



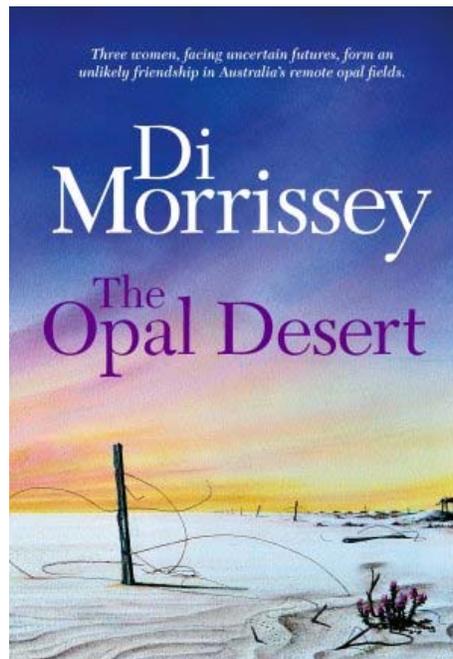
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## NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Di Morrissey



THE OPAL DESERT

## Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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## THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'Women friends are special. They can shape who we are and who we want to be.' (p 406)

Three women of different generations meet in a fictional town called Opal Lake in the heart of opal mining country, near Lightning Ridge, NSW. There they discover not only friendship in this desolate and yet strangely beautiful and mesmeric landscape, but also the strength and the conviction to enter a new chapter in their lives.

Forty-something Kerrie Jackson's husband the famous sculptor Milton Faranisi has recently died after their twenty years of marriage, leaving her alone to confront the acrimony of his daughters Alia, Luisa and Renata, and the remnants of her former life as an art student. Milton had advised her to pursue her passion for art when they were courting, but once married Milton had invariably dismissed her aspirations and expected her to support his: 'Tourist stuff. Sunday painters. Very unadventurous. You can think of better things to do than that.' (p 45) Kerrie, in a fog of grief, nevertheless responds when Milton's executor advises her to go to an outback area where opals are mined, sensing that an unfamiliar landscape may give her some welcome relief and perhaps inspiration. He suggests that she visit a friend of his Murray Evans an artist and gallery owner and his wife Fiona to whom she confesses that 'I hope that taking up my art again might help.' (p 131) She quickly meets various other friends who influence her decisions including Pam and Doug who own and operate a B&B in Opal Lake; Ingrid a talented jewellery maker; and most influential of all is Shirley Mason a woman approaching eighty, who has remained in her dugout for over twenty years since she mysteriously lost her partner Stefan. Shirley had grown up with 'opal fever'; she and her father used to come out fossicking until family commitments kept him in Sydney until his untimely death. 'When I was a little girl and came here with my father, I thought this was a wonderland. When I came to the opal fields as an adult, I thought I'd landed in a war zone.' (p 128) She eventually reveals to Kerrie that her great love Stefan Doric whom she met when she was nursing him after a mine explosion (p 208) had brought her back to the area where they were blissfully happy for twenty years until he went home to an ailing mother in Yugoslavia never to be heard from again. 'The fossils are all I have left to remind me of Stefan.' (p 255) Shirley has clung to the place where she was happy, but needs to 'let go' of the hurt she has nurtured in order to move on. Kerrie is also indebted to Shirley when she sends her back to Sydney with a parcel of opals to be sold to her jeweler Roth Cameron (who has been handling her sales for years), and therefore meets his son and partner Tim who will become her new love. Finally, the twenty year old Anna arrives in town and soon befriends Shirley and then Kerrie who has over the course of eighteen months become a frequent visitor. Anna's dreams of being a successful runner are challenged by a lack of money and her difficulties in following her coach's instructions. But working in Opal Lake gives her new confidence, and her friends eventually also support her with the financial assistance necessary to achieve her dreams.

Several topics are raised in this novel, one of which is the conflict between self and one's partner's dreams and aspirations. Kerrie had allowed Milton's work to subsume her own creativity by becoming the manager of all his affairs and even after his death found herself tied to his needs as the custodian of his work. She had never been allowed to return to her own art work or to cater to her own needs since Milton was forever requiring her to drop everything when he seized on a whim to travel somewhere to exhibit his work or to consult his muse. She was also required to care for his children with the help of a nanny, and became a slave to their needs as well. In contrast when she meets Tim Cameron, she finds a man who is proud of her new artistic achievements and who also spoils and pampers her.

