



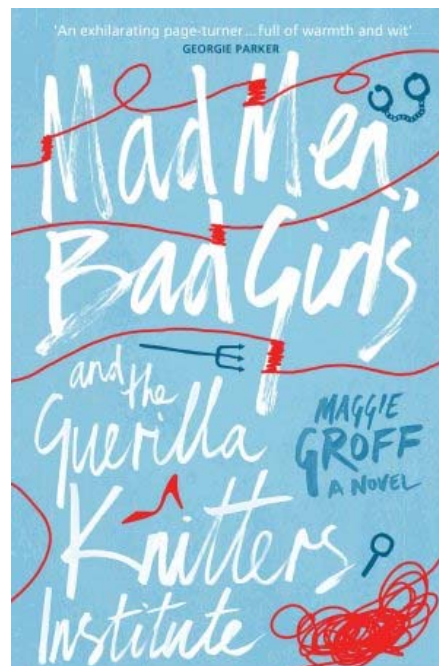
MACMILLAN

Macmillan Publishers Australia

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Maggie Groff



MAD MEN, BAD GIRLS AND THE
GUERILLA KNITTERS INSTITUTE

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

CONTENTS:

- Thematic & Plot Summary
- Writing Style
- The Author
- Questions for Discussion

THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'So, we don't have a plan?' 'We do,' I said. 'That's the plan: watch, see and decide.' (p 150)

This book is a step aside from the conventional crime novel, woven as it is with mystery, romance and hilarious comedy. Essentially, it's a work of humorous fiction which also engages with serious contemporary moral and social issues. Raised for discussion are the ethics of investigative journalism, cults, bullying, family and community dynamics, graffiti, the value of friendships and the responsibilities attached to relationships. Narrator and freelance investigative journalist Scout Davis is an intelligent and intuitive heroine who is addicted to solving mysteries; fiercely protective of family and friends; and perhaps in love with two men.

'Hey, I'd probably have it all sorted in a couple of days and by that time I might know where I was going with the cult story. At least, that was the plan.' (p 29) The sassy, forty-something Scout Davis lives in Byron Bay in a groovy apartment above a restaurant. Her partner Toby is a war correspondent who is currently in Afghanistan. She's been with him for ten years since they met shortly after she separated from now ex-husband Rob with whom she is still friendly. Her twin daughters Tasha and Niska were born when she was nineteen and are now in their mid-twenties, living in Sydney. Her elegant sister Harper is Head of Sports (p 23) at Tattings, a private coeducational school on the Gold Coast and has a comfortable lifestyle with her husband Andrew Blaine-Richardson, an orthopaedic surgeon, and their four sons Max, Sam, Jack and Fergus, and family dog Angus. Scout's parents also live in Sydney and complete a close family unit. One morning, Scout receives a call from a commissioning editor at Anzasia Media Group, Brian Dunfey, who has been sending work to her for years. He asks her to investigate the suggestion that a US cult called the Luminous Renaissance of Illustrious Light may have established itself on the Gold Coast. 'Brian's aware of my fascination for the dark side of the human psyche, and anything that hints at the abuse of power by an authority figure is right up my alley.' (p 3)

As a thorough professional, she embarks on the investigation with gusto. However, Scout's life is complicated by the fact that she has type one diabetes (p 18) which requires constant monitoring. She is also part of a secret and 'intrepid band of five yarn bombers known as the Guerilla Knitters Institute. GKI for short, we venture out in the dead of night and secretly decorate a variety of public objects—statues, trees, signposts and lampposts—with articles made from good old-fashioned wool. And if you were thinking this sounds like a form of graffiti, you'd be absolutely right, although we prefer to view our artistic creations as urban beautification.' (p 5) And in the midst of the investigation she also begins to harbour lustful feelings for local policeman Rafe Kelly who is Toby's old school friend. However, complications pile on complications when a second mystery is introduced with Harper arriving at Scout's apartment with a story about knickers being slashed in the Tattings school dressing rooms. 'She had circled in red the faces and names of the four girls whose underwear had been vandalised—Peony Day, Savannah Robertson, Brianna Berkelow and Kylie Rack.' (p 77) Scout goes into 'investigative mode' and discovers some key clues to pursue in relation to this mystery as well.

