

Picador Reading Notes

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Author: Gregory Day

Title: Archipelago of Souls

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Thematic & Plot Summary

‘The island does hold smells in glasswort gullies and behind hot dunes, but not like other places. The wind is a constant mail boat that comes to pick up that particular correspondence. We undergo a perpetual scouring, a scrubbing and washing. Eventually it wears away not only our scent but our flesh. We are wind-whittled. Human sticks in a shallow strait. Until, like Lascelles, they lower us into the ground, but even the soil that holds us will blow away eventually. When the sky truly will be scattered with an archipelago of souls.’ (p 74)

‘Lascelles and Leonie and I were just different facets of the same refracting shard. It was only I that was the returned soldier, only I that could command the official sympathy and the national applause, but we were all in the same situation. We were islands of the same archipelago, adrift in a sea of unknowing.’ (p 348)

Central themes in this novel are the ugliness of war, the power of words to heal, and the importance of living an authentic life. But if Wesley finds healing in his writing, his wife Leonie finds it in growing things: ‘It occurs to me that these local restorations are Leonie’s own version of this very text, the tiny plants the grammatical units in her own living statement on the nature of life, loss and recovery.’ (p 346) Wesley’s fellow soldiers have been damaged, and Lascelles wishes to create a memorial to them: ‘But no,’ Lascelles would calmly say in the monthly meetings held in the hall, ‘can we not offer our diggers more than a mere symbol of our respect? Can’t we offer them, in the difficult years of their resettlement, not only a roof over their head but a path to healing, to happiness?’ (p 323) ‘True’ is the name of Leonie’s uncle and it is a central word in this novel, too; leading an authentic and meaningful life in a world which is often lacking in meaning is a challenge: ‘we were a pair in that deeper task, to front the torrid face of reality head-on, without sentiment, without a need for trivial pheasant hunts, or the monotone of farms.’ (p 304)

The story is told in two alternating narratives by Wesley Cress. It swings between the present (recalled in immediate past tense, after Wesley’s friend, Lascelles, has died), and 1941 (recalled in a more distant past tense), when Private Wesley Cress of the Second AIF and his brother Vernon, and two mates named Mug Wiley and Ken Callinan, were doing service in Iraklion, Greece. The Kiwi General, Tiny Freyberg was in charge of Cretan forces, on the run from Hitler, who ‘had a bullet for every leaf and a bomb for every olive on Crete.’ (p 33) The boys are greeted by Tassos’s niece Adrasteia on their arrival, and Tassos’s family are very generous to them during their stay. The Cretan peasants are largely presented as a caring and closely-knit island community. Similarly, when Wesley later returns from war to buy a remote small holding of land – a property named Wait-a-While, in a place called Naracoopa – he discovers that King Island in the Bass Strait, where he intended to live an isolated existence, is a very small and closely connected world: ‘It’s as if everyone here can see clear across to everyone else; the longer the family has been here the more braided like a mooring rope their lives will be.’ (p 63)

Wesley is searching for some sort of truth in the world, and this spiritual exercise is what lies at the heart of this novel about war and its aftermath. ‘Truth, by its nature, cannot be clean and straight. It is not the events or the memories of the events creating my condition but the conditions of this island creating them. The life we’ve lived since the war. The two islands I inhabit. And I’ll say in reply, ‘*ex nihilo?*’ She’ll nod. Our little erudite joke in my schoolboy Latin. Out of nothing? Nothing comes out of nothing. So I walk the gravel path looking straight ahead at nothing.’ (p 7) **Instead of bemoaning what fate has in store for us, Wesley takes solace in the fact that everyone is strengthened by what they endure, whether it be the loss of a mother early, abuse by a violent father, or the brutality of war.** ‘Hate without love is universally recognised as evil, but equally love without a lineage of hate, or at least of bitterness and regret, is a flimsy thing indeed. A boat without ballast. Thus I believe the life we have built here will survive the squalls and vicissitudes of this our blue paddock.’ (p 223) Wesley’s wife Leonie has been badly abused by her father Nat Fermoy whose obsessive control over her makes him suspicious of anyone who comes near her – an irony given the treatment he has meted out to her over the years: ‘Those men are dangerous. They could hurt you,’ and she’d pull her duffel coat around, thinking that kindness isn’t dangerous and danger isn’t kind.’ (p 21)

The novel is told in four parts whose titles hint at some of the underlying philosophical themes and tenets explored in the work. [See Writing Style below.] **It also consists of a series of stories or**

parables which explore some of the moral and philosophical issues which Wesley's narrative seeks to unravel: The torture of Private Perry Coghlan, the soldier whom Wesley burns on the campfire in revenge for leaving Vern and others on board the burning ship, *Imperial* (p 141); Manolis, who hails Wesley as a hero but turns against him when he refuses to stay; Andreas at the Monastery of Agio Domitron who has become a Nazi sympathiser (p 204); Rickie Keith who was accused by Nat Fermoy of interfering with his daughter (pp 211–212).