Facing up to the world and being honest with oneself and with one another is another strong theme. People who escape the world by retreating to places like Opal Lake, often with secrets to hide or intentions to make a quick buck and decamp are evinced by the character of Davo. 'Ah, the dark underbelly of the opal fields!' said Doug. Murders, mystery, ratters and ratbags. That's us.' (p 141) Both Kerrie and Anna retreat to the place in order to escape the problems at home in Sydney and Adelaide respectively. Even Shirley, for all the good counsel she gives others, and who ironically encourages Kerrie to achieve

her own dreams, has tied herself to the memory of her lost love, and has been hiding from the world for years.

However, this idea is also challenged by the fact that some characters in the novel have obviously found their perfect home and community in Opal Lake. Pam and Doug manage to run their B&B and to also travel when they wish to. Murray and Fiona have a successful gallery in the area and are contented residents. Mick runs the pub and is the hub of the community. So the novel is also suggesting that a place can be both a temporary retreat and a permanent haven. Both are valid reasons for becoming connected to a place, whereas using it as a hiding place with no real respect for its landscape is not.

Environmental research is another topic raised when Kerrie meets Darren and Helen, a geologist and his very knowledgeable partner. They suggest that opalised fossils are part of geological history - and want to stop people such as Ingrid using them to make jewellery (p 138). They believe that it's imperative to create a repository of untouched fossilised opals (p 251) in order to study the geomorphic structure of the land in the Lightning Ridge area. They preach conservation (p 140) little realising that Shirley has hidden in her dugout a 'Tajna. Croatian for a secret' (p 253), a priceless opalised fossil which is her last tangible link with Stefan. At the end of the novel its fate is decided in a symbolic way which suggests approval of the conservation theme and which ties in neatly with the development of Shirley's character.

The issue of the Yugoslav war and the role that Marshall Tito the guerilla leader of the Yugoslav partisans played until his death (p 262) is also raised in the sub-plot about Stefan and his disappearance. When Goran Zilich from Croatia (p 391) finally appears to tell the story of how he met Stefan while both were imprisoned on the island of Goli Otok (p 392), he also reveals to Shirley the role that double agents such as Bosco played in Australia in feeding information back to the Yugoslav intelligence UDBa (p 242) and in double-crossing their assumed mates. This puts a grim perspective on the so-called camaraderie amongst the men Stefan regarded as his fellow countrymen.

This novel is above all a eulogy to the beauty and mystery of the opal. For not only is it a valuable and beautiful stone but it also holds the key to many geological mysteries. It has generated wealth and also encouraged particular settlements to grow. It has been the subject of myth and legend. For example, Shirley tells Anna that the myth that opals (pp 326-7) are 'bad luck' was spread by diamond merchants who did not want to see their product challenged. The fact that the Australian Opal Centre (p 403) is being built indicates that the opal is regarded as one of our most powerful international attractions.

The conclusion to the narrative has each of the women achieving new found confidence as a result of their friendship and its outcomes. Kerrie has discovered her art and found a more equal partnership with Tim; Shirley, through the intervention of Kerrie, has discovered the secret to Stefan's disappearance and that he did love her after all; Anna has, in surviving an ordeal when she was captured by Davo has discovered how to run as her coach wanted her to, and her two new friends have since given her the capital to finance her running training. These various changes in their lives have been brought about, too, by the landscape of the Opal Lake; this shimmering mysterious pool of water hides untold secrets just below the surface. And it is of course symbolic of the opal itself which has hidden veins to be discovered by cutting and polishing. These three women have found that they, too, have hidden strengths and inner beauty that has been lying dormant and waiting to be discovered...

## WRITING STYLE

1. Like several novels by this author, this story is set in a number of time periods and is structured using flashbacks. It also uses three different lives as the focus of this structure in three main parts. It opens with a Prologue establishing Anna's character and the setting of Opal Lake. Ch 1 is headed 'Kerrie' and takes place after her husband Milton Faranisi has just died. The narrative then flashes back to how he and Kerrie met twenty years earlier at art school, and then continues her contemporary story. In Ch 6 we move to 'Shirley' who begins to tell Kerrie her story and then there is a flashback to 1939 when Shirley was with her father Albert prospecting at Lightning Ridge. In Ch 10 we move to 'Anna' and her past in Adelaide, before she moves to Opal Lake to take a job at the pub. How did these various stories work together, in your opinion?

