

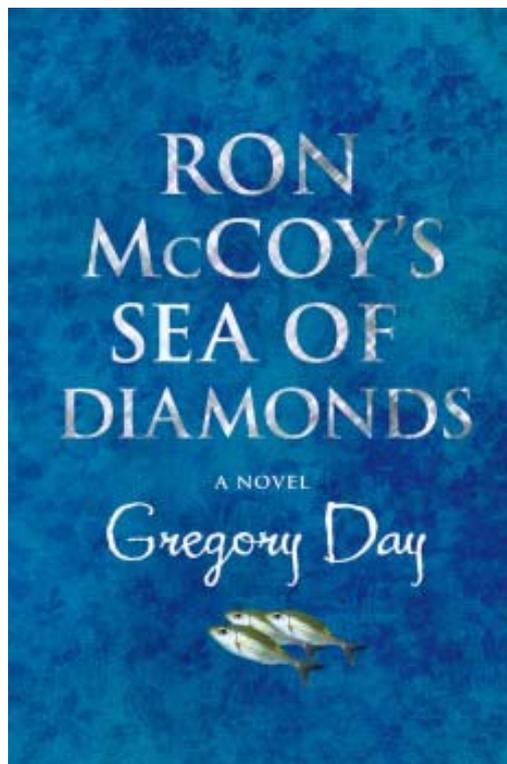
**PICADOR**  
**AUSTRALIA**

**NOTES FOR READING GROUPS**



**Gregory Day**

**RON McCOY'S SEA OF DIAMONDS**



## Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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### THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'Who knows where the diamonds of the sea go when the night falls that black upon the water.' (p 134)

This is a novel about how we live and what makes lives matter. Each human being's tenuous grasp of happiness and contentment is a central theme in a novel which asks 'How should we live? What is the most meaningful way to spend our days? How do we survive life's travails and heartaches with a sense of hope? How can a person or a small community survive when it is surrounded by forces destined to change it completely? What makes a life authentic?' The central character, Ron McCoy, has lived the sort of life which goes unnoticed, but which has a quiet sense of dignity and honesty. His attachment to the coastal place in which he lives and the natural elements around him is deeply felt, and movingly evoked. Gregory Day in this novel achieves the difficult goal of conveying the majesty of this simple life and the wonder inherent in the acts of living and dying with fortitude and grace.

Ron, whose relationship with the sea is one of the prominent themes in *Ron McCoy's Sea of Diamonds*, is the same character who briefly appears in Day's first novel *The Patron Saint of Eels*. This new work shows Ron, now in his seventies, struggling not only with age, but with the imminent death of his nearly 100 year old mother Min and with the need to move on and sell their property. As ever, the sea offers him comfort and solace. Ron has lived all his life in Mangowak in the Brinbeal shire, and he and Min still live in the cottage buffeted by the elements which was built by his father Len years before. Ron has grown up with the magic of the sea in his sights; he has learned to love and marvel at the view from the cliff face which he first saw from his enclosure in the makeshift playpen constructed by Len from chickenwire. 'The sea was full of diamonds. It was bursting with them.' (p 21) Despite the 'ordinariness' of his life, this physical view gave him a spiritual sense of magic: 'And so the La Branca bench and the tough grass and dirt around it, within the chickenwire cage, became a type of adventure-seat, a cage of dreams.'(p 22) But now, with Min failing in health and needing attention, he has decided with her consent to sell half their block to a Lebanese businessman named Dom Khouri.

Thus, water, and specifically the sea, is central to this narrative's concerns. The south west coast of Victoria is the setting and the characters' lives are all to some extent influenced by the sea. Some, like Liz and Craig Wilson, have gravitated to this coastal locale from elsewhere, enticed and held in thrall by the power of the ocean. Several key scenes in the novel take place in view of the sea, and several turning points occur in these scenes as well. For this is a place and way of life which is threatened by encroaching development, and by the inevitable change which occurs over time in most places.