War in this novel is painted as a sea of intrigue, of double agents and treachery. One of the most shocking examples of this is Wesley's discovery that the Monk Andreas who has taken him in and fed and protected him is a 'fifth columnist' (p 288) in the service of Hitler whose espousal of the 'purity' of race is echoed in Andreas's speech to Wesley: 'The true Cretan does not yet realise,' Andreas told me, 'how he, as the descendant of Minoans, is far nobler, more efficient, and with purer blood than the cross-bred British. The Cretan has the purest blood in the whole of Europe, even purer perhaps than the German himself.' (p 293) After Wesley kills Andreas (p 296) he leaves the monastery and finds 'To my surprise, over the treeline of the slopes below, I saw the horizon of the sea. It had been there all along but Andreas had never dared, or bothered, to show me.' (p 297) He realises that he had been kept a virtual prisoner in anticipation of converting him to the cause of the Reich. The commands issued by the British are often ignoble as well: 'And when I wasn't I'd sit in my camp and read and try to work out what to do about Vern now that I didn't have any family left to shelter from the facts.' (p 28) Vern's death was not a heroic story, and it reflected very badly on British conduct in the war.

The futility of war is another key theme. Wesley kills Simmo (pp 197–8) named after the legendary donkey of Gallipoli (p 179) in a nasty surprise of a scene; he'd been praising the animal's faithfulness but shoots him for food. The futility of this act, which is quickly followed by his discovery of a place of refuge makes it doubly distressing. When Wesley reaches the beach to find the destroyer off the coast burning, he does not know as yet that his brother and others are on board. 'It was as if everything had come to an end. Not only the battle but the war. Not only the war but the world itself. And now I am beginning to shake. My fingers can hardly hold the pen. In a last halo of acid light I hear the ship hissing water like a pained and dying beast. Flames dissolve and darkness surrounds me. Silence.' (p 71) The deaths of his friends and his brother Vern were largely preventable and achieved nothing. War appeals to romantics like Vern: 'He'd dreamt himself deep into the lines of all those books he'd read, played out his own mythological roles on the slopes of our farm's volcano, so that as the general put over the prospect of the battle's importance it sounded like literature to him, something already written.' (p 13) It also appeals to people like Lascelles who was denied the opportunity to serve: 'his problem was – there was nothing he could ever do about it – that he never saw action. Simple as that.' (p 7) But ultimately war is shown to be a huge folly which wreaks havoc on lives and countries.

Love of a romantic kind has proved elusive for Wesley until he discovers Leonie. Scarred by an early disappointment he writes: 'perhaps I had bequeathed all that to Vern. Not Sarah Murtagh herself but, yes, I left for boarding school, I took what was in fact his rightful place among the scholarly books, but more than that, I left a place behind for him. An untrodden space for a heart of beautiful things. And what I had to do with girls and women from that day on was sociable, fun, wisecracking, but nothing more, so that no wagon with me at the ropes would end up as a death trap on the slopes of love's volcano ever again.' (p 261) He has brief affairs during the war (notably with the beautiful Adrasteia who saves his life), until he meets his 'destiny' in Leonie. Wesley's silent vow to her is poetically indicative of the connection he feels with her: '*I will love you with the power of two men, one for who you are, the other for what you'll become.*' (p 267)

The novel also pits the mythology which underpins the Australian 'character' against the 'European character'. Wesley finds himself adrift in a world he doesn't understand and at the mercy of British soldiers who lack an appreciation of his rural background and ideals. 'Gradually too, even my dreams of Vern began to fade, or should I say, to be replaced by dreams of a composite of Pendlebury and Vern, a kind of Oxbridge savant with an Australian accent, who would ride the dormant volcanoes of Corangamite in search of Minoan shards. This figure was like a brilliant shimmer on the edge of the lakes, part Arthurian, part boundary rider, and I would be sent out to fetch him back for the old man but never get close. Pendlebury/Vern would gallop away from me in full declamation, thundering down the steep green

craters of my childhood and up again to the treeless rims on the other side. I would *cooee* across the chasms but to no avail, my voice swept aside by the lake winds, just as I felt my identity was being erased by the cruel elements of my war.’ (p 280) He is ‘lost’ on Crete, not only separated from his troop, but from his country, his land, and his people.

