



LAST DRINKS
by Andrew McGahan

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About Andrew McGahan

Andrew McGahan was born in Dalby, Queensland, but has lived and worked mostly in Brisbane. His first novel *Praise*, published in 1992, was winner of *The Australian/Vogel* Literary Award. Since then his writing includes the award winning stageplay *Bait* and the AFI award winning screenplay for the movie version of *Praise*. His second novel was the prequel *1988*, published in 1995, and his third novel *Last Drinks* was published in 2000. It was shortlisted for multiple awards, including *The Age* Book of the Year and *The Courier Mail* Book of the year, and won a Ned Kelly award for crime writing.

On Writing *Last Drinks*—Andrew McGahan

Last Drinks came about mostly out of desperation. I started it in early 1999. By then it had been four years since the publication of my second novel, *1988*, and in those years I hadn't managed to finish anything else of significance. I had indeed spent some of that time working on one long and heavy sort of novel, but had finally abandoned it in despair about halfway through the first draft. I wasn't at all sure what to do with myself from there. In fact, at the 1998 Adelaide Writers Week, the talk I gave was virtually a declaration of retirement from writing, or at least of complete uncertainty about whether I'd ever produce anything new. I knew I couldn't write any more of the autobiographical style novels, but didn't know if fiction proper was what I wanted either. Or even if I did, then what sort of fiction should I be trying? I mulled around with these questions for about a year after Adelaide without any answers arising, and without a real desire to write in any case. Finally, bored to death with things, I got out of Brisbane and headed down to Sydney for a holiday. I ended up staying for three months, and oddly enough, I started writing again almost immediately after arriving.

The thought was that instead of the weighty and sombre stories I'd been toying with in vain, I would try something light and quick and hopefully fun. The crime genre seemed most attractive. It's not that I'm a huge fan of crime, but I've read a few titles here and there, and the style looked like it would be simple enough to pick up. There were a few influences I had in mind. In terms of tone I'd always liked the general air of regret and sadness that runs through John Le Carre's work, for instance, or even the early Patricia Cornwall novels. On the other hand, half the fun of crime seemed to be the sharp lines and dialogue you might find in Raymond Chandler, so I had an eye on that angle as well. Overall it was all supposed to be a bit of a private joke, a fond parody of the genre. Some sort of dark, brooding, slick story that

would take only a few months to write, and which would have everything to do with style and nothing with to do with substance.

All I had to start with was an idea for a gruesome murder, an impression of an ineffectual central character, an image of some final sort of confrontation taking place in darkness and flame up in the hills, and the understanding that alcohol would feature heavily. The gruesome death was something I'd thought up years before, while watching one of those American serial killer movies. It might have been *Seven*. I was thinking how hard it would be, after all these movies, to come up with an original and horrible way for someone to be killed. They'd all been done. And then one popped into my head. It involved an electrical substation and the side effects of drinking—the link being, I suppose, that there was a substation near the farm on which I grew up, and as a kid I always used to wonder what was inside it. In the end, I still haven't been inside one. But I found the schematics for several different types on the net, and meanwhile my sister is a pathologist and could give me details about death by electrocution, so I could do a reasonable job of faking it. At the time however I certainly had no intention of writing a book that would actually use a gruesome death, it was just idle speculation. My rather superior judgement was that if you have to kill off characters to maintain the reader's interest, then you aren't much of a writer. I still think that's true to a degree, but obviously it was very handy to have a gruesome death sitting there when, much later, I decided to lower my standards and give crime writing a try.

As for the ineffectual character, it was always going to be someone like George. (Named in honour, by the way, of George Smiley.) As people have pointed out, quite accurately, George is in many ways just an older and no-wiser version of Gordon from *Praise* and *1988*. George and Gordon are both passive in the extreme. They react to events, but very rarely instigate them. They have no evident strength or courage, beyond a certain patient endurance, and are completely hamstrung by their own fears and misgivings. There's no particular meaning in this, it's just that, when writing in first person, I naturally fall into that sort of personality. I find it next to impossible to put myself inside the head of someone who is active and decisive and ambitious—qualities which, for better or worse, I simply don't possess myself. Of course, I know it can infuriate readers who just want Gordon or George to get off their arses and *do* something, but it can actually be quite a useful position for a main character. Devoid of any motivation themselves, they're forced eternally to seek it in the external world, and so are doomed to be tossed around helplessly by the actions of others, adrift amidst disappointment and frustration and defeat. All great stuff for novels.

