

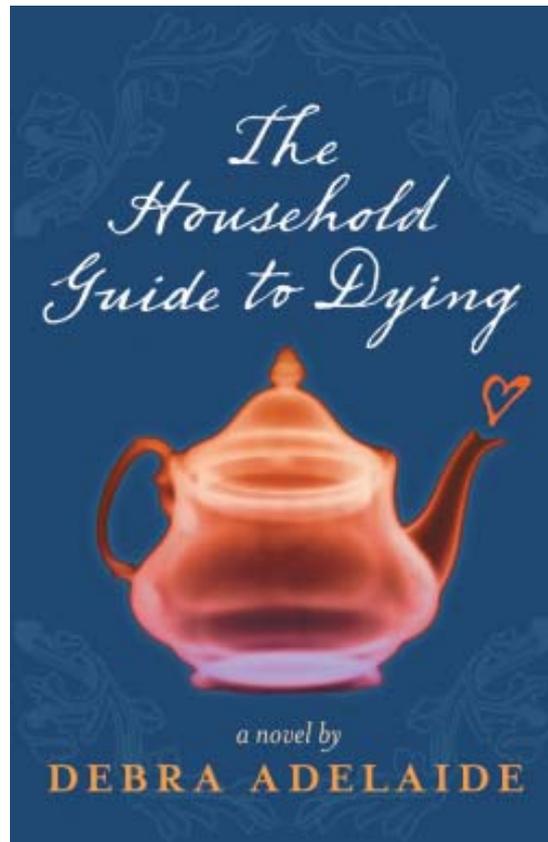
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NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Debra Adelaide

THE HOUSEHOLD GUIDE TO DYING



Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'Living in the moment. I needed a little more of that.' (p 94)

This is a life-affirming novel about dying but it's also about words and their power over our lives. It's about words like regret, loss, guilt, love, pain, joy, memory, remorse and death. 'I die. A brave and simple verb.' (p 142) How does one express the inexpressible? Why are words such as 'passing away' or 'losing someone' used to describe death? Why do we, like Delia Bennet, think that we can tie up 'loose ends' (p 131) before we go? Delia is facing 'the season of the future, when there was none at all' (p 4), and in her last days contemplates her own mortality, reflecting on the life she's had, and on the people she'll leave behind her. She resolves to seize the day and to enjoy the moment: 'Nowadays I focussed on small but insignificant things.' (p 14) She is going to enjoy her dying as much as she's enjoyed her life.

Forty year old Delia Bennet has given up fighting with terminal cancer after a series of gruelling treatments and surgical procedures. Having been brought up by her mother Jean, widowed by the sudden death of Frank when Delia was just three years old, she has never really felt confident in herself, but has camouflaged this by trying to maintain control over those things closest to her. For where Jean had played the role of a perfect mother while also operating a hairdressing salon with seemingly effortless grace, Delia had disappointed her by becoming pregnant at seventeen and fleeing from her home in shame. She'd settled in Amethyst where her former lover Van had grown up (pp 25-8), with 'a fierce determination to make everything as right as I could' (p 73). There she reared her son Sonny and befriended Archie, but at eight years old Sonny was killed in a freak accident, and Delia returned to her mother, before Archie claimed her as his wife. They'd had two daughters-eight year old Daisy and eleven year old Estelle-and Delia had studied at university, become a proofreader (p 32), an advice columnist for homemakers, and a writer of a series of bestselling household guides (p 30). Her success as a columnist relates to the fact that she's a control freak, for her responses to her readers' queries are often acerbic, but devastatingly funny. Of her family she believes that 'thanks to the one thread that was me, it all held together' (p 46). Her housekeeping style is military, and even her pegs are colour-coded (p 211). So when faced with death, Delia resolves to write *The Household*

Guide to Dying in order to deal with her situation. She returns to Amethyst to claim Sonny's small possessions, apologise to Pearl, Archie's former girlfriend, and to find Amber Morgan, the girl who received Sonny's heart after he died. Delia even tries to suggest that Archie marry his assistant Charlotte after she's gone (p 361), a piece of advice which doesn't go down well at all. But ultimately death is a subject she cannot control.

