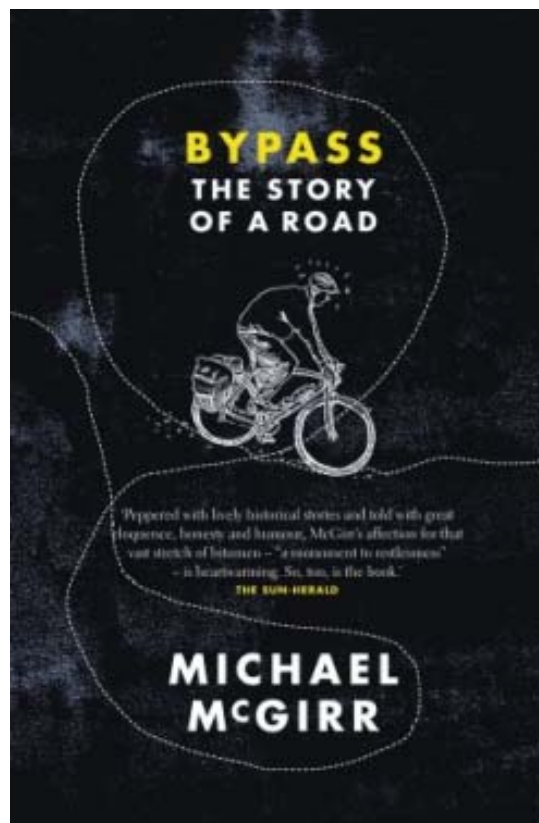


**PICADOR**  
AUSTRALIA

**NOTES FOR READING GROUPS**

**Michael McGirr**

**BYPASS**



## Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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### THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

#### Thematic & Plot Summary

'The road is a monument to restlessness.' (p 13)

'If we could do everything, we wouldn't need other people and we wouldn't need a road.'  
(p 301)

In this deeply life-affirming work, Michael McGirr documents his fascination with the Hume Highway which links Sydney and Melbourne—a road which not only links two major Australian cities but which also reveals a history and a people in the continuous process of their making. In a work of creative non-fiction which is a tantalising mixture of memoir, travel story, social history, road story and romance, he reveals his affectionate obsession with the road and the stories it carries with it, whilst he also details his own personal and spiritual journey.

Central to this story is the idea that a road is more than a physical thoroughfare - it's also a metaphor for both the many 'public' social, historical, and political events which have happened on its journey and for those 'private' events experienced by those who travel on its surface. 'Every story in Gunning seems to touch the road' (p 9) writes McGirr, and it's no surprise that he chooses to live there, for this book is as much a personal odyssey as it is a grand narrative of a major highway. Many of the remarks made about the road are directly related to the writer's experiences and to his personal search for meaning in the context of a society which fascinates him. His journey by bicycle is partly about tracing the road's development and influence on the nation, and partly about investigating who he is, now that he is no longer a Jesuit priest and has taken a bypass from the road on which he was formerly travelling. It is also about his journey not only with Jenny but towards her—their bicycle journey cements their relationship—it's a journey of the heart.

'Roads are a significant part of bringing a strange land to book, the act of domestication that needs to follow conquest.' (p 25) Michael McGirr is a social historian, and the stories included in this volume range across the history of Australia in a peripatetic but nevertheless extremely insightful manner. Some of them briefly inform the reader about currents of social engagement at particular points in the country's

culture. For events which Michael observes on his journey or which happened on the road in the past are indicative of broader currents of interest in the world at large. For example: 'The seventies had marked an increasing awareness of truckie culture.' (p 48) or, 'Young was part of a movement. In the early eighties, the whole world was running long distances. The craze was accompanied by fad diets, an obsession with shoes, and a library of literature...sweat.' (p 4) or, today we have 'Grey nomads like the restless damned.' (p 21) He also comments on Australian attitudes, for example, the amusing anecdotes (pp 109-110) reveal the innate insularity of many Australians.

Political and corporate power in influencing not only the development of transport infrastructure, but also its effects on individuals' lives is another theme (pp 203-6). The fact that the decision to bypass has destroyed many towns (listed on p 232) is a salutary example of that influence. McGirr manages to convey significant historical and/or surprising facts often in an oblique way. For example, whilst gently lampooning the 'Big Merino' he explains how bushranging was destroyed by the growth of the sheep industry (p 91). He satirises colonial scientific investigations such as David Bennett's ill-fated attempts to deliver several platypus to England (pp 112-3) and the devastating impact of road travel on Australian wildlife (pp 113-4). Indigenous history is also referred to, for example, during an interview with a property owner named Graeme (p117) and a description of a massacre (pp 247-8). He gives the reader a brief analysis of the social connections between the growth of fast food outlets and roads like the Hume: 'There are now more McDonald's outlets on the Hume Highway than there are towns!' (p 131) He also covers the diminishing role played by rivers in our national transport network (p 163) with real insight.