Losing a mother is another theme, and Wesley implies that his closeness to both Leonie and Lascelles is partly informed by this shared history. ‘The solitude that descends upon a person when they are divided from their mother at birth is a condition that, in both of our lives, and for different reasons, has managed to prevail.’ (p 325) Wesley never recovered from his mother’s death, and her closeness to Vern made him even more bereft: ‘This is what Vern had absorbed in the bed. Her wishing him close was his real education. The poems he got interested in after she was gone: the Brooke, the Byron, the John Shaw Neilson, were his stars in the eaves. And even more telling was the womanly sweat of her armpits, her whispering, the smell of iodine on the blankets, the liquid music of her bedpan in the cold hours of the night, the old Tipperary mottoes she mumbled as together they awoke, the mother and child, at dawn by the lake ... in the spirit of a woman staying alive in the growing identity of a boy.’ (p 317) Lascelles has lived as a loner, devoted to his father since his mother’s defection; Leonie has been left at the mercy of a violent father, damaged by his grief over her mother’s loss.

This novel is about the act of writing and telling stories to assuage the pains of the past, but it is most of all about the love which heals, the care which soothes our aches and pains, and the meaning to be made in living a life well. ‘I was in no need of a boat, not yet, and I had the first glimmers of understanding of what my fighting would be all about. An island should not be stolen, nor could it ever float away. And I? I would do things my own way. I would not be transformed into breathless myth, not like Pendlebury, not like Vern.’ (p 365) Wesley finds comfort in his marriage to Leonie, his friendship with Lascelles, and in his life on King Island where he unexpectedly becomes part of a community of people who are honest and giving. In this ‘archipelago of souls’, his attachment to this island becomes his anchor in a ‘sea of unknowing’. He lives there an ‘authentic’ life – and if it is not a heroic existence, it is one which is far more satisfying.

Writing Style

1. The novel is **structured** in alternate chapters set in the years immediately after World War Two, and during WWII. The narrator had been serving in Crete, and has now returned and ‘escaped’ to King Island. How well does this alternate structure work? Did you find it more intriguing than a strictly linear structure would have been?

2. **It is told in four parts each of which has a suggestive title.** Discuss the quotes selected below in relation to each of the titles.

One Days of Butterflies (p 2): ‘The air felt suddenly beautiful and warm like it had in those days of butterflies before the broolly drop.’ (p 57);

Two Fire in the Cave (p 109): ‘He rolled his body away from both myself and the fire, which at that moment were one and the same thing. In cooler air he began yelping, and then rolled over and over to put out any flame still biting at his flesh, right back into the shadows of the cave.’ (p 141);

Three Death of the Virgin (p 227): ‘A dolphin carries a man carrying a child. The chain of relation. The complete story, but without the mother, just as we are here at Agio Dormiton, where the virgin has died. But are we without her here? In the shard the journey of life is caught in midstream, bound in the salt sea of our mother blood, the earth is our womb and daily we dwell within it and live with the threat of our own expulsion, from time and from all possible love. For John, the eternal icon, the relationship at the heart of our human nature, was a dolphin carrying a man carrying a child.’ (pp 242–3);

Four Catch me Alive (p 313): ‘We live in our natures, as beasts and by rote until this moment comes. For many it arrives at the point of death, when death, as it seemed to do for Ken Cal, appears like a new sunrise. But for others I believe the moment sidles up in the midst of living. That’s when a morality is born rather than inherited, when it takes its place in harmony not with duty but with freedom.’ (p 320)

3. **Narrative Perspective, Person and Tense:** Both narratives are told in first person, past tense from Wesley Cress’s perspective. How does this perspective inform the reading?

4. What aspects of **style** did you particularly notice in reading this novel?

5. Characters are often drawn in this novel, in relationship to the landscape – to flora and fauna.

eg. ‘Coghlan was half Boatman, half eagle, a bandaged bird’ (p 148) OR ‘His hair was ash-white with the years of salt, and his Fermoy-blue eyes had turned the same cloudy, coppery green they’d been that day when he was sandworming on the beach, though I now noticed how the whites around the irises were stained almost the colour of the gurry,’ (p 207). What other such character descriptions did you particularly take note of?

