makes sense and there are long, loaded silences. What kind of literary influences are at play in this novel?

Absurdist philosophy claims that life has no inherent meaning, and that it’s absurd to try to give it meaning. Talk about a depressing idea. (The French absurdist writer Albert Camus claimed that ‘the meaning of life is what stops you from killing yourself.’ Even more depressing!) I wanted to contest this influential contemporary philosophy by showing how meaning can reside in family, friendship and work; that despite the sometimes irrational, deeply uncertain or treacherous nature of the world, feelings of connection and purpose can abide. And yes, silences matter. In both Pinter’s plays and my novel, silence often works as a powerful form of psychological action through which people attempt to intimidate or manipulate others, reject intimacy or disguise their weaknesses or shame. Sometimes I create those moments of silence when language seems painfully inadequate, when we’re literally lost for words because of the intensity of our feelings. Another literary influence is the genre of romance. My novel challenges popular and idealised versions of romance by insisting on the unromantic realities of marriage: how passion can wane and boredom creep in; even worse,

how once loving couples can become resentful or contemptuous of one another. A less obvious but important literary influence in my novel is the fiction of Jane Austen. My character Bernard is modelled on Mr Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*; both men are intelligent but cynical, and both use their presumed intellectual superiority to belittle their wife. My character Gloria is modelled on the garrulous Miss Bates in *Emma* – irritating and an easy target of mockery, she, like Gloria, is also kind-hearted and morally admirable. I share Austen’s privileging of character over personality; her belief that what matters about a person is kindness and generosity of spirit rather than surface charm.

You’ve been in a book club for three decades. What have you learned from that, and what do you see as the value of having a group of friends who read together?

The trivialising stereotype of book clubs, particularly women’s book clubs, depicts them as gossip sessions lubricated by many bottles of wine. But what I’ve learned from my longstanding book club, and as a guest writer at others, is that discussion can be a vital source of intellectual and emotional nourishment. It can be historically and culturally enlightening, and encourage us to reflect on our experiences, values and beliefs, and on people and events in the wider world. Importantly too, since everyone takes turns in choosing a book, being in a book club has broadened my usual reading interests and tastes. It’s also taught me about the educative and humbling effects of discussing books whose beliefs differ from my own; as Saint Thomas Aquinas warned, seven centuries ago: ‘Beware the person of one book.’ I particularly enjoy the experience of listening to different, sometimes radically divergent, responses to a book. While reading is by definition a silent and solitary activity, debates among readers remind us that books don’t have a fixed and single meaning; that each reader brings something different to her responses. My book club reads mainly contemporary novels, and we like to support Australian writing in particular. We also ‘revisit’ novels that we read as younger women. It’s always instructive to discuss why books we admired, even cherished, in the past no longer seem so appealing. Conversely, books we dismissed when younger can now seem much more interesting and enriching. The words in the books haven’t changed; we have. And yes, we do drink wine!



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