

Reading Notes *The Road Back*

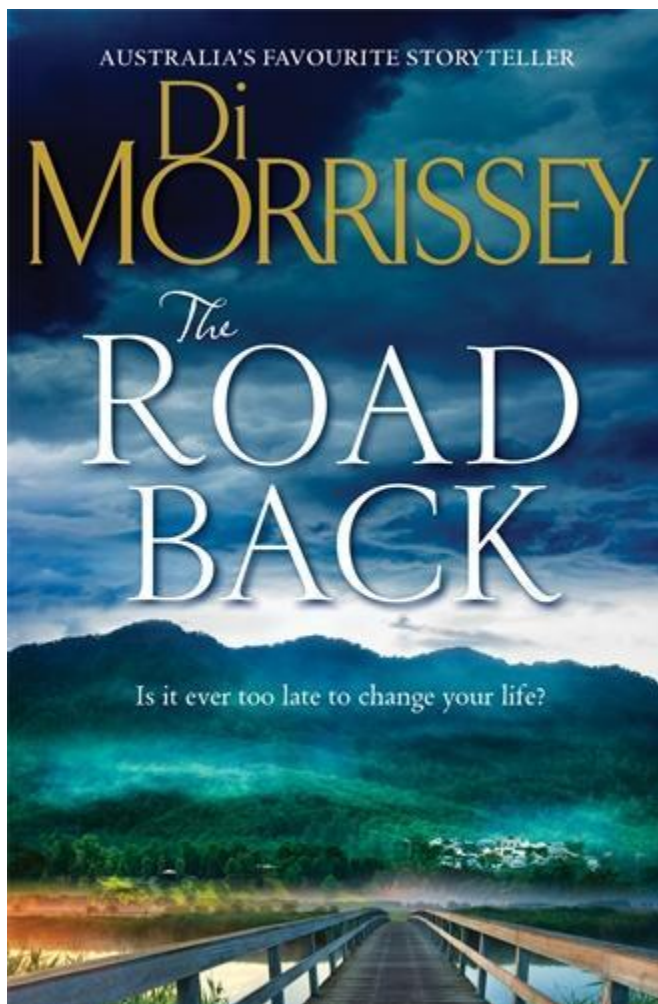
Blurb

From the mountains to the valleys, from big cities to tiny towns, to the outback and the islands, Di Morrissey knows this country. She's been there.

In *The Road Back*, Di weaves a tale of reconnection and starting over.

Journalist Chris Baxter is at a crossroads. Returning with his teenage daughter to his mother's house in the beautiful township of Neverend, Chris hopes to pick up the pieces after his life takes an unexpected turn.

Sometimes taking the road back is the start of a journey forward.



Plot Summary

Returning to Australia after living overseas, divorced journalist Chris Baxter unexpectedly loses his job just as his precocious teenage daughter, Megan, moves in with him. Desperately seeking stability, Chris takes Megan to visit his mother, Susan, in his birthplace, the beautiful New South Wales country town of Neverend. Unable to find another journalism job, Chris decides to stay put in the country and with three generations under one roof, the family faces some difficult adjustments to their new life. When an invitation to a reunion arrives for Susan, she reveals to Chris and Megan the story of her first love, which took place during a visit to Jakarta in the tumultuous 1960s. Inspired by his mother's story, Chris starts investigating the other members of her expedition group. Dedicating his free time to this writing project and enjoying his newly developing relationship with his daughter, Chris begins to feel his life coming back together. But then the solace of the quiet valley is shattered when he is threatened. *The Road Back* is a novel about the changes we all face and the importance of family.

- Chris faces a difficult choice between family and career: do you think he made the right call in turning down the Bangkok job?
- Without a second thought, Susan invites Chris and Megan to live with her at this difficult time. Can you imagine doing the same thing?
- The changing face of the media is a strong theme in the book. What did you learn about the lives of freelancers and journalists from reading *The Road Back*?