6. Poetically figurative and suggestive language and literary device enriches this narrative. eg ‘I could see the strata: white surf like the foam of beer against the kelplipped rocks, the low rise of the coastly hummocks and pastures, then the paperbarks, then the parachute of the lenticular hovering there.’ (p 22)

OR

‘At the high-tide line muttonbirds, like rags of ash, marked my progress alone in a dark coat of haunting. Dead, bedraggled, exhausted muttonbirds. Those that didn’t quite make it back to their burrows after the long Aleutian flight. Some were almost coffined in sand, others protruded with a wingtip, or simply from the way they’d fallen, or the way the waves had tumbled them over and abandoned them. Some lay with their black-hooked beaks ajar, as if they’d died mid-gasp from the effort, others had wings spread almost in imitation of their flight, but wind-combed now, salt-and-pepper journey birds gone to ground.’ (p 152)

OR

‘I took a glimmer on the water on an otherwise nondescript Tuesday morning, a soft brief streak of light offset by a hue of crowding clouds, and used it as anaesthetic, drill, and forceps combined.’ (p 106)

Discuss these passages and others which particularly enticed you.

The Author

Gregory Day

Gregory Day’s debut novel, *The Patron Saint of Eels*, won the prestigious Australian Literature Society Gold Medal in 2006. He has published two subsequent novels, *Ron McCoy’s Sea of Diamonds* and *The Grand Hotel*, which make up the highly acclaimed Mangowak trilogy. Gregory’s short story *The Neighbour’s Beans* won the Elizabeth Jolley Prize in 2011. He lives on the southwest coast of Victoria, Australia. He is also a musician and poet.

Questions for Discussion

1. The title of this novel suggests two ideas to be explored – that of the ‘Archipelago’ (island group, cluster or chain) and of the ‘Soul’. Consider the meaning and origin of these two words and find their definitions at ‘Archipelago’ <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archipelago>> and ‘Soul’ <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soul>> Then discuss the meaning of the novel’s title in relation to what you have read.

2. Discuss the quote which opens the novel:

*Alone is the swallow and costly the spring
For the sun to turn it takes a lot of work
It takes a thousand dead sweating at the wheels
It takes the living also shedding their blood
Odysseus Elytis*

3. This quote is suggestive of how every situation has a variety of interpretations: ‘ ‘the record’s never straight’,’ (p 7). Consider this quote in relation to the action in this novel.

4. Discuss this beautiful passage and the ideas it explores: ‘It is my actual belief – take it or leave it – that most Australians are not joiners. A mistrust of institutions is not an inability to love, I used to tell Lascelles. A liking for solitude, or even loneliness, is not an enemy of compassion, I’d say. I already knew by the time I’d arrived on King that any kind of real independence is impossible. Just bullshit. I wanted nothing to do with *Australia* or its handouts but not because I thought I could be free. My notions of freedom went down

in a not-quite-hollow ship. But what I hadn't learned by the time I washed up here was the infinite nature of love. Not the romantic love of one man for his maid, not even deep, abiding friendship or the tidal love of a parent for a child, but the vast well of universal love from which all these affections come. Love like the ocean and bigger than any of us. Love like the weather. Brutal love that can change and recover. After loss. After loss and after it's been slung and filleted on the bare rock of the world.' (p 22)

5. What picture of war does this novel present? Read the following quotes and discuss: 'I had strayed. Strayed from my unit, strayed from recordable chaos into the blind reality of all unspeakable stories.' (p 58) OR 'Time and again he watched the King Island SS – my cheeky name for the soldier settlers – trudge past through the squalls to the pub or the club. To drink. To bend their memories with beer and away from vexation. Lascelles knew that theirs was a version of the talking cure. Only it was self-medication. The shrink was no one specific, just any ear who'd listen – not to the gangrenous facts of the jungle or Tobruk, but to the avoiding of them.' (p 6) OR 'But we had not been taught how to wait, any more than we'd been taught how to watch our best friend pulsing out gluts of blood before he dies with a terrible absence of emotion. We taught ourselves.' (p 94) OR 'There were no longer cul de sacs. Only deeds to destroy a lifetime.' (p 36) OR 'Your friends are going mad,' he said. 'They are twice betrayed. By the Germans *and* the British.' (p 47) What role did the British play in the engagement in which Wesley and Vern took part? Did they betray the Australian troops? In the novel Wesley kills his donkey; burns his companion Perry Coghlan, and shoots Andreas. Are these acts of violence justified?

6. 'Wait-a-While' is actually an old Bass Strait joke describing the way life on the islands moves only at the pace the weather and sea allow.' (p 73) King Islanders also pursue some arcane and fascinating practices such as 'Gurrying' (pp 205–220), scrimshaw and making 'cuddlefish' oil. What picture do you have of life on this island from Wesley's descriptions? For details, visit 'King Island' <<http://www.kingisland.tas.gov.au/page.aspx>>

7. 'Life doesn't have to be like that. Find a place to put down your burden. Take a walk with my niece, into the olives. Let her be your guide.' (p 48) Did Uncle Tassos deliberately save Wesley with this advice or was it accidental?

