



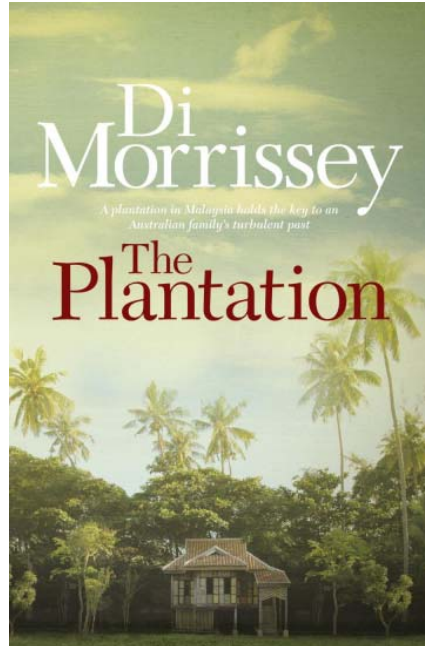
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## NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



**Di Morrissey**



**THE PLANTATION**

## Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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## THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'I think that all families are interesting. They are made up of individuals and although the family might present a united front to the world, scratch the surface and you'll find the dominant and gentle, the weak and strong, and people with different talents, tastes and desires,' he said. ' (p 400)

This novel is about family secrets. It's a sweeping saga of both personal and colonial relationships which have continued to resonate for several generations. It not only traces the hidden lives of a group of relatives, but also reveals how interwoven are the lives of the diverse groups of people who lived together in the 'melting pot' which was Malaya, and which continue to influence those who live in a heritage area in Brisbane, today. The generations have remembered some things and forgotten others. It's up to those in the present, to record or honour that which has been neglected, or been deliberately hidden-to uncover the secrets of the past.

These overlapping themes are explored through the eyes of 32 year old marketing consultant Julie Reagan, although the story also offers other family members' perspectives on the action as well. Julie has grown up in Brisbane in 'Bayview' the colonial home owned by her maternal grandmother Margaret, who shared it with Julie's parents Caroline and Paul, until Margaret's death. It is still both physical home to her parents, and spiritual home to Julie. Her grandmother Margaret had mysteriously abandoned the life she'd shared with her husband Roland Elliott on a plantation called 'Utopia' in Malaysia, and brought her daughter home with her. (Utopia had been founded by Eugene Orson Elliott, father to Roland.) Consequently Caroline never really knew either her father, or her brother Philip, who after attending boarding school in England, had run the plantation until he and his wife Stephanie died in an accident in 1994. Julie, like her mother Caroline, is therefore surprised to receive a letter from Dr David Cooper, a UQ researcher seeking information about Julie's great-aunt Bette. Apparently she had written a book about the threatened lives of both the orangutans and the Iban people of Malaya in the 1970s, a work which her family had not been aware of. They actually knew very little about Bette at all, since Margaret had been estranged from her sister sixty years earlier, and had never revealed why. Julie is intrigued by this reminder of her family's past, and then circumstances invite her to visit Malaysia and the Elliott family property 'Utopia', which is still run by her cousins Shane and Peter whom she has never met. Julie discovers a complex web of secrets which changes her life forever.

Rifts in families develop often without any clear intention, and can be the product of a missed connection between one or two people in earlier generations. When Julie embarks on a trip to Malaysia she has no inkling that she'll find out not only about her great-aunt Bette but also about her own grandmother, Margaret. She comes across several facts which cause her to re-examine her own family history, and which appear in this text as critical thematic junctures. For example, when Julie reads Roland's diary she's astounded to read that: 'Several months later I was joined by my wife who had seen out the war in Australia and I was reunited with my son, Philip, who had spent the war in a Japanese internment camp in Sarawak with my sister-in-law, Bette.' (p 229) Until then neither she nor her mother had any idea that Margaret had been separated from her son during the war. Later, this is further explained when Bette says in one of the 'flashbacks' in the novel: 'Philip isn't my son, he's my nephew. We got separated from my sister on the docks in Singapore, so she got evacuated on a ship and we didn't.' (p 271) Julie is intrigued by these revelations and then later discovers another secret: 'Julie suddenly leaned forward. 'Tsang. Tony Tsang. Is that who Bette married?' she asked breathlessly. 'I never knew her married name.' ' (p 311) These small climaxes add to Julie's growing perception that the family have been kept in the dark by Margaret and that they have still more to discover.