Themes

Family

The novel presents the reader with a modern, multi-generational, blended family.

- In the beginning, Chris relies heavily on Susan's experience as a school teacher to help him parent Megan. Do you think he was right to do this? What moments in the book did you think reflected his changing parental style best?
- 'Jill had wanted custody of Megan and since he travelled and worked overseas so much, Chris had never contested it. But Jill always liked to let Chris know that, in her opinion, she'd got the short end of the stick.' (p21) How well do you think Jill and Chris handle their shared care of Megan? What challenges do they face?
- Chris struggles with the idea that Susan might embark on a new relationship with a man who is not his father. How understandable and justified is Chris' response?

Change

Several key moments in the novel revolve around major characters realising that they need to change.

- What do you think prompts Susan to finally decide to leave her home of forty years?
- How has Chris' choice of career affected the decisions he has made in his life? What sort of decisions do you think he will make in the future?
- 'Chris wondered to himself how a sweet girl like Megan could be so mercenary and status-conscious. But obviously all her friends were too, and peer pressure was a force to be

reckoned with.’ (p44) Megan goes through a significant transformation. What surprised you about her journey?

Characters

Chris

‘Over the years, Chris had sometimes thought himself superior to these small-town friends with their narrow horizons, content to live quietly and protect what was familiar. But now he realised that although he had been challenged and enriched by the life he had chosen, here he was, back to square one with not a lot to show for it, while they seemed content with their lot.’ (p83) Chris struggles with the adjustment from high-flying career man to dependable truck-driving dad. How did the author convey his changing mindset?

Chris is extremely angry and upset to discover Jazzy smoking pot at Susan’s house. Did you think his response was justified? Why/why not?

Upon receiving the legal threat from Alan, Chris decides to pursue his book anyway. Do you think he made the right decision?

Susan

“Are you going to stick to your word and keep Megan with you? And if so, how are you going to manage?” Chris knew his mother’s blunt assessment was right, but at that moment, it didn’t seem to be helping.’ (p85) Susan presents the reader with a strong, practical, down-to-earth family matriarch – do you think her character is positive and likeable as a result, or not?

“I was being very forward,” admitted Susan. “But the funny thing is, even though it is years since I taught Janelle, I still felt as though I had a responsibility to her.” (p201) When Susan calls Janelle to tell her of Jazzy’s misery at school, Susan knows she is interfering but she has Jazzy’s best interest at heart. Would you do the same thing?

Megan

Megan is torn by the demands of her parents’ lives. ‘Megan can be a frightful drama queen. It goes with being fourteen. And Perth is not exactly another planet.’ (p25) Do you think it is fair that Jill expects Megan to move to Perth for Trevor’s new job?

‘Megan lolled on the sofa listening to the Thundamentals on her iPod while updating her four closest girlfriends with the details of what had happened so far that day on her smart phone.’ (p9) How different is the experience of being a teenager today to years gone by? What has changed? What hasn’t?

Setting

The novel is set in the beautiful town of Neverend, near Coffs Harbour in New South Wales, Australia.

- ‘As always, once he’d crossed the bridge over the Henry River and turned off the Pacific Highway towards Neverend, he felt his body and mind relax.’ (p407) Chris feels a sense of

peace as soon as he enters the town of Neverend. Have you ever had the same experience upon visiting your place of birth?

- Inspired by the environment and natural beauty, the book features many beautiful passages describing the wonder of the mountains, valleys and rainforests. Which passages did you enjoy most?

Writing Style

- The book features two chapters written in first person from Susan's perspective. How did these chapters enhance your understanding of Susan's character?
- The author does a lot of research before writing her books. Did the descriptions of 1960s Jakarta bring that time and place alive for you? Which details stayed with you?

Final thoughts

- Did you feel sorry for Alan in the end at all?
- What do you think the punishment should have been for the character who caused so much anguish to the Baxter family?
- Where do you think Chris and Georgia's relationship will go from here?