The people who activate these events are important to McGirr as well. Unique historical figures are given fitting tribute here from Hume and Hovell to the determined Lady Franklin who took the same journey in 1838, albeit not on a bicycle but with a full complement of servants and equipment! 'Hume is the patron of all who take to this road knowing exactly where they are going and why. Franklin is the patroness of the others, often more companionable, who are not too sure why they are on the road in the first place.' (p 119) William Tutledge's role in early transportation (pp 270-1), Henry Ford and his influence on Australian workers with his Broadmeadows plant (pp 277-281), and William Buckley (p 287) are some of the characters we meet along the way. But just as much of interest to McGirr are the truckies and wanderers he meets on the road, and he is always willing to see things from other points of view. For example, he tells the brief life story of the notorious backpacker killer, Ivan Milat (pp 73-4), and demonstrates that often such violent behavior stems from a history of abuse. And it's no surprise that he uses the ultimate ordinary man Cliff Young as the link between all these stories either: 'But Cliff did something to the road... He was small enough to bring it to life.' (p 297)

'The road is a great leveller.' (p 157) The idea of a 'public' and a 'private' (community) history is cemented when Michael meets Emil Pich the bus driver who relates a litany of

names which drivers have given parts of the road, and which tell a different set of stories to those on the 'public record'. 'Drivers never had title but they used to own the road. Now they just work on it. There isn't much poetry left' (p 160). McGirr clearly believes that the modern era of corporate control and government privatization of assets is in danger of destroying the voices of ordinary working people and rendering them powerless. So this work is in part a manifesto for the importance of the ordinary person's voice; for listening to and observing those around us. The reason he takes a bicycle and not an automobile is because he wants to be able to stop and observe, to really see the road on which he is travelling.

The myths which make up history are called to account often in this book, too. The real story of the dog on the tuckerbox (pp 147-8) was one surprise! And the story makes the salutary point that so many symbols (eg Anzac) synonymous with Australia's sense of itself actually have a somewhat dubious origin. The origin of the supposedly iconic song 'The Road to Gundagai' is but one example of mythologisation where mythologisation is not really due. But perhaps Ned Kelly is the most famous (p 235) example of a hero whose canonization has often been questioned by skeptics.

'In some ways, the Hume Highway is one long war memorial.'(p 242) McGirr clearly has respect for some war heroes such as Weary Dunlop(pp 240-2) but he is also dubious about the way in which 'the remembrance of war is moving from the personal to the public sphere, and with that, from a description of something unspeakable to something about which you can never say enough.'(p 246) He is puzzled by the way in which some towns, such as Goulburn (p 247) have created an identity from their association with the war dead.

He also writes here something of a literary history with sections devoted to the contributions of Mary Gilmore and Banjo Paterson to the road's cultural history. He compares Paterson and Lawson (pp 132-9) and their tragic or disappointed lives. He also refers to Don Quixote and Sancho(pp 198-9), to Mark Twain's reflections on the rail system(p 200), to Henry Handel Richardson (p 217) and to Dorothy Johnson(p 222) in various parts of the narrative. He thus pays tribute to their associations with the road and/or with their metaphorical connections with it.

'The road means life to a town like this..It is also lined with countless reminders of death.'(p 178) The toll of human life which the road records is another aspect of its history which McGirr acknowledges. He writes a eulogy to those lost on the verges and to those who've been forgotten. His journal is a way of affirming the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins' statement that: "All Life death does end and each day dies with sleep". To find contentment in that thought is one of the writer's aims.

**'You don't come to a small town to hide. There are cities for that.'**(p 6) The difference between engagement and withdrawal from engagement is evoked by the opposition between city and country: **'the smaller your vehicle the more conspicuous you become.'**(p 212) This journey shows him how important engagement with our environment really is, and ends with he and Jenny listening to the sounds of the night whilst waiting up with their baby.

The throwaway society is noted too in this journey where roadside rubbish is everywhere. **'Just about all of it is evidence of a culture which has plenty, which is drowning in its own excess.'**(p 239) McGirr obviously cares that we should not misuse our wealth and that we should value what we have. This question of 'values' relates to the religious and spiritual message of the text.

For morals, religious faith and philosophical questions are central to this narrative as well. **'Philosophy has often made use of the image of a road...The information superhighway is one philosophical image; the road to hell is another.'** (p 171) And if the bumper stickers at the head of each chapter seem flippant they are actually 'signposts' to the deeper concerns of the narrative. The writer is leaving a 21 year life as a Jesuit to pursue a new married life. He confesses that he did not so much find obedience difficult but actually found it so easy that it made him compliant and ultimately robbed him of his full potential (p 173). But his faith is still absolute. **'For me, the alternative to believing in God is to believe in myself in some kind of absolute way, a loneliness too horrendous to contemplate. I can't live in a space so small.'** (p 174)

Romance is another kind of relationship which lies at the heart of the book. **'I was a novice again and sometimes I didn't know where I was.'**(p 181) McGirr reflects on the first intimate relationship of his life, and concludes that **'religious life was a flat road with numerous twists and turns...Life with a partner, on the other hand, is a straight road with numerous hills and valleys'** (p 182). His growing relationship with Jenny is movingly evoked by the various incidents which they experience together.

