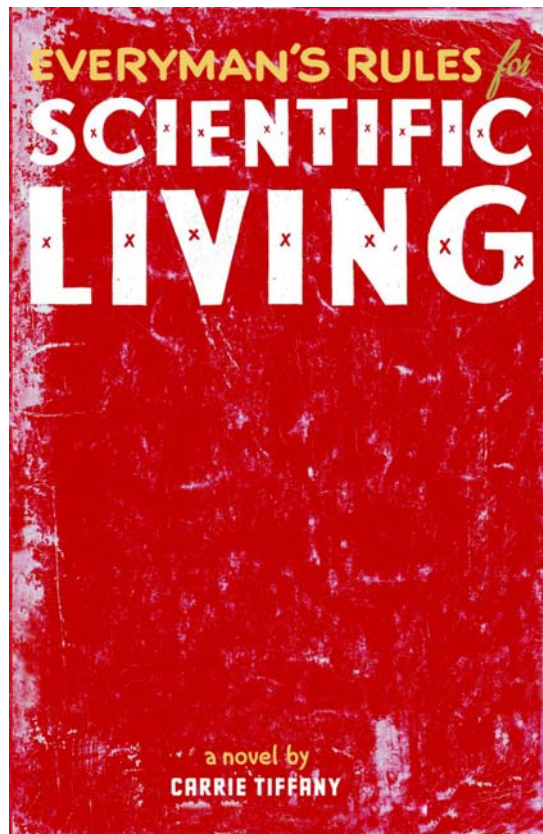


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NOTES FOR READING GROUPS

Carrie Tiffany

**EVERYMAN'S RULES FOR
SCIENTIFIC LIVING**



WINNER OF THE FIRST VICTORIAN PREMIER'S AWARD FOR AN
UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT 2003

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'I know what I don't want. I don't want to teach something I haven't lived.' (p 85)

This haunting novel explores the experiences of a man and a woman in a period in Australia's history which was a time of optimism and idealistic hope - after the devastation of WWI and the Depression, and before the next world war was declared. Jean Finnegan, a gifted seamstress, is one of the staff on the 'Better Farming Train' which traveled through the wheat fields and small towns of Victoria between the two world wars, supposedly bringing new agricultural knowledge to the people working on the land. Robert Pettergree is the soil and cropping expert who is initially unknown to his fellow travelers, and 'seems to be some sort of scientific recluse.' (p 14) But he and Jean form a passionate connection and his zealous desire to create a model farm infects Jean too. The difference is that Robert's passion is for science, whereas her willingness to join his experiment is founded on her passion for him, her growing love for this landscape, and on a desire to live a life which is 'true'. This novel is not only about the tragic failure of human vision, but also a lament for the fragile Australian landscape of which so much has been destroyed.

Nature or nurture is a theme in many literary works. Here, the question of whether one can (or should) change the path of a life, a community, an eco-system, or a nation, with theory, or whether one must recognize the pull of innate, fundamental or elemental forces such as love, natural disaster, or random acts of nature, is a central concern. This novel questions blind belief in the power of scientific aptitude to alter the course of lives or history. Robert's experiment is a tragic impasse between theory and fact - ironically since one of his rules for living is a belief in the importance of facts. Jean, in contrast, recognizes that life is not as ordered as he wants it to be. 'Progress is the word that dips and slides through the men's discussions in the sitting car. Men bring progress...measure the activity of progress 'per man, per day'... although this seems to deny something that even I can see - that all men are different, that some light the way with their ideas and others are merely followers.' (p 11)

This theme also relates to concepts of nationhood since this novel takes place in a crucial time for Australia's economic and political development. Such post-colonial countries were finding their own identities in the early twentieth century while major political events such as world wars and Depression were occurring. 'Sometimes he will give us all an 'impromptu lecturette' on our roles as propagandists and the importance of agricultural education in the development of a truly modern society.'(p 13) The novel also draws a close parallel between the jingoistic work done by government departments in recruiting farmers to new methods, into 'growing more wheat', and later to attracting military enlistments via the 'One-In, All-In Train'. It thus implies that governments manipulate the people's will to suit prevailing economic circumstances.

The differing roles which men and women were expected to play in this society are clearly illustrated by the parts which Jean and Robert play in their partnership. The theme is suggested first by the women's carriage being placed at the end of the train, and then by Jean's memories of her education. 'we are merely playing at science, using its language to dress up the drudgery of women's lives' (p 11) Girls were taught to be modest, learnt sewing and cookery skills, and told that their job was 'to fill up the empty continent with lovely healthy babies.'(p 16) The boys spoke of war. When Robert gives her a gift it is a thimble. Later Ollie's subjugation to the fate of her family is symbolized by the selling of her sewing machine. Jean is uncomfortable about aspects of the male-female relationship

and is therefore attracted to working on the land where men and women tend to work together. 'I admire the women that I teach. They are not like me in the sitting car, a shy spectator. They are truly within their lives, working in partnership with their husbands for the good of each other.' (p 27) She desires to be like those women and to form a new kind of partnership with Robert in this meaningful life. Ultimately, she denies society's expectations of women at the time, by choosing to stay on the farm alone, even after Robert has joined up.