Death is the central topic in this novel, or rather, living with the act of dying. Delia defends her planned book by arguing to her publisher that: 'everyone dies, Nancy. Think of the potential readership.' (p 103) This subversive trope of being able to provide advice about the one thing we can't control is very arresting. 'Death was death. Death could not die itself.' (p 127) Death is a topic we manage via euphemisms: 'the *coffin* no longer existed. It was now called the casket.' (p 180) 'Do you have a good word for dying?' (p 187) We try to concentrate on symbolic ideals such as 'the idea of life, of hope, of renewal.' (p 171) 'But that was it. There wasn't anything comfortable about dying, not that I had found.' (p 172) Delia observes that 'all but your closest friends would desert you in your hour of terminal illness' (p 174) and that 'only the most important things matter now.' (p 247) Death creates mixed emotions towards those closest to us, including guilt and anger, for Delia is worried that she is abandoning her daughters: 'You could never imagine Mrs Gandhi or Mrs Micawber or Mrs Thatcher or Mrs Weasley dying before their time and leaving their children unmothered.' (p 45) Regret is another strong emotion forced by death. Delia ponders the things she'll miss when her children grow up without her, and possibly with another partner (p 48).

The concept of being a good homemaker and the acquisition of domestic skills is a further theme. 'Now you could be a goddess, a beautiful producer of lavish meals in magnificent kitchen temples. Or a domestic whore, audaciously serving store-bought risottos and oversized oysters and leaving the cleaning to others. Goddess or whore, both were acceptable.' (p 6) The letters to Delia for household hints and problems are related to Mrs Isabella Beeton's famous guide to cookery. All such advice seems futile, though, when the household's major problem is that the woman who resides in it is dying. And yet this novel is about the woman's need to maintain some semblance of order in her life; despite the irony of the fact that the one thing she cannot control is her own preservation. 'I could admit now that the perfect husband resembled a wife. I yearned for a wife.' (p 61) The lists she makes are an attempt to teach her girls basic skills such as how to make the perfect cup of tea (pp 12-4) or how to boil the perfect egg (p 311). And the list regarding arrangements for their weddings (pp 42-3) is even more poignant. Jean's life is a model of a woman being both 'good mother' and a professional (p 303), and Delia strives to maintain the same balance. So mothering and the conflict with achieving professional and intellectual satisfaction is another theme.

Male/Female roles are another topic explored in the novel. 'But what really was the difference? Turning grass into lawn, or crumpled linen into smooth sheets? Maybe the so-

called domestic oppositions, the traditional roles, were much more compatible; maybe they were so fundamental, powerful, and even erotic.' (p 165) Delia is sometimes frustrated by Archie's lack of domestic skills but later thinks that, 'Maybe Archie's indifference to the household was restraint, a capacity for self-control and wide-gazing detachment. Something I couldn't do... in the basket.' (pp 46-7) His skills lie elsewhere in gardening, landscaping, and mowing, 'He realized it was in fact no chore, but an opportunity for self-expression as well as meditative stillness.' (p 166)

'Winter would soon be just a chill memory' (p 39). Nature's seasons are used symbolically to trace the lines between renewal and decline, as the novel traces many of the ordinary seasonal activities which give Delia's life a pattern of meaning. Observing the passage of time reflected in her garden, the flowers and their aromas are richly redolent with Delia's own feelings. 'My lungs swelled with the delicate warmth of new jasmine frothing along the side fence and the peppery odour of the council's wattle, already well into bloom.' (p 77) Feeding her chickens, watching the clover she planted secretly on Mr Lambert's lawn grow, these are the things which she will leave behind.

This novel also luxuriates in the joy and the pain of birthing and parenting: 'no other perfume, no drug, nothing ever had the smell of a baby' (p 156). It presents the flipside of that feeling, for parenting can often be painful too. Jean has suffered the pain of losing Delia to a teenage pregnancy to Van who proved unworthy. Delia has suffered the loss of her son Sonny, and the heartbreaking decision to allow his heart to be given to another child. Jean's arrival at the hospital (p 191) evinces her love for Delia who later has the joy and pain of rearing two sometimes rebellious girls. Jean must now watch her daughter die, and Delia must face the fact that she will never see her girls grow up, and that perhaps someone else will instead.

The novel traverses Delia's passage from anger to acceptance. She begins with feelings which might be expressed as:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

She ends her book with a sense that 'it was time to let go of some things, seize others (p 375). She spends her last days trying to recover those things most precious to her. She relishes her home, her family, and the things which have made her life meaningful, as she steels herself to face the great unknown.