The novel also deals with the theme of post-colonialism, by offering a précis of the history of Malaya and the successive periods of rule there, leading to British supremacy in the region. 'One of my favourite places,' he agreed. 'The White Rajahs, the Brooke family, ruled it as their personal kingdom for a hundred years, until the Japanese invaded. The first rajah, Sir James Brooke, was ceded Sarawak and his family ruled it as absolute

monarchs. They had their own money, stamps and flag and even the power of life and death over their subjects. After the war, the third rajah, Charles Vyner Brooke, gave Sarawak to the British and after independence it became part of Malaysia. Many of the imposing colonial buildings were built by the second rajah, Sir Charles Brooke.' (p 160) Such a summary hints at the sense of entitlement that colonialist plantation owners like Roland Elliott felt in being landowners in this country, where they had developed a very comfortable and affluent lifestyle. This life, though, was overturned -first by the great Depression, then by World War Two, and later by Malaysian independence in 1957. Roland Elliott's father Eugene had loved Utopia, and his son inherited his fierce loyalty to the enterprise, and to the unequal balance between owners and local workers: 'Ramdin is the family driver and 'his grandfather, Hamid, drove great grandfather Eugene,' (p 142). When Margaret met her future husband, 'She found all of his answers interesting, even when he talked about the daily muster, the need to keep a close eye on the native workers, the problems with up-country estates, the communist troublemakers, the drop in tin prices, the idea of turning some of the rubber estate over to oil palms, and the renewed interest in rubber as the effects of the Depression eased.' (p 38) This catalogue of Roland's beliefs summarises the role of the plantation owner at that time very succinctly. Roland had brought his holding safely through the Depression and was facing new challenges and opportunities when WWII broke out. What he couldn't tolerate was the idea that his own workers might not remain loyal to him.

**The role of British imperialists is also made more tenuous during WWII because of the lack of British protection of colonial outposts such as Malaya.** This sense of abandonment is made abundantly clear in Roland's account of the conflict, which reveals that despite their years of investment in the country, British high command did not hold Malaya's fate high in its list of priorities. Thus, both white colonialists and local people became victim to the vagaries of war and endured years of deprivation and imprisonment by the Japanese. After the war, the local people continued to suffer, as their lives were ruled by successive bureaucracies. 'The government has moved some Iban longhouse communities,' said David. 'And apparently some of these people like the new settlements and the new-style modern longhouses.' Tuai James shook his head. 'That is true, but they no longer own their land, and they cannot practise the old ways of farming. The younger people go away to school and when they come back they do not always respect our customs. They are clumsy in the prau and have little knowledge of adat, the law.'(p 190) Such a comment reveals the human impact of colonialism (which is typical of post-colonial countries) in that successive generations find themselves disenfranchised even after attempts to offer them self-determination.

**One major aspect of colonialism, therefore, is the effect it had on workers native to the country, some of whom became increasingly disgruntled by witnessing the wealth of their bosses in relation to the poverty of their own lives.** The vibrant multicultural diversity of Malaya (later Malaysia) is often referred to in the novel: 'Malaya is certainly a mix of races, isn't it, Roland?' commented Bette. Coming from an Anglo Saxon middle-class background, with little exposure to such diversity, Bette found it all fascinating and exotic. 'I mean, there are native Malays, the Chinese, the Tamils from India who work on the plantation and Europeans. Your plantation seems to be a microcosm of this mix. Where do your workers come from?'(p 105) And yet, to the British, these people were simply servants to be educated in 'white' ways of doing things. Ah Kit, although a loyal family servant to the Elliotts, was also a Communist who was the most outspoken of Roland's workers, and eventually leaves his employ: 'We work many hours for little pay so that your family can be rich. I do not think that is fair. I think that the British exploit us. I think that the British should leave Malaya.'(p 223) Roland again has typically strong views on this: ' 'They want the British out of Malaya, but these people aren't ready to rule themselves.' (p 379)