The appearance of 'the folly cow' (p 29) in this narrative has an acid edge to it, symbolic of the fatal idealism of Robert and his scientific associates. As Mr Plattfuss is telling the people that this ordinary animal is 'the cow of the past', we begin to ascertain that the novel will question the aims of the Train, and that they will be proved to be folly. Mary and Jean secretly feed the cow treacle pudding, and Mary avows that 'you need an honest practical animal that will make the best of what's on offer.' (p 30) Mr Pettergree's ideas are presented here with the benefit of hindsight. For example, he advises the farmers not to ringbark trees and wait for them to die, but to 'completely clear the land. Once you've got nothing between yourself and the soil - that's the time for agriculture.' (p 33) He believes that his article Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living (pp 48-50) could act as a roadmap for living a prosperous farming life. He has no doubts and does not countenance either failure or the possibility of natural disasters. But later Jean listens to the women's jokes about the BFT (pp 110-113) and begins to doubt its efficacy. When Robert's shipment of super phosphate is railed in it is meant to be a day of celebration for the entire district, but instead is remembered as 'The Day Depression came to Wycheproof' (p 143) since it also brings a group of men who have nowhere else to sleep except on trains as they travel from place to place. Next, the crops fail to improve, and a mouse plague destroys everything except the super phosphate. A dust storm takes all the soil away and the situation becomes even grimmer. By the time the district is on its knees, Jean has a different view of Robert's 'rules' (pp 197-200) but she continues to love him all the same.

Their love is founded on a strong sexual connection, which is another reference to the theme of 'nature or nurture'. 'Because of the train we are coming together at a gallop'. (p 44) Robert and Jean's romance is described with an urgency born of the claustrophobic world in which they meet, and suggestive of the power of sexual desire. Their first coupling (pp 42-4) in the honey car is a heated encounter which is entirely without words. Their frantic sex in their kitchen, and later in the wheat field is tenderly and yet erotically charged in its description. Sex is one of the themes here, in an era which does not observe any connection between this and advice about marriage. Mr Ohno's odd gift of sexual postcards is another reference to the elemental nature of desire which is denied by Sister Crock's clinical lectures on motherhood and women's duties.

The devastating and tragic influence of war on people's lives is suggested throughout the novel. First, Jean's childhood memories of the war efforts encouraged at her school and her naïve understanding of what it meant are used to show the meaningless nature of war. 'We were being good at the war - especially on the Gallipoli Peninsula.' (p 21) Later this idea is cemented when Jean's father's disappearance from her life in WWI (pp 23-4) is seen through her eyes as a child who has no sense of what has happened, and sees him simply as an unexplained absence. When the district meeting is held to discuss the government's instructions to grow more wheat, it takes place ironically 'under the names of the district's dead. The men and boys of Teddywaddy lie in Ypres, Flanders, Rheims, the Somme, Gallipoli and the Dardanelles'. (p 137) Much later when the failed farmers of the Mallee enlist for WWII and are accepted despite their age and infirmities, the hypocrisy of recruiting agencies is called into question as well. And there is an equally ominous sense in this last stage of the novel that all these aging recruits to WWII (including Robert) will not be coming home.

A major aspect of the work is its passionate environmental theme. The difference between a clinical analysis of and manipulation of this land and the more elemental response to its fragile beauty and the need to preserve it, is conveyed throughout. Robert's effort to alter the quality of the soil is gradually undermined by the resistance of the land to such interventions and by the tragic breakdown of the natural cycle. As he attempts to increase crop yields and Jean bakes and measures bread to assess the harvest's quality, the

novel builds an impressionistic picture of the infinite variety of the Mallee landscape. 'The Avoca is the colour of long-brewed tea, its waters oily with shadows from the sugar gums.' (p 135) Several intimate scenes between Jean and Robert take place in the wheat fields and Jean translates this landscape into her intricate embroidery. Robert can taste a soil and identify it - a far more intuitive response than pure science. When Jean helps him sample the soil, she loves to observe the subtle differences in colour and texture. 'I love to watch it pouring into the calico bags and have to curb the impulse to reach out and feel it on my skin.' (p 134) And its effect on them both is clear. 'The farm is changing Robert's body.' (p 114) But the gradual destruction is potently conveyed when Mr Frogley visits and comments on the lack of birds and Jean realises suddenly that 'with more wheat there will be fewer animals and that the small creatures - frogs, skinks, birds- will be the first to go.' (p 165) And then, tellingly, when the dust storm occurs and the plants are literally exposed to the roots, 'there is something obscene in the way the tripod legs meet the torso, often with dangling root hairs or a hanging tuberous growth.' (p 169)

Ultimately there is both a social and an environmental edge to the scientific theories Robert espouses, for his belief in nurturing particular strains of wheat (echoing Mr Talbot's about animals and his ill-fated speech about breeding out impurities), implies that only 'pure breeds' will survive. This relates to the discussion of Mendel and Eugenics (p 207), and ultimately to Hitler's beliefs which are about to plunge them all into WWII. Robert's 'pigeon' chest and the death of his siblings from birth deformities perhaps have informed his own single-minded pursuit of perfection. This theme has a sombre message; that we need to love every creature and to allow diversity in order for prosperity to occur. Robert's experiments go tragically wrong since they destroy the bio-diversity of the Mallee region and he and his neighbours not only lose their crops but their livelihoods.

