



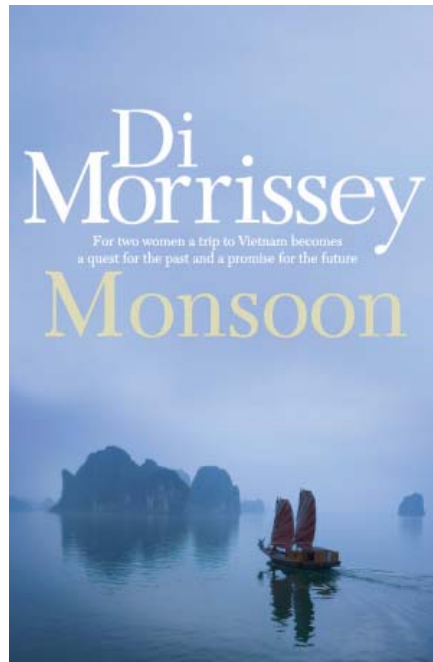
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NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Di Morrissey



MONSOON

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'She suddenly realised that the cause of the sadness in both their families had to do with this country and its history.' (p 110)

Two Australian women who have been friends since childhood find another unexpected link in Vietnam - a country neither had visited until their twenties. Twenty-eight year old Sandy Donaldson has been working for an NGO called HOPE in Hanoi and is about to complete her contract, when she invites her best friend Anna Fine to join her for a holiday. Anna has never been to Vietnam although her mother Thu who died when she was a child, had been a Vietnamese refugee in the 70s. Her father Kevin has never pressured her to return to her mother's home, but is pleased when she accepts Sandy's invitation. Sandy, too, has a family connection with the country, for her father Phil Donaldson had been a member of the 6RAR which fought at the Battle of Long Tan in 1966, and had been wounded and repatriated, since which time he has always harboured unresolved feelings about the experience which he has chosen to keep from his family. His mood swings and difficult temperament have always suggested to Sandy that he has not come to terms with the past, and needs to confront it. When he receives an invitation to attend a reunion of the Long Tan veterans, the past threatens to engulf him again. Meanwhile, Sandy and Anna meet Tom Ahearn a retired journalist who has been invited by his old chief of staff, Alastair Knight, to go to Hanoi in advance of the reunion to research the changes in the country since he was a 1960s war correspondent. When he realises that he had interviewed Phil at a hospital after the battle, the connections become even more significant.

The physical and the psychological effects of the Vietnam War are made clear in this novel; both for the foreign veterans and for the Vietnamese people who fought alongside or against them. Some Australian veterans such as Phil have never recovered, but some of them have returned to Vietnam in order to confront their demons. In some cases, such as that of the owner of Pat's Bar in Vung Tau, they not only want to help other blokes, but have dedicated themselves to providing assistance to the local people. For many Vietnamese and their descendants are still suffering the dreadful effects of Agent Orange generations later, and still waiting for compensation (p 117). The destruction of Vietnamese cities, of priceless antiquities and of arable land was another legacy of war made visible to Sandy when she visits Hue and hears of the destruction of much of the Forbidden City (p 161). Despite the many ancient sites now visited by tourists it is a tragic truth that the bombing left whole tracts of land wasted and many ancient cities in ruins. And many Vietnamese also still mourn the loss of thousands of people, who either died or escaped by boat to countries like Australia. For example, Anna's mother Thu and her younger brother Van were sent by her parents with her uncle Quoc on a boat in 1978 to escape the communists who resented the south Vietnamese for helping the US in the war (p 72). While at sea, Van died, the boat was attacked by pirates, and Thu was raped, and despite later making a home in Australia she lost all contact with her family, save for her uncle Quoc. An underclass has developed in Vietnam, too, of orphans born as a result of liaisons with visiting soldiers and then shunned by their own family members.