WRITING STYLE

1. Literary references form a sub-text in this work which begins with a quote from a John Forbes poem and then refers to Eliot and Shakespeare (p 2), Dickens (p 17), Heartbreak Hotel (p 21), favourite music (pp 24-5), several authors (p 45), Eliot (p 49), music (p 65; 108), Alice Walker (pp 247-8), the books Delia took from Amethyst (p 294), John Donne's '*Death, be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and dreadful*' (p 301), quotes about death (pp 125-6), and finally the poetry Archie paints inside her coffin (pp 328-9). There are often artful asides informing the themes too. eg Delia is delighted when Archie demonstrates for the first time that he is a man unafraid of washing, and then remarks: 'I was reading *Madame Bovary* at the time' (p 116). Her meditation on the books she's loved and the poetry which gives her comfort at the end (pp 334-341) are another aspect of this literary referencing underpinning the novel. Read the entire text of John Donne's poem 'Death, be not proud' or any of the other texts mentioned here. Discuss in relation to the novel.

2. Letters to Delia punctuate the narrative and provide an ironic sub-text to the novel. How did they inform the themes, in your opinion?

3. Language is used subtly to suggestively echo themes and scenes. eg 'I generally wake early, before the light has fully hatched.' (p 9) This line comes after the feeding chickens and so circles around the notion of life being born—a terribly important idea in this story about dying. Debra Adelaide's love of words is evident too. eg hardware (p 110); medical language (p 128) and words like 'nidification and gelogenic' (p 144). There's a lot of reference to the meanings of words such as 'cockles of our heart' (p 15) when Delia visits Rookwood Cemetery, or 'autopsy' which means 'seeing with one's own eyes' (p 220). Playfulness with words is evident too. eg Delia calls Amber 'hearty' (p 371) which, given that she has Sonny's heart, is very apt. Choose a passage which uses words inventively and read it aloud to the group before discussing it.

4. Humour is used frequently. eg Delia (pp 35-6) picks up on a woman's secret affair in her letter about a stained tablecloth, in her later response (p 51). Her exchanges with her family are often very witty, too: 'Actually I'm dying in here! Not that you two care.' (p 93) Black humour is used as well. eg She has fun giving businesses in Amethyst names such as Roadkill Café and Lazarus's Vehicles. And Delia's desire to depict on the cover of her book an image of herself lying in a coffin (p 171) or making blood sausages from her own blood are equally black ideas. The letters to Delia are also extremely funny eg the messy housekeeper who finally reveals her gender (p 331). Discuss the role of humour in this and other books on serious subjects.

5. Aphorisms litter Delia's narrative: 'The mystery of hardware were complex as well as masculine.' (p 109) 'he can change a tap washer but can't locate the other sock.' (p 114)
What wise or witty sayings particularly appealed to you?

THE AUTHOR

Debra Adelaide is the author of two novels, *The Hotel Albatross* and *Serpent Dust*, and the editor of four themed collections of fiction and memoirs, the latest of which is *Acts of Dog*. She has worked as a researcher, editor and book reviewer, and has a PhD from the University of Sydney. She is now a senior lecturer in creative writing at the University of Technology, Sydney.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the quote from John Forbes' poem 'Death, an Ode' at the beginning of the novel.
2. Death and how to deal with it gracefully have been the subject of several works: Ruth Cracknell's *Journey from Venice*; Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (also a play); Robert Dossaix's *Night Letters*; Virginia Lloyd's *The Young Widow's Book of House Improvement*; and Kate Jennings' *Moral Hazard*. Read one or more of these works and discuss in relation to this one.
3. 'All the world over, lawn meant death.' (p 169) Read Delia's meditation on lawn and its associations with death (p 169) and discuss. 'Those were the days when everything to do with death was silenced, hidden and guarded, like a rabid beast that a family was still obliged to keep.' (p 19) Are we more open about death today, or have we found other ways to camouflage and avoid the reality of death?
4. Each society has its own way of dealing with death. eg The various cultural customs relating to death such as Aztecs bleeding victims and eating tortillas (p 289) and Egyptians using the colour of eau de nil (pp 297-8) are mentioned in the novel. Do our society's funerary customs provide comfort or are they limited in their relevance?
5. Cancer treatments (p 152) and the impersonal and often offhanded treatment of patients is another sub-theme. 'She'd have been an excellent doctor if she didn't encounter real people.' (p 154) Discuss.
6. Delia refers to 'My dull sense of inferiority (p 70). Given the life Jean has made for her, why is Delia like this? Is it because Jean herself was such a competent and good mother?
7. The novel comments on 'The concept of family wholeness and permanence and security that all these household books implied' (p 170). The popularity of books such as Shannon Lush and Jennifer Fleming's *Spotless*, and the rash of celebrity cooks and homemaker programs, suggests that society has turned to nesting and nostalgic love of domestic skills as a way of managing the anarchic nature of our lives. Discuss.
8. 'Too many homes were now empty places, physically, psychically but also culturally, lacking the memories, knowledge and wisdom formerly accumulated like cherished crockery and handed down from generation to generation.' (p 31) Discuss in relation to modern homes which are scaled back to the most minimalist of decor and furnishings.
9. 'It took a stout feminist to withstand the onslaught of the shirt.' (p 47) Large divisions occur in relationships over seemingly trivial matters which reveal fundamental differences in attitudes. Discuss.