The practice and ethics of investigative journalism is a major theme. Scout's tactics in researching the cult are typical of those employed by journalists. First, she does some trawling on the internet to find out more about the cult and to discover possible leads. She creates a whiteboard on which she circles topics and their links to each other. She places an ad in a number of papers and is contacted by a woman. 'My name is Marcia Sanderson. My daughter's name is Matilda Wilding. At least, it was. It's . . . it's Eternal Shadow now.' There wasn't a hint of amusement in her voice and I refrained from comment.' (p 21) She is finally given the letter (pp 159-61) sent by Harold Steinman the grandfather of Casey who has been spirited away from the US and is somewhere on the Gold Coast with the charismatic leader of the cult. She is also given a lead by Toby's cousin Dan in NY who makes contact with an ex-cult member and arranges for Scout to conduct a phone interview (pp 189-93). Throughout all this sleuthing Scout is conscious of the ethics of her profession and manages to both protect her sources and to act with propriety. She doesn't invade anyone's privacy by hacking phones, for example, and she ticks Harper off when she was going to take photos of the suspected knickers slasher in the change-rooms pointing

out that her actions would be contravening the law! In fact the two mysteries regularly intersect in this way. For they demonstrate that a seemingly graver matter of people being brain washed and subjected to both sexual predators and physical cruelty involves some of the same moral questions as does the school bullying being perpetrated at a privileged school.

Cults (and their influence over those who join them) are another major topic in this novel. What are they, and how do they really differ from religions? Are all cults sinister? Scout discovers via the internet that 'the cult was based near Saratoga Springs, in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York' (p 9) and that its leader was known as Heavenly Brother Excalibur. She registers with a consumer protection website and types in the cult name: it sends the message 'danger' (p 12). She researches cults by speaking to a number of people with first-hand knowledge of them and hears some interesting views about them. For example, Toby's policeman friend Rafe Kelly says that he was surprised at the effectiveness of their techniques. 'I remember being shocked,' Rafe began, 'that it was so easy to break down someone's defences in a short period of time. Sophisticated mind control will work on even the most intelligent person, particularly if you change their environment and introduce sensory deprivation. Simple stuff, like removing clocks and watches, can destroy a person's ability to function normally in relation to the passage of time. And sleep deprivation disorients you.' (p 128) She discovers that they have changed their name to Bacchus Rising (p 21), and their leader's name to Serene Cloud, and that they are based in the Gold Coast hinterland. She also finds that many of the girls are pregnant, and when she goes undercover and infiltrates their headquarters that some seriously abusive behaviour has been going on. She locates Tildy (whose son Tommy has run away to join her) and Casey, and eventually becomes involved in a breakout aided by two undercover members of a secret international anti-crime organisation: 'All I can tell you is that we're both field operatives for a transnational organisation investigating corruption and crime involving people trafficking, the sale of children, international education scams and human rights abuses perpetrated by cults and totalitarian organisations.' (p 331)

The morality of bullying behaviour amongst teenagers is another topic covered in this novel. The peer group pressure which allows girls such as Brianna Berkelow to inveigle three of her classmates into intimidating scholarship student Mary Niles is chilling. The fact that Brianna's father has been complicit in hiding her former misdemeanours is doubly disturbing. The school's initial response to the bullying of Mary is also troubling. Mary Niles' attempted suicide and the fact that two teachers' lives were almost ruined are further casualties of this sort of behaviour.

The Guerilla Knitters Institute is a renegade group whose seemingly frivolous and often highly amusing antics present another moral issue. What restrictions should be placed on a citizen's right to engage in public statements or acts of protest? Is it a crime to decorate public places with art or 'installations' which endeavour to make a statement about issues of community concern or interest? What sorts of charges might be laid on the members should they be discovered, and are such charges fair or just?

Finally, the decisions we must make in terms of relationships, the responsibilities entailed in them, and the interplay between romance and lust figure in the plot as well. Should Scout succumb to the strong attraction she feels for Rafe while Toby is away? Should Rafe feel guilty for sleeping with his best friend's partner? What is the difference between love and lust, and can a woman love two men at the same time? Because she is a single woman with no incumbents apart from her adult twin daughters, Scout seemingly has the freedom to act as she wishes to. Or does she?

By the end of the novel Scout manages to solve two mysteries, and to embark on an affair which seems right at the time, but will no doubt create future problems. She has demonstrated the skills and ethical decisions involved in being a top-notch investigative journalist and has obviously got many cases ahead of her. This is not the last that her readers will hear of Scout Davis ...