The economic aftermath of the war in Vietnam is also depicted as a mixed one. On the one hand, the country is flourishing with the influx of tourists and the investment of big businesses. As Sandy explains to Anna: 'Yep, industrious and entrepreneurial right down to a woman sewing, cooking or selling produce off the pole on her back, or a cyclo driver dreaming of one day owning a taxi. And with the government loosening restrictions on free enterprise, big business is booming too.' (p 38) Doi Moi is the name which was given to the 'renovation of the country which began in 1986' (p 127), however such cultural transformation and affluence has also attracted corruption 'By whatever means, legal or not, many saw the chance to profit from the war.' (p 2) It also brought environmental degradation, as enterprises such as shrimp farming (pp 85-6) threaten the ecology of the country. Tourism, too, creates a range of environmental hazards, and often leads to local people being relocated, and their neighbourhoods destroyed or transformed by 'luxury' developments. Sandy, in working for HOPE, is trying to assist those whose rights are being flouted by these large enterprises but is constantly frustrated by 'inefficient bureaucrats, and knowing corruption exists and seeing the degradation of the countryside' (p 155). For example, when Sandy and Anna offer to look after Barney's Bar while the owners - an American draft-dodger named Barney Stuart, and his Vietnamese wife Lai - are overseas,

they discover that he regularly pays standover men for 'protection' (p 210). Captain Chinh's young crewman Hung's later attempts to ship drugs disguised amongst supposedly priceless pottery out of Vietnam under the aegis of the powerful Madame Nguyen of Hoi An. Rick Dale, an American art valuer (pp 90-1) assists Carlo Franchetti, Anna's boyfriend, in this exporting venture until they all realise that Mme has fooled them. Hung's actions are symptomatic of the feelings of young Vietnamese who aspire to the affluence they envy in others.

'Then one day, our time is up but even the government didn't want to know us when we came home.' (p 218) Many Australian soldiers were killed in Vietnam and the Australian band Red Gum's song 'I was only nineteen' (pp 17-8) sums up that loss very poignantly; it also sums up the abandoned feelings of men when they returned. The shabby treatment of returned Vietnam veterans in Australia and the US has been acknowledged only relatively recently, and many still feel they haven't been adequately recompensed. The impact of their problems on their families too has left a generational legacy which becomes less easy to trace as time goes by. Sandy's family is certainly aware of the impact it had on her dad Phil, but might consider themselves relatively lucky. Sandy's mother Patricia has played the role of peacemaker and has thus protected Phil from himself, and her children from the worst of his moods. In contrast, many other veterans came home not only with physical injuries, but also with drug and alcohol problems, sexual diseases, and residual anger which resulted in domestic abuse and in the breakdown of relationships and families.

The novel describes the 'hothouse', unreal atmosphere which existed in Saigon in 1965, when Tom arrived as a young press journalist, and the insights such writers gleaned from being there. He and his mates both partied and worked with legendary figures such as Neal Davis (pp 102-3), and frequented popular spots such as the Hotel Caravelle. They attended what were affectionately known as the 'five o'clock follies' - the press briefings (p 141) given by the Australian authorities which updated them on the progress in the war, albeit with a fair degree of censorship. This lifestyle lay in stark contrast to what Tom discovered when he travelled closer to the action: 'Tom found it hard to reconcile the casual chaos of the military in Saigon with its blackmarket, gung-ho mentality, compared with the life and death reality being played out in the paddy fields.' (p 144) Tom witnessed at first hand how war changed men (p 175), so that some became rebels, some evinced uncommon bravery, and others cracked under the strain. The novel also depicts the role played by Australian entertainers in Vietnam and the heady and adventurous days they experienced there. The incident in which Col Joy and the Joy Boys and Little Pattie (pp 2-3) travel with Tom Ahearn, to give a concert at Nui Dat is highly entertaining, and is made more so by the later advent of monsoonal rain and nearby attacks; and becomes somewhat farcical when Col is the subject of a hair-raising 'kidnap' by Tassie Watts (Clarence) who wants him to meet the soldiers who couldn't get to the concert.