Regionalism versus urbanization, the phenomenon of people taking a 'sea change', and how that effects communities with rising prices, tourism and degradation of foreshores and fishing stocks is a major theme. When Ron sells part of their land to be built upon, he realises how such changes will escalate when the builders begin to arrive: 'It was a different world they were bringing to his own, a big world to a little world.' (p 70) He feels vaguely threatened: 'The world seemed no longer able to leave him alone.' (p 258) The reverse happens to Liz and Craig who have retreated from the city, she to work as a freelance designer, and he to sell real estate. Both are experiencing doubts regarding their sea change, though, having left Melbourne two and a half years earlier. The move had left them cut adrift from friends and not accepted as 'locals' either. (pp 38-9) He's become a good real estate agent working for Colin Batty, but misses his work in hospitality and is starting to yearn for the sort of exhilaration music gives him, in his home and social life as well. He's bored and 'deeply pissed off' (p 39). 'Locals seem friendly but scratch any deeper and you'd find a hole. An echo. Like there was some inner sanctum you couldn't touch ... They were a tribe.' (p 40) He takes his aggression out on Liz by railing at themselves: 'And fucking city people like us come down here and fuck the coast up.' (p 45) He fears that they have contributed to the decline of the area, 'And something golden being lost forever.' (p 48)

The conflict between the notion of progress and that of environmental or social decline is part of this theme of searching for authenticity. Although the scale of the house Khouri builds is a surprise to the McCoys (pp 68-70) and is symbolic of many similar conflicts in rural areas, it doesn't prove a real problem to anyone. Khouri is not like Batty in his greedy pursuit of land grabs, dishonest housing deals and development speculation. He wants to build a retreat -a monument to the beauty of this place and to his own memories of Tripoli. So, although at first it 'seemed a building that would somehow threaten the bush-democratic atmosphere' (pp 74-5) it becomes instead a source of work for half the town and the most interesting project most were ever likely to work on again (p 75). Ron and Min accept it and go on as if it isn't there. Ron enjoys his chats with Dom and the workers and he and Min don't change their lives one iota while the house is being built. The distance between the six pounds (p 131) Len paid for the block and the 1.4 million they received for half if it is clear in the simple life they lead with the mansion being erected beside them.

This book contains several memorials denoting its concern with the weight of the past on the living. Len's cottage is adjacent to the seat which Len (Ron's father) had built in memory of his mates lost in WWI. At the end of the novel another memorial is erected in close proximity. In this town of very few people, most have 'history' which connects them. Symbolically, the novel opens with Noel Lea creating a painting of the marks on the gravel roads which will soon be no more, once the roads are sealed. 'Noel had come to see the unsealed roads not only as canvases for painterly traffic but as thoroughfares representing open ground, textured with the days ... earth.' (p 4) Ron has connections to nearly everyone locally. He was best friends with Noel's father Wally and with Darren Traherne's father Norm. Both younger men go fishing with Ron and enjoy hearing his yarns about the past.

The novel is full of stories of local people and how they came to or left the district. They include Dr Leo Morris who was a folklorist who owned the rights to 'click go the shears' (pp 84-5); the legendary publican Big Martin Elliot, the conman Art Batty and others. These stories add resonance to the narrative and explain something of the baggage which we all carry through life. Colin Batty's past is particularly painful. He might seem a truly ghastly person but when one is offered insight into the barren relationship he had with his father, one begins to see how he might be the way he is. Colin Batty's dad Art had been a pioneer surfer (p 105) and surfing shop owner, or at least that was the myth he created about himself. Colin had fled to Europe to escape his dad's cons and tricks only to come back and move to nearby Mangowak. But his real estate job makes locals suspicious of him...and he inherits his father's air of being 'not to be trusted' (p 111). So when Ron sells his land without asking for Colin's help he's incensed. His past sense of injustice rears its ugly head and makes him do very immature things.