WRITING STYLE

1. This novel is a **cross genre piece** containing elements of **humour, crime, mystery, family and community relationships, and romance**. Which genre did you find the most compelling?
2. **Literary and popular cultural references** are littered throughout. eg Scout and her sister Harper were named for *To Kill a Mockingbird* (pp 126-7); Scout's cat is called Chairman Meow. What other such references did you find noteworthy or amusing?
3. As befits a crime novel this text has all the accoutrements of such fictions. It contains **suspense, two mysteries, clues** (eg pine cones (p 61)), and **red herrings** (when Scout's car is stolen it was tempting to believe it had something to do with the cult investigation). Were there any clues or puzzles not followed up and why do you think that was? How would you compare Scout's sleuthing skills to those of other such mystery-solving heroines in series (eg Corinna Greenwood created by Kerry Greenwood)?
4. **Humour** constitutes a good part of the charm and appeal of this novel, despite it also being about serious subjects. 'Harper and her husband, Andrew, live in a starter castle' (p 64); 'The power of mothers to extract information is unmatched in the western world, and I'm amazed the CIA hasn't cottoned on to that.' (p 135) What passages did you find particularly amusing?
5. **Coincidences** can be useful in driving a plot as well. For example, Scout's daughters went to school with Matilda (Tildy) who is now being held by the cult; her friends Dave and Daisy Fanshaw have a son named Ben who was embroiled in a cult at one stage; Miles the restaurateur who lives downstairs has a daughter Susie Cameron who teaches at the school which expelled Brianna Berkelow before she enrolled at Tattings; Toby has a surgeon cousin Dan in NY who has treated a former member of the Luminous Renaissance of Illustrious Light; Brian Dunfey has a cousin Gerry who is a Brisbane immigration officer. Do we really live in a 'small world' and are such coincidences typical of life in your opinion?
6. 'I pushed Chairman Meow off my lap and pulled my notebook and pen towards me. I had a story to write.' (p 357) This is a **first-person narrative**, but in some senses it is a **metafiction** about the act of creating a story, since it is Scout's account of her investigation. Discuss.

THE AUTHOR

Maggie Groff is the author of two non-fiction books, *Mothers Behaving Badly* and *Hoax Cuisine*. She has worked as a columnist for *Sunday Life* magazine in *The Sun Herald* and been published globally by *Readers Digest*. She lives with her husband in northern New South Wales and is currently working on her next Scout Davis novel.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The activities of the Guerilla Knitters Institute are based on the same ideals shared by graffiti artists; that public spaces are 'canvases' on which the citizen has the right to express an opinion. Discuss. (Read about the ideals of the world-renowned graffiti artist 'Banksy' to inform your discussion.) Given the opportunity, would you be a covert yarn bomber?

2. The heroine Scout Davis is a woman of our times - independent, sassy, intuitive and accomplished, with strong family and community relationships and an unusual hobby. What would you say to an invitation to drink tea with Scout on her back verandah? Have you tried Scout's blend of Earl Grey and Lapsang Souchong tea (p 25)?

3. Many fictional crime-busters have a side-kick - Sherlock Holmes has Dr Watson, Inspector Morse has Sergeant Lewis, Scout Davis has Chairman Meow. What is the importance of the 'side-kick' in crime novels, and how does Chairman Meow measure up?

4. The novel has some charmingly quirky characters (and that includes you too Chairman Meow). Which was your favourite character, and why?

5. Scout is a freelance investigative journalist. She muses, 'One of the things I love about freelance writing is that it allows me to retain professional integrity and not be influenced by an employer's agenda. Unless I'm broke, and then I'd sell my soul to the devil.' (p 3) How does this novel present investigative journalism? Is it a flattering portrait of the profession?

6. Scout struggles with the relationships and/or differences between cults and religions. 'Playing my own devil's advocate, I considered the five million Catholics a year who spend a fortune visiting Lourdes in France where spring water in the grotto is believed to possess healing properties. Was this such a huge leap away from believing that a pendant transfused with the supreme profluence of Bacchus would bring cosmic enlightenment?' (p 34).