The ties between family members, and between ancestors and their descendents is another theme in this novel. Anna has never evinced much interest in her mother's past, although she is close to her father Kevin and obviously feels sad to have lost her mother so early in her life. However, her visit to Vietnam reminds her of her heritage and she finds to her surprise that 'She wanted to find her mother's family' (p 313). When Anna and Sandy visit Phu Quoc island which is where Anna's mother's departed on a boat bound for Australia (p 330), they meet Mr Hang who had maintained many records of the refugees and tells them that she was actually from Bao Loc outside Dalat in the Central Highlands (p 342). Anna finds an uncle there and leaves Vietnam contented that she now knows where her mother lived, without feeling the need to stay there herself, for she has her own life to live.

The mysterious power of romance and love in the course of our lives is another subject in the novel. Sandy can't understand Anna's attraction to Carlo Franchetti and tries to test their relationship by inviting her to Vietnam. But she discovers by the end of the novel that Anna's affection for him is fully cognizant of his faults, and that Carlo will be a devoted husband to her, for they do truly love each other. Sandy has always thought that her peripatetic lifestyle was not conducive to serious romance but surprises herself by falling in love with Doctor Jean-Claude Petiere, who is the French director of a pilot shrimp

aquaculture operation near Hai Phong and, who is working to improve standards in Vietnam. Her decision to marry him will present a range of difficulties, but she realises that love is founded both on compromise and on being content in oneself.

What makes a life rich or poor? Anna and Sandy are invited to answer this question often as they tour together, and particularly when they share a meal with the Trung family whose son works at the resort in Hoi An (p 150). These people have little of material value, but they do have a deep-seated sense of security in their family, home and ancestral culture. Food is a big part of that culture, and they are happy to share it despite their poverty. Similarly when Sandy and Anna are stranded in a car with a group of orphans during a monsoon (p 172) and forced to take refuge in a mausoleum, they are assisted by the poor farmer Nguyen who welcomes them to his home, despite his own travails. His pride in his heritage (one of his ancestors worked for Emperor Tu Doc) is (p 195) part of his strength. He and his wife also share their food despite having little themselves. Spiritual messages play a part in this theme. Anna feels an instant connection to the old nun who lives alone on top of a cliff in Halong Bay. The nun gives her wise counsel suggesting that Anna needs to visit her inner self and to find her past, in order to locate solutions to some of her problems. And her new-found passion for Vietnamese cookery has also offered her another exciting option for the future - becoming a restaurateur.

There is a strong message about finding inner contentment throughout this novel. Each of the characters has to 'settle the ghosts' (p 181) and to reconcile themselves with some aspect of their past, before being ready to engage with the future. The Tale of Kieu (pp 50-1) which Captain Chinh tells Sandy, Ann and Tom on board his boat on Halong Bay is symbolic of the losses of the past and the nostalgia we all feel for things which cannot be restored. For only when we confront the past, can we ever move forward.

WRITING STYLE

1. The novel is set in a number of time periods and is structured using flashbacks. It opens with a Prologue set in 1966, then switches to Maroubra, 2006. Chapter 1 is also set in Sydney in 2006. Later we read the harrowing story of Thu's escape in 1978, and of her subsequent marriage to Kevin. The novel continues to play with time as a means of telling the story in a dynamic way and in order to show the importance of the interaction between the past and present in this narrative. Discuss.

2. What contributed to suspense in the novel?

3. How would you describe the characterisation in this novel? What devices does the writer use to convey ideas about characters?