**'I belong at one end of this road, but I don't know which one.'**(p 229) A life well lived, a road less travelled, a journey undertaken not for the end but for the journey—in this wise, witty, poignant and humane book, McGirr outlines his philosophy of this journey (pp 300-1) and his theory of contentment. He reminds his readers that we should never imagine that we are on our own. There are people all around you, if you but take the time and the care to reach out your hand.

## WRITING STYLE

1. This **hybrid work of creative non-fiction** is a memoir, travel story, social history, romance and road story. Discuss the conventions of any one of these genres in relation to this work.
2. **Literary devices enliven and enrich this writing with sparkling wit.** For example: 'Hovell had been a naval captain. On land, however, he was all at sea.' (p 19) 'They were like fishermen who were prepared to dam their own river rather than let it starve them.' (p 48) 'A roadhouse is a place where everything that can't be eaten has been laminated, and not all the food can be eaten.' (p 66) 'Guerilla warfare is the opposite of God who, for some unknown reason, makes his or her absence felt even when present.' (p 81) 'I came to Gunning to hide, but people kept finding me.' (p 97) 'Sturt went blind trying to see what none had seen before.' (p 170) McGirr's anger at some social problems is often expressed in blunt metaphors, for example, when discussing gaming machines in Goulburn he writes: 'They are abattoirs of the human spirit.' (p 90) His love for language is reflected, for example, where the text is an extended reverie on arcane words and their meanings eg panier (p 98), or in his jovial attempt to find a word to describe a group of prime ministers (pp 153-4). Choose and discuss a passage you found interesting for its use of literary devices.
3. **Humour** is one of the most appealing features of his writing. eg The discussion of caravans with a fellow traveler (pp 110-1). Discuss some of the elements of McGirr's humour.
4. The **structure** of these 6 parts is cemented by the recurring story of Cliff Young's epic run which opens each part in a chronological sequence, before veering off at tangents to tell other stories of the road. Why did McGirr choose this story as a linking device, do you think?
5. Michael McGirr is masterly in creating **punchlines** to end his stories. eg 'I don't believe in washing your dirty laundry in public.' (p 263) Discuss some of the chapter endings.

## THE AUTHOR

Michael McGirr is the author of *Things You Get For Free* and *The Lost Art of Sleep*. He was raised in Sydney but grew up in Melbourne. He now lives in a small town somewhere between the two where he is enjoying his middle age with his wife and three children.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Choose any one of the bumper stickers and discuss its implications. eg 'Midwives deliver' or 'Trucks carry this country' or 'Your carma just ran over my dogma'. They may seem flippant but each of them relate to significant social, philosophical, political or domestic issues.
2. 'Few politicians get anywhere in this country without heeding the potentates of talk-back radio.'(p 49) Discuss in relation to recent examples of such power and to the mistakes made by such potentates.
3. McGirr notes that billboard advertising has diminished since the 1960s due to the perception that it may cause accidents (p 62). Is our society over-regulated in such matters?
4. 'One of the lazy habits of popular history is a tendency to romanticise the criminals of the past and demonise the criminals of the present.'(p 80) Discuss.
5. When McGirr writes about the lack of government spending on railways as opposed to roads, he writes: 'This is a symptom of something deeper because government spending-decisions simply mirror the interests of voters. Those interests are now less likely to include common property or the development of common assets.'(p 92) Discuss.
6. Are Australian myths such as that of Ned Kelly vastly inflated? Discuss.
7. What does the Cliff Young story tell us about the nature of celebrity and about Australia's love affair with sport?
8. This is a eulogy to a road which has been particularly influential in the formation of this nation. Choose another road with which you are familiar, and a story about it which particularly interests you. Share your story, and invite comments for discussion.
9. The priest's role is still very much a concern to the writer, despite having left the priesthood himself. The Mass he and Jenny attend in Tarcutta causes him to reflect that 'The man was leaving himself out of it and lending himself to a higher function.' (p 172) Ideally, should the role of a pastor or priest be personal or impersonal?
10. 'People now seem to believe that in looking at the Anzacs they are looking at themselves. They aren't. The dead deserve more respect than to be used to make ourselves feel larger.'(p 246) Discuss.
11. 'The thing about pomp and circumstance, like everything else, is that you can't take them with you.'(p 255) This work advocates for human equality. What other values does it promote or evince?
12. In what ways is a road symbolic of life's journey? Discuss.



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