**Another impact of post-colonialism was the use of land in order to maintain profits, and the effect on agriculture and food production.** 'About sixty years ago some chap smuggled rubber tree seeds out of Brazil, rather naughty of him. Brought them to Kew Gardens in London and some of the saplings were sent to Ceylon and Malaya, to see what they'd do. The resident of Perak was something of an amateur botanist and encouraged some of the planters to switch their empty plantations over to rubber. We had all those unemployed Ceylonese workers hanging about, so we had a workforce and cleared land.' (p 61) After rubber growing became problematic, they switched to growing palm oil, which

had both its advocates and critics: 'Julie, palm oil is such a contentious subject. There's so much of it in our food. Do you know that you ate about ten kilos of palm oil last year and you probably weren't even aware because often it's not labelled? Not just that, palm oil plantations are causing havoc for the wildlife and forests. While Utopia is trying to be a modern, sustainable plantation, it's still in a business that causes deforestation, which destroys animal habitat. It's not just the big mammals that are becoming rarer, but because palm oil is a monoculture, the plantations don't provide enough variety of foods for the smaller wildlife, like birds and insects, and they are disappearing fast, too. Many plantations have displaced the indigenous population, and the rapid expansion of them is frequently related to government corruption.' (p 138)

Another concern expressed in the novel is the destruction of not only the Iban people's habitat, but also that of animals such as orang-utans and tigers, birds and other wildlife, and of natural features such as mangroves. David's initial contact with Julie's family was prompted by reading Bette's book on orang-utans, and how threatened they had become. In the present era there is more awareness of this, but both widespread land clearing and tourism have become such powerful interests that wildlife issues have not taken precedence in local development. 'Aidi, is tourism going to destroy this area?' 'Unbridled tourism will, but well managed tourism will help the region, not destroy it. You have to give people an alternative source of income by conserving what's here, not destroying it,' he answered. (p 249) This sort of comment summarises the delicate balancing act being exercised in countries already altered by colonial powers, and now relying on global interests to protect their lifestyles.

Progress and planning as they relate to peoples' lives and history is also a major issue in the novel. Julie's family home is under threat from development and her mother embarks on a campaign to reverse council ruling. 'Obviously these so-called planners have never set foot in these streets and seen the homes that are around here or they'd never mark them for demolition.' (p 19) The fact that heritage orders can limit one's personal control is also noted: 'We did talk about that once, but it put too many restrictions on what alterations and changes we could do to the house.' 'Not that we've ever made any structural changes, or want to. No one would ever dream of altering such a classic building,' said Paul.' (p 23) One night Julie 'sees' the mysterious figure of a woman dressed in muslin outside her window (p 26), which suggests that someone is trying to 'speak' to her from the past, again denoting the power of history.

Despite the dire implications of these issues being canvassed in the novel, it concludes on a hopeful note with the family now much the wiser about their past, and having made connections with those they'd never met (Shane and Peter) or had presumed dead (such as Bette). Julie is embarking on a future made richer by having made new associations with the country of Malaysia, and connections with long lost relatives. Her burgeoning romance with Christopher is another promising sign for her future. History has proved a powerful force in healing and uniting a family once again.

## WRITING STYLE

1. The novel is structured in sections which weave between past and present, in order to tell this sweeping saga of a family which stretches back from contemporary Brisbane to pre-war Sarawak. The lives of an earlier generation of the family which lived at 'Utopia' a Malaysian plantation, and those who now live in Brisbane, are interwoven in this evocatively teasing narrative. In the Prologue we find ourselves in Sarawak, 1960; in Ch 1, in Brisbane, 2009; in Ch 2-3, in The Mediterranean Sea, 1937; in Ch 4, in Port Sweetenham, 1940; and in Ch 5, in Brisbane, 2009; in Ch 6-8 we follow Julie to Malaysia; then in Ch 9, in Sarawak, 1942; in Ch 10-12 we follow Bette and Philip's wartime experiences; in Ch 13, the novel moves to Penang, 1950; in Ch 14, it returns to Utopia, 1950; and ends in Brisbane. We also read excerpts from Roland's memoir, and various accounts of past action. How does this interplay between different times and voices add to the suspense in the novel? (For example, the opening scene in which we meet Bette is not explicitly explained until pp 423-4.)