4. Were there any passages which were particularly evocative in the use of descriptive devices?

5. Di Morrissey's novels are each inspired by a particular landscape. How does this novel depict Vietnam?

THE AUTHOR

Di Morrissey is one of Australia's most successful writers. She began writing as a young woman, training and working as a journalist for Australian Consolidated Press in Sydney and Northcliffe Newspapers in London. She has worked in television in Australia and Hawaii and in the USA as a presenter, reporter, producer and actress. After her marriage to a US diplomat, Peter Morrissey, she lived in Singapore, Japan, Thailand, South America and Washington. Returning to Australia, Di continued to work in television before publishing her first novel in 1991. Di has a daughter, Dr Gabrielle Hansen, and her children, Sonoma Grace and Everton Peter, are Di's first grandchildren. Di's son, Dr Nicolas Morrissey, is a lecturer in South East Asian Art History and Buddhist Studies at the University of Georgia, USA. Di and her partner, Boris Janjic, divide their time between Byron Bay and the Manning Valley in New South Wales when not travelling to research her novels, which are all inspired by a particular landscape. For further information visit <http://www.dimorrissey.com>
Read: 'Interview with Di Morrissey' ABC Talking Heads with Peter Thompson, 2005.
<<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/talkingheads/transcripts/s1336300.htm>>

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What did this novel reveal about the background to the Vietnam War?
2. The majority of the population are under thirty-five,' said Kim. 'Baby boomers don't rule here!' (p 67) What does this statement suggest about Vietnam's recent history?
3. 'No, you see, we're involved in a pacification campaign, not a war. We're hoping the local lads maintain the peace. Guerrillas don't represent an invading army, if you get my drift.' (p 139) Major Brown tells Tom Ahearn in 1966 that the 'powers that be' do not want the conflict described as a war. This sort of political 'spin' has also been evident in the description of recent conflicts in the world. Discuss.
4. 'How different from the control, the technology, the spin doctors and the organisation behind the media at war these days.' (p 175) Tom suggests that in the 1960s journalists were freer to report the truth than they are today. But later he records the filtering of the truth from official reports (p 177). Is Tom looking through rose-coloured glasses at his own involvement in 'filtering' the truth? Discuss.
5. 'Australian soldiers good men. Not Like Americans' (p 187). What lies at the heart of this statement? What does the novel suggest as the reason for why the Vietnamese people seemingly 'liked' Australian but were suspicious of Americans?
6. 'It might show you that the whole stinking mess did serve a purpose, that it wasn't a lost cause.' (p 245) From reading this novel in the context of the history of this conflict do you believe, as Phil does, that it was a lost cause or as Tom does, that it did have a purpose?
7. Why has the Australian government been so slow to offer compensation to Vietnam veterans? What factors influenced their treatment when they returned, and what forms of deprivation do many still suffer?
8. 'Attached! She's got no reason, no right, to feel anything about the place. If anything, she should hate the place.' (pp 245-6) Phil's attitude to Sandy's work in Vietnam is typical of the attitudes of war veterans in several wars. For example many WWII vets harboured deep-seated resentment toward the Japanese. What effect does war have on the children of veterans? Is it likely to make them sympathetic to their parents or to rebel against them?
9. Some vets who returned to Vietnam have taken much younger wives and fathered children. What did you think of the bar owner Pat's 'happy family' situation? And what might his older children think of it?
10. Vietnamese refugees in Australia suffered ugly racism such as that experienced on Maroubra beach on Australia Day 1985 by Thu (pp 69-70); such violence is reminiscent of the later Cronulla riots, and stems from the sense of entitlement which earlier migrants have developed, and the fear which they evince when confronted with a possible threat to their 'entitlement' by newer migrants. The children of refugees also confront prejudice in their parents' homeland. For Anna's arrival is greeted by hostile airport guards who think of her as 'Viet Kieu' (p 33) or 'Foreign Vietnamese, those born or living outside the country who had privileges and opportunities but no awareness or knowledge of their heritage, often earned the scorn and ire of those living in the country who had inherited the past as well as the future of a now-united Vietnam.' (p 35) Does racism stem from the bully's insecurity rather than from any real issue with the people being bullied? Discuss.
11. When Anna locates 'The Family House' (p 327) she is told that Ho, the cook at Barney's Bar has been supporting their efforts in offering refuge to abused women and children. Ho has lost his family due to his past failings, and has in reparation, dedicated himself to offering others some form of refuge. Pat has tried to do the same with his bar and veteran programs. Can one ever make up for the losses of the past?
12. Why is this novel called 'Monsoon'? It certainly features tropical monsoons in the plot, but does the word have any other thematic significance?

MONSOON

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