'I've never been quite sure what defines a cult or separates it from a religion,' Dave said. 'From personal experience, my understanding is that, in a cult, the doctrine takes precedent over one's own thoughts, and you lose the ability for critical thinking.' (p 94) Discuss these two comparisons between cults and religions.

7. The novel is something of a eulogy to both the beauty and the wackiness of Byron Bay where Scout lives. 'My desk overlooks Byron's main thoroughfare, Jonson Street, where the muse in charge of fabulous things has dropped the biggest fancy-dress party in the world.' (p 7) She loves it for this haphazard sense of style and says: 'I can't describe what it is that makes Byron special; there's an intangible quality that's difficult to define. Apart from the outstanding natural beauty, there's a soul that seeps into your bones. Byron is an eclectic mix—cultured and feral, chamomile and gin, tattoo and Gucci. With attitude.' (p 140) Is the setting in this novel important to its themes?

8. 'Someone at school is slashing underwear in the girls' change room. Cutting up bras and briefs. Cutting legs off tights.' (p 27) How well did Tattings deal with these issues? Should a principal have expected a staff member like Harper to deal with this? Or was it a police matter, in your opinion? Did the school fail in its duty of care to both the accused teacher, and the accused student Mary Niles? Discuss.

9. The bullying of Mary Niles had devastating consequences. Cyber-bullying amongst teenagers has become a serious issue. Is it more insidious and dangerous than face-to-face bullying? Is this because the bully can be braver with anonymity, and say more terrible things? Or is it because the victim's personal sanctuary (ie their home) is invaded and they have nowhere to hide? Discuss.

10. Scout's friend and lawyer Dave Fanshaw is a frustrated writer (p 92) who styles himself on Ernest Hemingway. If you had the opportunity to reinvent yourself, what author would you choose? Why?

11. Scout is always on the lookout for new story ideas. 'I nodded in agreement. Someone seriously needed to look at the privacy laws relating to mental health issues. I filed the idea in my brain vault as a possible future story.' (p 54) Is this a real issue in your opinion? Should families who care for a mentally ill relative be able to access medical information about that relative? For example, should they be informed when the person is discharged from a mental hospital?

12. 'There are drugs at most schools, but it certainly isn't all kids doing it. It's the same with sex. Many will say that they do it just to gain street cred. Some do it sometimes, some never do it.' (p 80) Is this an apt representation of teenage behaviour in your opinion? Do we often define teenage behaviour as being 'bad' when we should be seeing it as relatively normal? Discuss.

13. Scout compares the incident in the cafe with joining a cult: 'In other words, I'd just witnessed first-hand that people are susceptible to authoritative control when emotions are involved. In a minor way I was beginning to understand what Rafe had meant by cults targeting emotions not intellect.' (p 133) Can you compare this incident to one in your own lives where you responded to authority in this sort of unthinking way? In your opinion what is it in a person's makeup or character that makes them susceptible to cult indoctrination?

14. It's time to tackle the moralities of Scout's affair with Rafe. 'Do you think it's wrong?' I asked Miles. 'You're a grown-up,' he said. 'It's what grown-ups do.' We fell silent again and I watched a couple of dogs chase each other along the lane. 'And it's very French,' Miles said, and when I glanced up at him he was grinning from ear to ear.' (p 269) There's no doubt that Rafe is a handsome rake but should Scout have rejected his advances? Neither Scout nor Rafe seem perturbed about how their relationship might affect Toby, although Scout does try to resist for a time, and also admits later in the novel that Toby has been unfaithful to her while he's been on assignment (more than once!). Scout admits that she is not trying to get even with Toby (p 283) so is it perhaps that at forty-something she might be trying to prove that she's still got what it takes? Or is it, as Scout states, that 'in five years' time, when I looked back on the occasion, would I wish I hadn't made love to Rafe?' (p 283)

15. The title of this novel sums up its major themes in an ironic and deliberately suggestive way. Discuss.

MAD MEN, BAD GIRLS AND THE GUERILLA KNITTERS INSTITUTE

Maggie Groff

Macmillan Australia

Trade paperback - ISBN: 9781742610795

These Notes may be printed or viewed for your own private, non-commercial use.
This material is copyright and may not be repackaged, resold or posted electronically on
networks without prior written permission from Pan Macmillan Australia.

Pan Macmillan Australia
Level 25, 1 Market Street,
Sydney NSW 2000

www.panmacmillan.com.au

©2012 Pan Macmillan Australia