The central theme here is that science has a purpose second to its antithesis - the power of love or natural instincts, and the overwhelming power of nature, which needs to be acknowledged and respected. 'And what of the lamb, Robert? What of its pain and trauma? Is it not enough that we should treat the lamb kindly because kindness is simply good?' (p200).

WRITING

1. The style is full of gentle wry humour. Read for example, 'Then we had to write an essay about duty...smiling dingo for company.' (p 17) Or Sister Crock's opinion that men have some uses, for example, 'in kitchen design'. (p 84) Is humour one of the obvious features of the work in your opinion? Did you find it amusing, despite the tragic events described?
2. This novel is heavy with metaphor eg the 'rules', the educational train, the folly cow, etc. Every incident implies an underlying message about living a life. e.g. Mr Pettergree's passion for soil is described in Ch 4. Discuss some of these metaphors.
3. The novel contains several lists and a number of photos. What did you make of these aspects of the presentation of the narrative?
4. First person narratives allow the writer to view the events from one point of view. How might this narrative have been different had it been told by Robert for instance?
5. This historical novel is in part a work of **faction**, a mode of writing which combines real events and fictional ones. It deals with the journey of the Better Farming Train between 1924 and 1935 in Victoria - and the background of two world wars and Depression - and creates a fictional narrative around these events. To read more about the train, you might like to visit The Virtual Exhibition The Better Farming Train which was retrieved 12/7/05 from the DPI website at <<http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/virtualexhibition/Train/Index.htm>> It also refers to other events such as Bradman's victories at cricket (p 173) and R.G. Menzies and the Mozart Vienna Boys' Choir (p 203) touring the area at the same time. What is the novel saying about this period?

THE AUTHOR

Carrie Tiffany was born in West Yorkshire and grew up in Western Australia. She spent her early twenties working as a park ranger in the red centre and now lives in Melbourne where she works as an agricultural journalist. An earlier version of this novel won the Victorian Premier's Award for an Unpublished Manuscript in 2003.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'They are men with no experience of corners.' (p 3) What does this mean?
2. 'Sewing is about completing the circle.' (p 26) What thematic role does sewing play in this novel and in Jean's life? Discuss.
3. Relate Robert Pettergree's theories about land clearing and fertilization to a discussion of the current water crisis and the long term effects of what we have done with land exacerbated by the recent droughts throughout Australia. This novel is written by an agricultural journalist so her knowledge of this aspect of the novel is as significant as its historical background. Read some of the recent writings about such issues such as Tim Flannery's *The Future Eaters*, or search the web for information on groups such as the Murray Mallee Strategic Task Force (MMSTF) which have been established to encourage sustainable farming. Discuss.
4. Both Robert and Jean are orphans. What influence has that had on their lives and characters?
5. What did you make of Robert's instruction about experimentation? (pp 59-64) Was it intended to show you as the reader the principles of scientific research, or was there an underlying meaning to this passage? Note that Jean refers to real-life examples while she is describing this 'lesson'. Later she thinks about it again: 'I think about my experiment with Robert....is contained.' (p 157) Discuss.
6. 'We have slipped through the science to a place of pure and perfect motion.' (p 90) What does Jean's description of making love imply?
7. 'I don't understand this gulf between our bodies and our minds and why it is so hard to move between the two.' (p 136) Jean describes here the dilemma confronted in all relationships. Some are dominated by the body and some the mind, and perhaps the more perfect combine the two. Discuss.
8. 'Fences mark one man's crop from another but they have no power over the land itself.' (p 160) This statement is not only a true statement about the land, but a magnificent metaphor for nationhood, and for the global effort to create artificial boundaries between cultures and races. Discuss.
9. Internment of foreign nationals as 'aliens' in war time is an invidious aspect of war. Discuss the imprisonment of the Japanese (such as Mr Ohno) and the Germans in this novel. For instance, did you know about the Vienna Boys' Choir being stranded here? Read about this issue in articles such as: National Centre for History Education, 'I was a Twelve Year Old Alien.' Retrieved 18 July 2005 from <http://www.hyperhistory.org/index.php?option=displaypage&Itemid=442&op=page>
10. What do you make of the character of Mr Ohno in this novel? Is his connection to Jean an infatuation or something more?
11. Robert's decision to leave and go to war is born of failure. His confused memories of his mother and her lost babies have fuelled his desire to make a perfect life, and when he fails in farming, and in saving their baby, he can't find solace in Jean, or in the healing power of love. Is there any hope for him?
12. Jean is a woman who desires not simply a perfect union with Robert, but wants to feel 'at one with' herself. This theme relates not only to her but to the people of a nation and their intimate connection to the land in which they live. Discuss.

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