Anyway, I started off and got about five chapters in, setting up the basic murder and the discovery of the body etc, before it all ground to a halt. The idea of a quick, snappy crime jaunt was already beginning to feel a bit pointless. It was too disconnected from the real world. My earlier books had by no means addressed any major themes or issues, but at least they'd been grounded in a genuine life. What I was writing now seemed to have no relevance to anything at all. I pondered the whole scheme for a while and started thinking about how often a story can be helped by being set against a much larger background than itself, a *real* background, like a war or a revolution. My little crime plot was set in Queensland, so if I was going to develop things along that line, then I would be looking for some great upheaval in recent Queensland history to use as a backdrop. That's when the Fitzgerald era—the three decades of National Party domination and corruption, the Inquiry that brought about their fall, and the whole sea change in attitudes that followed—came to mind. Not quite a revolution, but something which, from a Queensland perspective, was very close. And from that moment the whole concept of the book changed completely. I dumped what I'd written so far, and got started on what would become *Last Drinks*.

Strangely enough, considering the final product, the Fitzgerald era was not something that I'd had much interest in previously. Of course, I was living in Brisbane throughout that period, but in truth was barely paying attention. I was much more concerned with my own world of idle unemployment, bad poetry, doomed relationships, sex, drugs and alcohol—the source material for *Praise* and *1988*, in other words. So my vague recollections of the actual Fitzgerald events were never going to be enough on their own. I embarked on something I'd never had to do before—research. I dug up whatever non-fiction books had been written on the subject, which wasn't many, and sought out various old newspaper and journal articles. The larger written sources were Evan Whitton's *The Hillbilly Dictator*, Phil Dickie's *The Road to Fitzgerald* and (on video) Chris Master's *The Moonlight State* from Four Corners. (Of less direct use, but in some ways the most alarming of all, was disgraced Queensland minister Don Lane's autobiography—not for what he denies, but for how much he's happy to admit about things like the rigging of electoral boundaries, or the secret activities of the Special Branch.) Even more importantly, I talked to a people whose memory of the real events was better than my own, most notably an ex-journo friend named John Orr, who'd been a political reporter for the *Courier Mail* back in those days. He led me on to other contacts, and so on. (A note here to anyone who knows him—John Orr, as much as he likes a drink, is most definitely not the basis for the character of George.)

What amazed me throughout was the realisation of just how outrageous things became in Queensland before Fitzgerald bought it all crashing down. I mean, the worst of it was only about fifteen years ago, and I was around when it happened, yet I felt like I was hearing about it all for the first time. I became appalled at myself for not having being aware of it, and appropriately outraged, when it was actually going on. After all, the information had been readily available—just ask the thousands of protesters and activists who battered themselves senseless against the corruption monolith—but like millions of other Queenslanders, I simply hadn't cared. My own life remained untouched, and the state of Queensland, if I considered it at all, seemed to be booming. If I'd actually bothered signing up for the electoral role when I turned 18, instead of only getting around to it about ten years later, I might even have voted for the regime of those days, an act that would have haunted me to this day. It certainly seemed a bit useless to be finally developing a social conscience fifteen years too late. And those feelings came to be mirrored in the character of George, who is so lost in his own drunken world that he too ignores the implications of everything that is going on around him. His failings and weakness were my own, in a way, as is his growing sense of guilt about his complicity as the book develops.

Meanwhile, the Fitzgerald twist was taking over the entire plot. What was originally a fairly random murder in a electrical substation eventually got warped into something linked to the malaise of Queensland politics in general—the very idea of electricity as a power that can be controlled becoming a metaphor for political power at large. And what had been originally conceived as a cast of petty crims and lone psychopaths gradually became a cast of interwoven government ministers, public servants and society figures who ran a state for their own pleasure. There were dangers in this, because now I was dealing on a much bigger scale, and with real events. I had to decide how to present it all. Obviously I didn't want to get sued for defamation. More importantly though, I didn't see much point in dumping all the blame on particular individuals or political parties. The corruption of those days was the end result of a long and complicated process going back over decades, taking in all political parties, with virtually everyone complicit in the blame—the politicians, the public servants, private industry, the police, the underworld, the media and finally the Queensland voters themselves. So I didn't feel any need to be overly specific, it was the general pattern of the corruption I was interested in.