8. Soldier Settlement schemes get a 'bad wrap' in Wesley's eyes: 'Nevertheless by beating the settlement scheme I felt proven in my self-image as a man for whom the scales had fallen from the eyes.' (p 50) Read more about them, and whether many soldiers 'made a go of it' on such landholdings.

9. How did you interpret this passage about a dream: 'That night Warren Burrows... The unforeseen meeting of the young sweethearts at the saleyards, and the coming betrothal, was both a sacrificial and satisfactory event.' (pp 51–2)

10. 'Uncle Tassos wiped the slate of my education clean. He was writing a new story for me now, a true story on the slate, not with untethered colonial ideals but with the stink of death in his nostrils, the rocks and plants at his disposal.' (p 55) What was the nature of the 'education' which Uncle Tassos offered Wesley?

11. 'What indeed was the point of life when we are denied the opportunity to give? One stone burden to another. The things we have worked and fought so hard for are the very things we need to give away.' (p 56) Discuss.

12. 'Before I knew what I was doing I'd suggested that islanders are habitually patronising to all outsiders and inveterate liars because of it. What was I thinking, mainlander that I was, having been saved and comforted so many times by the kindness of islanders on Crete?' (p 100) The novel reveals in many incidents the generosity of the local people towards the lost soldiers. Would such generosity be displayed in our society? (Think, for example, of Australia's treatment of refugees.)

13. 'To be good requires freedom. You can recognise evil by the way freedom is hurried out of the room, even the hope of freedom.' (p 118) Discuss.

14. 'When our battalion had first arrived for training in the desert at Gaza we'd been talked down to by the British. They'd told us we were stuck out there in that merciless heat because of our fathers' and grandfathers' misbehaviour in the first war. Apparently their whoring and drinking was the reason we weren't stationed in the far more convenient surrounds of Cairo.' (p 163) Despite being allies some deep divisions are revealed in this novel between Australians and their colonial 'masters', the British.
15. 'Any way I look at it now, it was the noble thing to do.' (p 178) Cutting half of Spenser's moustache off would hardly appear to be 'noble' but in this context the narrator explains that it is. Manolis and the villagers treat him like a hero for the act; feed, celebrate and protect him. Discuss his action and its motivation.
16. 'I suffered all over again, but this time wondering in dark brown *cuddles* ink whether or not every route we take, left or right, east or west, through bitter citrus or healing eucalyptus, will always, eventually, lead us to where we are ultimately destined to be.' (p 192) Has Wesley found his spiritual home on King Island?
17. 'So it was, so I felt and do; and in that high ruin I attained a thorough complicity with the nature of the world, my own cold shale of treachery finally shedding a few drops of salt moisture down my cheeks, not for Vern this time, not even for Simmo who had carried me high to the realisation, but to what both of those deaths now symbolised: a random world without a god.' (p 199) Is the absence of a god ultimately a source of emptiness, or does Wesley derive inner fortitude from that lack?
18. 'But she's stayed there all right, every night she's back there. It's damn unnatural the amount of love that girl's got for a father like that but, yes, she's stayed . . . right through . . .' (p 214) Why does Leonie stay with Nat, her violent father? Is it out of love, duty, or fear?
19. There is a strong theme in the novel of looking after the land: 'of her father's Brangus cattle, which Leonie confessed for the first time to hating, because of the way they were enemies of the island trees and groundcovers, and for the way they stiffened the ground with teeth and hoof.' (pp 221–2) Wesley and Leonie later restore their land by propagating the original flora, and encouraging local fauna to return. Is this aspect of living an 'authentic' life a difficult one to achieve if you are not living on a remote island?
20. 'I saw the way she had sacrificed me, the way she had sacrificed her love for me, so that her husband would have a companion through the trials of his grief. He wouldn't be alone. None of us would, if Mum had her way. It was a flawed decision, an impossible situation. We could not all of us sleep in her bed. Only the little one, only the baby.' (p 344) What does this quote suggest about Wesley and Vern's mother?
21. Wesley writes of the proliferation of writing after WWII (p 223) suggesting that it was often false and vainglorious. He is dismissive when his friend finds a journalist's report of action on Crete which seems to demonstrate his own heroism: 'What I wanted to tell Lascelles was that although, yes, the fella who held up the jeep was me, the story would mean nothing at all unless you knew its undersong, what had happened beforehand, the terrible events and betrayals, the morbid emptiness that eventually saw me capable of such cavalier and so-called heroic behaviour.' (p 225) Is bravery often born of ignoble rather than noble impulse?
22. This novel is about a spiritual journey; a man's search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless life. Discuss.