There are many stories of migration and of the challenges of resettlement and adaptation to a new environment in this novel. Dom Khouri is a Lebanese migrant who arrived in 1955 and made good with his uncle's glazing company Taweel Glass becoming a construction company (pp 52-3). He is unusual, though, in that he doesn't crave money for its own sake: 'money is like the glitter on the water, but the water is the thing' (p 53). He wants the McCoy's land because it reminds him of home: 'it's the picture my old uncle painted of this country when he came and found me.'(p 60) 'In Dom Khouri's life of successful exile, that water was a symbol of the blood that flowed between people and within everyone.' (p 53) The Italian Birdsong brothers who own the quarry (p 73) are like Dom in having come from Europe to make new and successful lives. Others have migrated from cities like Min (as a new bride), and like Craig, Liz and Carla as midlife explorers. Even Colin Batty (who's only moved down the road), finds the transition difficult.

Spirituality and connection with each other is a further theme. 'She wondered how people survived without any kind of spiritual practice. It was a mystery to her now how she herself had survived in the past.' (p 296) Several encounters in the novel consist of spiritual

meetings with creatures of nature or with music or poetry. Liz sees the seal (pp 34-5); Ron has his affinity with the sea, sees the 'snoutcat' (p 119), and later has a similar moment of exhilaration when he teaches himself to play the sounds made by the tin-whistle bird on his pump organ (pp 122-3); Min has an epiphany when reading Hopkins (p 95) and when looking at the shell on her window sill (pp 195-202); all the characters are searching for meaning and for a sense of belonging to something or someone. Such moments help them to cope with life, for the veneer of happiness is paper-thin, and accidents of fate can trigger all sorts of mental and emotional collapses. Liz Wilson's accident (pp 23-35) when she's bitten by bull ants, and falls ill, causes her to not only lose her energy, but her love for the landscape and her interests. As she sinks into dark thoughts, 'soon she was doubting not only the landscape but even her marriage as well' (p 31). Later Liz discovers yoga and finds that she like others is searching for a form of spirituality or inner authenticity (pp 161-8). Then she finds the convent and her inner peace grows, as she chooses a less materialistic view of the world by the novel's end. She sees the ants as 'spirit messengers (p 173) and is convinced that Mangowak is a gift (p 174) she's given her children. Similarly, Craig feels constrained by the need to support the family, which conflicts with his love for music and surfing, but he generally finds himself accepting his lot, and quelling his secret desires. 'He drove home at a legal speed and put his heart behind him'. (p 41) His wish to give up surfing and take up fishing (p 129) is his further attempt to create an 'authentic' life for himself. But then, towards the end of the novel when he witnesses something terrible, he too has a collapse, which causes him to re-assess his life and to give up selling real estate.

**The power of the natural world and its connection to our spirituality is celebrated in this novel.** For losing sight of that connection can lead to the death of a person or a community. Min's death (p 205) is a turning point in Ron's life and in that of their community of friends. Ron's fear of being alone to deal with the aftermath of her passing is palpable. And her old friends feel it keenly as well. 'The old lady was everything they liked about the world.' (p 215) Ron's grief is inconsolable, and even his beloved sea can't take away the pain. But the novel ends with a sense that Ron's spirit will live on, will be remembered not only by his friends, but by the landscape which he loved so much. Ron's memorial depicts him casting his line 'into the black starry night [with] an otherworldly glow.' (p 310) Even the tide of new dwellers coming to this area can't stamp out the rich history preserved by memory.

## WRITING STYLE

1. Structure and suspense in narrative construction is all important in a novel. This one opens with the poetic and portentous notion of Noel Lea painting and thus recording all the marks on the local gravel roads before they are to be surfaced. Disjunctions also occur where there are flashbacks to people who don't exist in the present- Dr Leo for example. These narrative strategies keep the reader guessing and pondering about the significance of key events and key characters. Discuss.