2. **Suspense is essential to any novel.** What mysteries or secrets were integral to the suspense in this novel?

3. There are three main female characters in this novel who are of very different ages. What devices does the writer use to distinguish between them as characters? (For example, dialogue often reveals a lot about a character.) How might you describe Kerrie, Shirley and Anna? Do they have similarities as well?

4. Were there any passages which were particularly evocative in the use of **descriptive devices**? Eg Kerrie's first visit to Opal Lake.

5. Di Morrissey's novels are each inspired by a particular **landscape**. How does this novel depict outback NSW in this fictional location? Does she draw on any particular place for inspiration?

## 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. Milton gives Kerrie wise advice about being an artist: 'You can only persist because you cannot live without art.' (p 20) Discuss in relation to writing, visual art (and other artforms) the pursuit of which generally involves financial insecurity and long periods of self-doubt.
2. 'I'm rescuing you, Kerrie! ... Please, can't you make me the passion in your life?' (p 33) Milton despite his obvious appreciation of Kerrie's charms, regards her role in their relationship as one who will be his cook, his companion, and manager of his career (p 41) in return for which he lavishes gifts on her (pp 30-1). He seems to contradict his earlier advice to her that if she loves art she should pursue it, by expecting her to drop everything for him. Discuss.
3. 'It must be stultifying being lumbered with thousands of years of history,' said Shirley. 'Here, in Australia, you have the opportunity to be creative and original without the burden of the past. This country is like a clean slate...' (p 228) Do you agree/disagree with Shirley's statement to Stefan? What might Indigenous people say about this statement, for example?
4. 'So she kept them safe.' (p 285) The issues of local history preservation are vexed ones. On one hand, well-meaning local archivists store things for posterity but often to the detriment of the material's longevity. But on the other hand, the conservators with the skills to store them safely sometimes do not understand the hidden past and significance of the artefacts they discover. Discuss.
5. Towns such as Opal Lake are working hard to invite outside attention and to generate tourism. In the novel the planned Australian Opal Centre at Lightning Ridge is mentioned and you might like to visit their website to find out more. <<http://www.australianopalcentre.com>> Such museums have the potential to develop a real profile for a town just as the Waltzing Matilda Centre or the Stockman's Hall of Fame in Queensland have done. The planned outcome is that visitors get to discover the things which Kerrie has found so inspirational in Opal Lake; the downside is that such tourism ventures have the potential to destroy the very things they celebrate. Discuss.
6. Women in this novel support each other both emotionally and intellectually. But there are also evidences of the reverse in the fact that Kerrie's step-daughters are so hateful to her, apart from Alia who eventually 'comes round'. Are women so supportive in your experience? Discuss.
7. 'It's sort of like a blank canvas, so you can read it lots of ways.' (p 329) This novel is a eulogy to the mysterious power of landscape. Discuss.
8. Bosco's power in the local Yugoslav community and his role in determining Stefan's fate is a chilling example of the complexity of the lives of people from totalitarian regimes, and how even in a so-called democracy such as Australia, they are still not entirely free. Discuss.
9. 'Ratters' seem to be part of the opal landscape. Shirley comes across them as a child, and also later when she and Stefan find Viktor murdered. Even Davo turns out to be a ratter. Are such actions typical of frontier places, where law enforcement is scattered, or is it more to do with the excessively powerful lure of the opal?
10. Being a stepmother can often be a delicate balancing act. Shirley's advice to Kerrie as to how to deal with her stepdaughters was wise. Alia was obviously pleased to become an assistant in curating her father's work. How likely is it that the older two girls might eventually treat Kerrie with more respect in future? Discuss.
11. The town of Lightning Ridge and environs is obviously inspiration to this novel. Visit the website to find out more <<http://lightningridgeinfo.com.au/>> What aspects of life did you find surprising eg living in dugouts, or the range of art being produced in such places? Have a look at the website of Broken Hill artist Jack Absalom (who is mentioned in the novel) to inform this discussion. <<http://www.jackabsalom.com.au/>>

12. This novel is about women achieving independence. But it's more than that, for it's also about the power of the natural world of the outback to remind people of what really matters in their lives. Discuss.

## THE OPAL DESERT

Di Morrissey

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