2. The 'front matter' in this novel includes photos at the head of each chapter. How do they extend or interact with the text?

3. How would you describe the characterisation in this novel? What devices does the writer use to convey ideas about characters? For example, does dialogue reveal much about characters? Choose a passage to illustrate your answer to this question.

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 the country of Malaysia?

## 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. On the Booktopia website, Di Morrissey answered 'Ten Terrifying Questions' <<http://blog.booktopia.com.au/2010/11/04/di-morrissey-author-of-the-plantation-answers-ten-terrifying-questions/>> What questions would you ask her about this book, if you had the chance?
2. This is a post-colonial novel about the aftermath of British rule in Malaysia, amongst other subjects. What message did it convey to you about the effects of this period, and the interaction between native and newer populations or cultures?
3. Although this novel is told as many family members' stories, Julie is at its centre as the youngest in the saga. She is a successful marketing consultant and is quite a 'modern' career woman. She lives alone and gives no indication about her past relationships. She receives unwanted advances from David, and then falls for Christopher. What did you imagine had been the pattern of her past life and/or loves? Is it more of a challenge to have both a career and a romantic life in this day and age?
4. Margaret's 'inner self' is never really revealed in this novel. We witness her early years and marriage, but the most personal insight is regarding her honeymoon: 'She responded with what she hoped was satisfactory ardour to Roland's lovemaking but couldn't help feeling relieved when it was over.' (p 66) Did you have the sense that Margaret wasn't really suited to married life?
5. Is David as bad as Julie makes out? He doesn't abandon her parents' conservation cause after Julie rejects his advances, and is actually quite gracious about it. Does sexual attraction (or the lack of it) often blind us to the real qualities of a person?
6. 'Be independent, like India? I don't know about that, Margaret. Surely the most important issue is for all the different races to live together in peaceful harmony and then decide what sort of an independent Malaya they want,' said Bette.' (p 379) Integration or self-determination - which policy has worked best for post-colonial countries in your opinion?
7. The debate about growing palm oil has led to the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (p 309) mentioned in the novel. Visit the website to find out more about this body. <http://www.rspo.org/> Find out more about this subject and discuss your findings.
8. 'Many of these young women are known as the fishing fleet travelling to the East, looking for suitable husbands.' (p 41) Did Margaret marry Roland for convenience or was she really in love with him?  
What does this novel reveal about the life of plantation wives? Would Bette have made a better wife for Roland than her sister? Has life changed for plantation wives since the war? Does Martine as Shane's wife face an even harder time in living in Malaysia than did Margaret?
9. How did WWII affect people in Malaya, as this period is depicted in this novel?
10. There is a sense conveyed that the colonialists and later tourists don't understand the people they purport to know so well: 'I've noticed that away from the tourist places, the locals don't seem to care about pollution and rubbish.' Aidi sighed. 'Yes, it's a big job to educate people not to treat the beaches and the sea as a sewer and a dumping place.' 'I've been told the east coast has wonderful beaches but the pollution is getting out of hand over there, too,' said Julie.' (p 306) How would you compare these statements to the way in which British colonialists have treated the land in these countries?
11. Men such as Roland are depicted as feeling superior to women, in this novel. 'Ah yes, but we men talk about important matters. It pays to keep a handle on people's movements, plantings, prices, what the locals are up to in various districts.'(p 69) Are the



contemporary men in this novel any better? Consider the attitudes of David, Christopher, Shane and Peter in response to this question.

12. Is Julie's story typical of many families? Do we all have such skeletons in the closet? What does this novel suggest about the nature of families?

## THE PLANTATION

Di Morrissey

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