People have since tried to attach some characters from the book to actual public figures, but such attempts are missing the point. My own strategy was to assume that yes, we all know who the three or four famously corrupt ministers were—now let's just assume there was one more of a similar type, and call him Marvin. And we all know there were two major crime

syndicates running the brothels and casinos back then, and who the bosses where—now let's just assume there was a third, smaller syndicate, run by a similar cartel. In other words, the characters in *Last Drinks* are meant to be examples of the sort of people who ran Queensland back in those days, not fictionalised versions of the real ones. You could call them archetypes. And as George journeys back through his past, he meets them, one by one, in a simple procession. George himself is the archetype of the compromised journalist, and from there we have a) the dodgy night club owner, b) the unctuous public servant, c) the thuggish bag man, d) the corrupt government minister, e) the femme fatale and behind them all f) the legitimate businessman raking in all the benefits. By just tracing out that order I had the basic structure of the novel, and from there I only had to interweave it with flashbacks to the past events, mix in some musings about alcohol, and (supposedly) keep control of the murder mystery.

Still, there were ethical questions in this because I was telling the story from the point of view of the bad guys, and yet I also wanted them to be sympathetic figures. Of course, to their friends and families, the real bad guys were indeed sympathetic. But it was tricky to be sure how to present their crimes in fiction, without white-washing them. George was a useful device here. That is, his ignorance was a useful device. He could be part of it all, and show how exciting and addictive the power of corruption was to those involved—but his personal obsessions and alcoholism blind him to any deeper understanding of the implications. That understanding comes fifteen years later, sober, when belatedly the full ugliness is finally revealed to him by those who no longer have any reason to hide it. The process destroys George, and everyone else around him, and so it should. It's a reflection of Queensland in general, before and after the Inquiry. But even so, the impression I give of pre-Fitzgerald Queensland is still far too positive. I don't, for instance, go into the drug side of it all, or the exploitation of the women in the brothels, or the full range of the political bastardry, or the destruction of those who honestly tried to fight the system. My underworld and overworld figures are seedy enough, but not really as cheap, nasty, brutal, manipulative, hypocritical and greedy as they actually were. And in all sorts of other ways I dealt with the truth selectively. There were just limits, in the end, to what I could do with reality, and still make the main characters attractive enough to read about.

But of course I was trying to write an entertaining crime novel, not an analysis of the actual history, and so reality was never an issue anyway. I constantly and readily re-arranged the genuine events to suit the fictional plot. Unfortunately it was that same fictional plot—the story of the murder and its solving—that was coming to interest me the least. By the end of the second draft I was seriously regretting ever getting involved with a crime plot. The need to keep an elaborate mystery scenario ticking over seemed to completely suffocate all sorts of other interesting possi-

bilities. The only parts I really enjoyed writing were the observations about the Queensland state of mind, its politics and vulnerabilities, and the increasingly extended contemplations about alcoholism. I struggled to maintain a belief in the rest of it. It all felt contrived and thin, the minor characters in particular suffered as their personalities were shaped to fit the conventions of the genre, and anyone can see that towards the end of the novel I'm barely in control of the plot twists at all. If I'd had more time (by which I mean if I wasn't completely broke and trying to finish the book as fast as possible and get it sold) I would probably have dropped much of the cheesier crime element and turned the story into something more reflective and slow. It didn't happen, but what I ended up with to me feels at best like a somewhat uneasy amalgam. That said, it's important to remember that I never would have started down the Fitzgerald road in the first place, if I hadn't given myself a murder to solve.