2. The story has the air of a fable or legend and contains all the tropes of a traditional narrative. Ron McCoy appears outwardedly ordinary but his 'journey' is set in a mystical space where the sea is his spiritual haven. He is visited by both strangers and familiars who each give him some sort of insight into his life. What other aspects of the fable or fairy tale did you notice in this plot?

3. Symbolism, metaphor and imagery abound in this work, in which for example, the title is a metaphor. Many phrases appear which suggest the underlying spiritualism of the novel's themes. Choose and discuss some of them.

4. Read the passage: 'In the darkness he watched the channel... strange (pp 150-1) and analyse the various techniques the writer uses to convey ideas in the writing. Here, for example, instead of using words descriptive of the sea, Day uses words which relate to quarrying and farming to describe the sea. What meaning is conveyed by this device? Choose other passages like this one to discuss.

## THE AUTHOR

Gregory Day's debut novel, *The Patron Saint of Eels*, won the prestigious Australian Literature Society Gold Medal in 2006. His previous books include the poetry collection *Trace* (in collaboration with photographer Robert Ashton). He is a poet and musician and lives in Victoria.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Liz Wilson loves reading because of 'the state of deep time a book could put her in' (p 23). Is this what reading does for you?
2. The titles of the chapters are all suggestive and rather poetic. Discuss the meaning of any one of them.
3. The 'sea change' was made famous by the television show of the same name. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of such moves as they are presented in this novel. How does a move from city to country or rural area effect those who move? How does it effect the town of Mangowak?
4. You can tell a lot about a man from the contents of his shed (pp 64-6) and Ron's shed contains a life time of memories. Discuss.
5. Read the Hopkins poem 'God's Grandeur' (p 90) and discuss with relation to Min's afternoon of being offered solace and comfort by Dr Leo.
6. Hardworking rural families, self made immigrants, pioneering surfers, rural gentrification, an Australian folklorist-this novel is littered with stories which together tell the story of Australian nationhood. Discuss.
7. Water is a constant theme in a novel which opens with a quote by WB Yeats: 'What's water but the generated soul?' Discuss.
8. The meditation Liz enjoys (pp 170-1) is a luxurious feeling of the spirit and the body. Is this sort of freedom even possible to those less fortunate whose lives are threatened by the daily grind of poverty and violence? Discuss.
9. 'If they could be rich and healthy and spiritually aware all at the same time, to her way of thinking, that would constitute success. Life was all about balance, diversity. She knew that now.' (p 227) Is Liz chasing an impossible dream? Although she feels she's willed a great future to her children in moving them to the country, it's clear that many parents find their children rejecting their rural homes to seek adult work or to study elsewhere. Liz's daughter Libby is not convinced either and is sure that her mother has become a nutcase (p 174). Are Liz's dreams of spiritual healing impossibly idealistic?
10. 'Music is a natural medicine, no different from eucalyptus oil, a balm for the monotonous march of time.' (p 93) Music informs this work in many ways. Ron's pump organ and the sounds of the birds which he tries to emulate; Leo's folk music; Craig's

guitar and his singing are all examples of how music 'calms the troubled soul' in this work. What part does music play in exploring themes here?

11. 'It's funny...just how close together heaven and hell can be.' (p 228) Discuss.

12. The difficulty attached to maintaining a relationship is explored in the marriages between Min and Len, and Craig and Liz. Min's guilt (pp 89-95) that she had 'closed' herself to Len is assuaged by the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. 'For Len McCoy, marrying Min was like finding himself a slice of Paris... silent he became.' (p 92) Liz has times when she doubts her love for Craig, as he does for her.

Discuss the examples of marriage in this novel.

13. Is this novel partly about generational change and the differences in attitudes towards property, relationships and family? For example, compare Liz and Craig to their children, and to Ron and his mother. Discuss with relation to your own experiences.

14. The back cover blurb describes this book as a powerful meditation on belonging, landscape and love. Is this an apt description?

15. What makes Ron McCoy's ordinary life also a majestic one?

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**Gregory Day**  
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