10. Delia Bennet's hilarious comparison between her lot and that of the long suffering Mrs Bennet (pp 58-61) is well worth discussion! Read Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as background to this, and then compare the lives of such a mother in that time and in ours. Is Mr Bennet unduly critical of his wife given what she's had to endure? Is Delia's life (pre-cancer diagnosis) a comparatively easy one?

11. 'Archie had given me more than I deserved' (p 47). What does this statement tell us about Delia?

12. Organ donation is a key subject in this novel too (pp 250; 253; 313). When Amber eventually turns up (p 368) she reveals that she has been afflicted with cellular memory (pp 372-3) which has given her some of Sonny's attributes. Is this a comforting or disturbing concept?

13. 'As with the wedding cake itself, hope is the chief ingredient of a wedding cake.' (p 62) 'I was beginning to sense the redundancy of marriage' (p 43) Delia and Archie are happy together, but is this novel optimistic about marriage in general?

14. Delia and Archie marvel at Mr Lambert's careful tending of his lawn 'I never saw anything so necessary, but so irrelevant to a person's life' (p 76). But later in the novel they discover something he's kept hidden. Even close neighbours often harbour misconceptions about each other. Discuss.

15. Delia imagines Daisy at 25 in a realistic assessment of how we change (p 78) as we grow older. Discuss the expectations you have of children or young people who are close to you, and the likelihood that they may well surprise you.

16. 'You could vanish in the gleaming bright abundance of a city supermarket, but you couldn't hide in a place like Cliff's.' (p 98) Compare this comment to your own experiences of small towns as opposed to cities.

17. Discuss the description of the publishing business and the publishing proposal (pp 104-6). Would Delia's book be likely to appeal to a publisher today?

18. 'Everyone who trivialised and dismissed domesticity has done generations of women a profound disservice.' (pp 112-3) Discuss the history of home economics (pp 6-7) in relation to contemporary attitudes to domestic duties. With its discussions of the intricacies of household practices and its virtual eulogies to the art (for instance) of washing and laundries (pp 113-9) this novel is one sense a Guide to Household Etiquette in itself. Despite the parody, it also demonstrates the author's deep-seated pleasure in the ordinary minutiae and the majesty of household tasks and practices. Discuss.

19. 'Trendy psychobabble was beginning to talk about closure then.' (p 286) What do you think of the notion of closure? Discuss.

20. At the end of the novel Delia plants clover in Mr Lambert's lawn to secretly express the word, eternity (pp 157-8; 365). She visits Arthur Stace's grave and reflects that he 'achieved literary perfection. Eternity contained everything he needed to say.' (p 145) Stace was a homeless man who began in the 1930s to write the word 'eternity' all over Sydney, and after his death in 1967 he was commemorated with a wrought aluminium replica of the word being erected in Sydney's Town Hall Square. He was later internationally celebrated by the word being written in lights over the Sydney Harbour Bridge during the Millennium celebrations in 2000. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Stace What did you make of this aspect of the novel's themes? It ultimately suggests that death is a form of letting go; of recognising the joy in the moment and embracing the future, or eternity. 'Death is a poetic moment' (p 380). Discuss.

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