The other major theme is of course alcohol, and in that regard at least I wasn't wandering far from the territory of my earlier books. Obviously though, *Last Drinks* is a more critical consideration of drinking than *Praise* or *1988* were. For all that Gordon and his friends wallow in external corruption, alcoholism is the true evil at their core. There is some personal relevance in this, but not as much as people often think. I have not, for instance, ever been inside a detox ward or sought treatment for alcoholism. Most of that stuff came from a psychologist friend of mine who used to work in the field. He also gave me piles of reading on the topic, and it was educational to examine my own drinking in the light of everything I was reading and writing. There's no doubt my attitude towards alcohol has changed as a result. Or perhaps it had already changed before I started *Last Drinks*, which would explain why I cast George from the very beginning as an ex-drinker. For while at times alcohol has indeed loomed very large in my life, it has steadily been becoming of less importance. I most certainly haven't gone teetotal, but the golden illusion of drinking (to put it in George's terms) has long faded away. And perhaps my obsession with it has always had more to do with the romantic image of drinking than with any real addiction. For what it's worth, *Last Drinks* was written completely sober. Compare that with *Praise* and *1988*, both of which were typed via bucketloads of cask wine and bargain-basement Scotch.

Meanwhile the manuscript was ready for the publishers towards the end of 1999. The editing and re-writing went on over another six months or so, with plenty of alterations, and it was published late in 2000. Shortly before then I moved to Melbourne, following my partner who was offered work down here. The timing was weird, and the book was consequently seen by some readers as my personal farewell to Brisbane and Queensland. (Some reviewers even mistakenly assumed that I'd written the whole thing in Melbourne, having long escaped my home state to a saner environment.) But it was never intended that way. I started it

in Sydney, admittedly, but the vast bulk of it was written back in Brisbane, with no expectation that I would be leaving anytime soon. As for the reviews themselves, they were much better than I was expecting, given my grave doubts about the crime plot. An even more rewarding element was that I afterward got to meet people like Chris Masters and Phil Dickie in person, and discuss all kinds of things about the Fitzgerald days. To my amazement they thought the book wasn't a bad interpretation. My main regret was that I hadn't sought them out while I was writing it, for there were plenty of juicy details that, even with all the research, I still knew nothing about. But then again, I already had more reality than I could use.

Either way, in the end *Last Drinks* was nothing like I thought it would be at the beginning, and though I don't plan to ever try crime writing again, I do have a new found respect for writers who have the knack for it. The publishers were likewise a little unsure of what to make of it. Was it a straightforward crime novel or wasn't it, and accordingly, how should it be marketed? Which shelf should it occupy in a bookshop? We went through several cover designs, some supposedly classic 'crime' covers, and some not, before arriving at the current one, about which I'm undecided, but which the marketing people liked. More torturous was the battle over the title. *Last Drinks* was indeed the original name, but during the editing I decided I much preferred *Funeral For A Friend*—the Elton John song of the same name notwithstanding. The story is all about funerals, after all, the funeral of a friend, of an era, of an entire state. The publishers deeply disagreed. The book was just as much about drinking, they argued, and more importantly they thought that the words *Last Drinks* on the cover would have more appeal for the readers of my earlier books. We debated it for months, but it's hard to fight the opinion of an entire publishing company, and in the end they sent out advance catalogues with *Last Drinks* as the title, so I finally gave in and resigned myself.

Reviews

***The Bulletin*—John Birmingham Feeding the Crooks**

In *Last Drinks* he (McGahan) has fashioned a powerful morality fable out of the broken, twisted split ends of that period. This novel, which is one of the best published this year, at first seems simply constructed; a crime story, with a conventional tale of a fallen narrator trailing through the wreckage of his life in search of someone who has killed a former friend.

With an elegant inversion worthy of *noir* legend Jim Thompson, however, McGahan's characters are all thoroughly compromised, corrupted and personally debauched.

. . . It seems a straightforward thing. Former indie grunge author (his first novel, *Praise*, won the Vogel literary award) turns neo-realist crime writer in an attempt to escape being smothered by the genre. But *Last Drinks* is so much richer and denser and more ethically complex than most other recent mainstream novels that it demands consideration as literature. It won't receive any, of course, given the gritty, undistinguished nature of its subject matter. That's a pity, because McGahan's stripped-down prose powers a compelling narrative of personal and institutional debasement that at its best recalls the definitive passages of Frank Hardy's classic *Power Without Glory*. Australia's high-end novelists have largely abandoned this rich vein of real-world material for pointless, rhapsodic journeys of self-realisation.

There is, nonetheless, a mother lode of withering self-examination by McGahan's characters, who are alcoholics one and all. This never detracts from or overwhelms his work on the wider canvas, however, which is an attempt to understand the nature of a whole society. If there is a weak point it is the occasional political history lesson he is forced to include because of our short memories.

McGahan is often brutal in his assessment of Queensland and Brisbane. As a local he has more leeway. As an exile who fled to write *Last Drinks*, he also has the distance and perspective to put one right through the dark heart of the place.

***The Australian*—Mark Butler**

With his debut novel, *Praise*, Andrew McGahan announced himself as a precocious master of deadpan, trawling pitilessly and hilariously through the post-Bjelke-Petersen netherworld of Brisbane, among the jobless, the predators, the penniless students and a fruity cast of champion self abusers, always with a drink, a joint or a needle in their hands—sometimes all three ...

For his latest novel, *Last Drinks*, McGahan has changed gears again, as any quality writer does, this time moving into crime novel mode, spinning the narrative conventions of the genre around the Inquiry (a metaphor for the sulphurous stew of corruption, hypocrisy and venality that comprised establishment Queensland in the 1980s), and its effect on seven disparate characters whose lives are forever altered by their contact with it.

The twist is that these characters are really united by their selfishness and their love of alcohol: in their own way, each is addicted to that fleeting, eternal moment of sodden joy

every serious drinker savours, that moment when it hits and you cast off from the calm shores of sobriety into an altogether more dangerous world. The moment that keeps you drinking.

The triumph of this book is that it makes alcoholism—addiction—a central, crucial element of the plot by intertwining it in a gripping mean-streets story—complete with corrupt cops, venal politicians, a dying licentious aristocrat and a relentless killer—in a way that leaves you asking yourself some uncomfortable questions about the kind of world we live in and the kind of lies we tell ourselves to make it easier to bear. It is a love story too, of sorts. But love and sex, as it is in real life, are pushed to the margins by the whirlwind stirred up by addiction.

McGahan's doom-laden, laconic style has been honed to perfect pitch here and it hums in the opening chapters, as former Brisbane gossip columnist and now small-town journalist and recovering alcoholic George Verney confronts a grisly reminder of his colourful past, pre-Inquiry ...

The main characters are familiar, but not clichéd, which is standard for the genre. McGahan teases out the dual strands of the stories, each strand subtly reinforcing the other, and adding to the suspense. By the time we meet Maybelline, we are well and truly ready for the tragedy to unfold, as we know it will.

What impresses most is McGahan's grasp of structure, his fluid, almost rhythmic, storytelling and the ineffable sadness at the core which, he suggests, is the essence of Queensland.

McGahan has a great novel or two in him. This could be one of them.

***Meanjin*—Lara Travis**

Finally, a novelist has taken that sordid and intriguing moment in Queensland's history, the Fitzgerald Inquiry into police corruption, and made it his own. Andrew McGahan's *Last Drinks*, his third and most ambitious novel, tells the story of George Verney—shirker, survivor, half-rate journalist—a man who doesn't know his friends from his enemies or a crime syndicate when he's in one. He's the perfect vehicle to take us, the uninitiated, into the criminal world ... McGahan's spare writing style is perfectly suited to a place that just twenty years ago seemed a large country town. His Brisbane is dry, desperate, loathsome and loved as the city actually was before cappuccino ...

Although McGahan appears loath to do anything fancy, *Last Drinks* is far more accomplished than his first two novels ... McGahan's symbolic references are not terribly subtle—important places have names such as the Last Chance Hotel and Redemption Falls that even

George Verney finds corny—but can be, initially at least, very effective. On the second read, when you know what’s coming around the corner, that cool, dry style doesn’t hold the attention so well. McGahan’s pop-up symbolism is immediately gratifying but will it last in the reader’s memories of the book? But *Last Drinks* is a story that moves on plot and character. It’s a book that deserves a long life, and on its evidence we can expect McGahan’s next to be even better.

Sydney Morning Herald—Debra Adelaide

McGahan’s third novel . . . is crime fiction that transcends the genre, becoming an extended meditation on the alcoholic’s nightmare and a lament for the rotten golden heart of Queensland itself. It’s a truly compelling and stylish novel, seamlessly written.

Australian Bookseller & Publisher—Michael Shuttleworth

It is seedy and it is scary. *Last Drinks* wrestles with problems like love, addiction, hate and faith; and with conflicts of heart, politics and pain. This territory you might think belonged in books like *Power Without Glory* or *Brighton Rock*. *Last Drinks* is a thrilling noir-ish cocktail of drama and dark laughter. It unfolds gracefully and is written with impressive craftsmanship, which are just two reasons why this book deserves real praise. Grunge is dead. Long live Andrew McGahan. Cheers.

Sunday Mail—Frances Whiting

One for the road

It had to happen, he knew it would happen, he would probably be surprised if it didn’t happen. It’s the question: ‘Andrew McGahan, are you an alcoholic?’ For the record, he’s not—unless you or I or anyone else who knows the late-night pleasure of sitting around talking drivel, talking pure genius with red-wine-stained lips, is an alcoholic.

But with the publication of his new novel *Last Drinks*, McGahan knows that, just as everyone believed he was the Gordon of his semi-autobiographical novel *Praise*, they will also assume he is George, the shambling alcoholic journalist of his latest offering.

The thing is, McGahan is just so damn good at slipping into other people’s skins, at inhabiting the streets and houses and bars and clubs where they live, you can’t help but think he surely must have been there and done that. *Last Drinks* is no different . . .

While the inhabitants of *Last Drinks* were fermented in McGahan’s fertile imagination, they are so strangely familiar it’s hard to believe they are fictional creations. ‘I think that’s because they’re stereotypes from that era, you know, the crooked minister, the barfly journo . . .

if you lived in Queensland during that time you knew about those people, saw them out and about. They were part of the landscape.'

Or if you didn't actually know them, you probably had at least had a drink with them.

***The Weekend Australian*—Helen Elliot Life Beyond Praise**

He's an oddball for a writer, this Andrew McGahan. For instance, he looks vaguely like Julian Barnes. The same handsome nose and pale alert eyes. But he doesn't know who Barnes is. He doesn't know because he doesn't read novels. He writes them instead—although he'd prefer to write history or non-fiction. He's just been immersed in a book about a man who travelled the world by freight ships. Fascinating, he says.

And then, unlike other writers, he's relaxed about what he does. Insanely relaxed. Living well is what he does, and writing is just a way into that. Cooking an interesting meal each night for himself and his partner of nine years, Lisa, is just as integral to his daily life as writing . . .

Set in Queensland in the present and during the years of the Fitzgerald inquiry into corruption in that state, *Last Drinks* is almost a crime novel, almost a love story and almost a recovery manual for alcoholics. It's a tight, confident and original novel and McGahan has no reason to be apprehensive. Though he is. 'I know it's going to be classified as a crime novel and that's quite dismissive, don't you think? I don't like being put into a genre. I was more interested in the alcoholism. Do you think it works? Or wasn't it ugly enough? I was a bit worried that it'd sound romanticised.'

. . . In *Last Drinks*, the style has altered. He needed more atmosphere and quite liked having the time to get it. The stripped-down style of the first two novels left little opportunity for atmosphere. He finds that the closer to the bone, the more pared down the writing, the more difficult it is . . . He is an extraordinarily well read man, but not in fiction, and who he doesn't know is simultaneously shocking and endearing. Who he doesn't know also makes him who he is. Gives him that natural, confident voice. 'To tell you the truth I am not at ease in the literary world. I know you can say that I've written two books about myself, but I'm actually quite private. I prefer to live a life away from all that. I don't feel at ease with the literary world and with the idea of myself as an artist. I don't see it like that. I look at all my friends and see the work they're doing and it seems more relevant to life than what I do. They work in public service or community law, whatever. Saving some guy from being deported back to Africa—that's more

important than writing books. I mean writing's a worthy enough job but it's nothing more important than that.'

***Sydney Morning Herald*—Catherine Keenan Down and Out in Brisbane**

For almost a decade, Andrew has been Gordon. Ever since 1992, when he published *Praise*, his celebrated semi-autobiographical novel, Andrew McGahan has been synonymous with his main character, Gordon Buchanan. Scruffy looking, heavy-drinking, chain-smoking Gordon. The nadir of urban grunge.

This confusion of author and character has not been without its advantages. It turned McGahan into the poster boy for Australian dirty realism and helped him sell almost 50 000 copies of his book.

. . . Some people have wondered if, without Gordon, there really was an Andrew. So, with his third book, *Last Drinks*, now being stacked onto bookstore shelves there are questions to be asked. Is Andrew still Gordon? And if he's not Gordon, then who is Andrew McGahan anyway?

Sitting in a watering hole in Darlinghurst, he orders a light beer, which I can't help feeling is like Elvis opting for a diet cola.

. . . The book is bigger and broader than anything McGahan has written before. It is, as the publicists proudly claim, a more mature novel, although McGahan laughs that one off ('there's nothing more mature about writing a crime novel'). It's a book about emotions and loyalties and very much about Queensland itself.

But where the book really soars is in its meditations on alcoholism and addiction, an observation with which McGahan cheerfully agrees. 'Even the editors say that it only really works when [I'm] talking about alcohol,' he says. For although the characters rarely actually drink, *Last Drinks* is a book suffused with booze. George and Charlie had been friends because they both 'had a flair for drinking' ('Why else pick journalism as a career?'), and this is what George has to confront when he goes back to Brisbane to investigate his friend's death. For the alcoholic, there can always be one more last drink, and the big question is will he or won't he fall off the wagon . . .

The sections detailing George's tug of war with the bottle are so visceral and compelling that it's easy to assume that these, too, have some basis in McGahan's life. But while he admits

that ‘maybe I’ve teetered on the borderline’, he says he’s never been an alcoholic. ‘I’ve had these big periods where I’ve thought “I really should stop this”. And then you start thinking, “Well why do I have such a hunger for alcohol? What do I expect from it anyway?”’ These thoughts form the basis of George’s reflections, but the wholly believable sense of darkness in them comes, McGahan says, purely from conversations he had with a friend who works in a de-tox ward.

While McGahan admits to being a heavy drinker, he has shucked off the romantic idea of the alcoholic writer, no matter how appealing it once was. ‘When I was younger I thought that’s what you do. You sit there with wine and you type away all night. When I wrote [the first two novels] I’d sit there with a glass of wine and I’d get half drunk while I was writing and it was all very romantic. But I can’t do that any more. Now I write sober in the afternoons. It’s not quite so glamorous, but it’s more effective.’

Some suggested points for discussion

- ◆ To what extent does the title *Last Drinks* indicate the novel’s central concerns? Describe how alcoholism functions as one of the book’s main metaphors.
- ◆ Identify and explore symbolism within the novel. Did you find McGahan’s use of symbolism ‘corny’ or did you think it worked effectively?
- ◆ How does *Last Drinks* explore human frailty? Do all the characters have their weaknesses? What is McGahan saying about human nature?
- ◆ McGahan is able to pin down themes such as personal corruption and the nature of addiction in a raw yet concise way. Do you think McGahan’s ability to capture the complexities of emotion and people are part of his strength as a writer? What else do you like about his writing?
- ◆ Michael Shuttleworth says, ‘*Last Drinks* evokes the sensuality of Queensland in all its lurid glory.’ What did you learn about Queensland’s past through McGahan’s novel? Discuss the way fact has informed fiction in reference to both *Praise* and *Last Drinks*.
- ◆ There are some dark gripping scenes in *Last Drinks*. Which ones stand out?

- ◆ *The Age's* Michelle Griffin says, 'The book begins at a pitch of high anxiety, and then unravels like a fishing line jammed in the mouth of a blue marlin.' How does the structure and pace reflect and enhance the story?
- ◆ McGahan shifts from the present to the past tense: does this device increase drama and add to the suspense? What other devices introduce suspense?
- ◆ John Birmingham has described *Last Drinks* as, 'A political history thriller, it is also a journey into the dark places of the soul'. Other reviewers have called it a morality fable, crime story, thriller and political novel. How would you classify it?

Further Reading

Praise by Andrew McGahan

1988 by Andrew McGahan

The Big Sleep and Other Novels by Raymond Chandler

Candy by Luke Davies

Silvermeadow by Barry Maitland