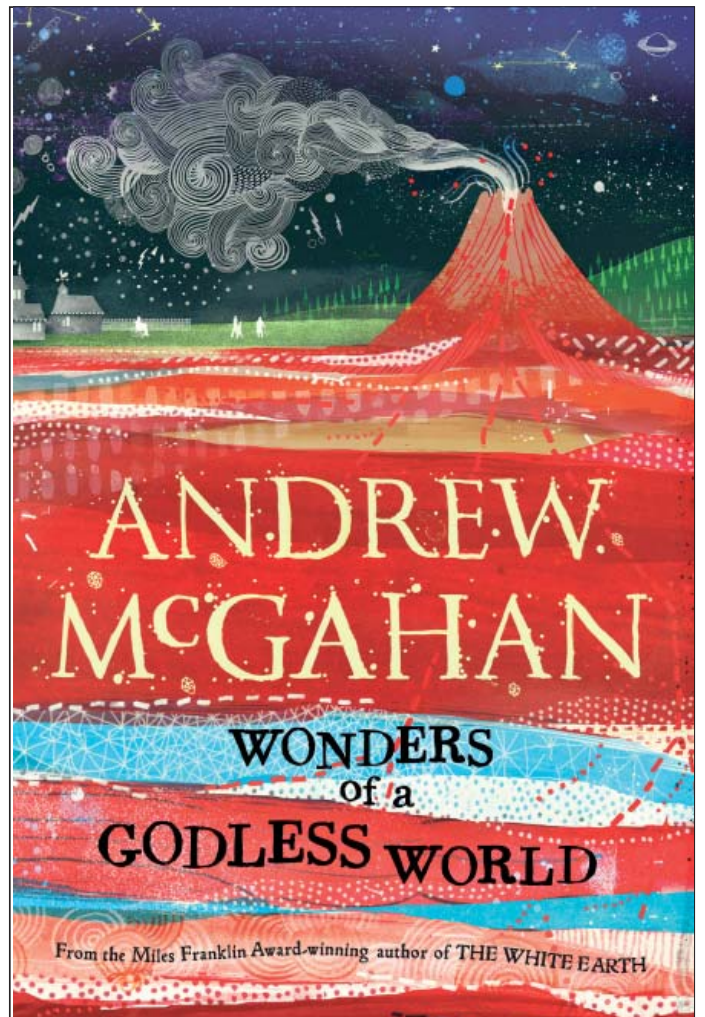


ALLEN & UNWIN



# READING GROUP NOTES

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## About the Book:

On an unnamed island, in a Gothic hospital sitting in the shadow of a volcano, a wordless orphan girl works on the wards housing the insane and the incapable. When a silent, unmoving and unnerving new patient - a foreigner - arrives at the hospital, strange phenomena occur, bizarre murders take place, and the lives of the patients and the island's inhabitants are thrown into turmoil. What happens between them is an extraordinary exploration of consciousness, reality and madness.

*Wonders of a Godless World*, the new novel from Miles Franklin-winner Andrew McGahan, is a huge and dramatic beast of a book. It is a thought-provoking investigation into character and consciousness, a powerful cautionary tale, and a head-stretching fable about the earth, nature and the power of the mind. It is utterly unlike anything you've read before - it will take you by the shoulders and hold you in its grip to its nerve-tingling finale.

## About the Author:

Andrew McGahan was born in Dalby, Queensland, but has lived and worked mostly in Brisbane. His first novel *Praise* (1992) was winner of The Australian/Vogel Literary Award. Since then his writing includes an award winning stage play (*Bait*) and the AFI award winning screenplay for the movie version of *Praise*. His second novel was the prequel *1988* (1995), and his third novel *Last Drinks* (2000) 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. In 2004 *The White Earth* was published and went on to win the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the South East Asia and South Pacific region, The Age Book of the Year (Fiction) and the Courier Mail Book of the Year Award. It was also shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards that same year. *Underground*, McGahan's fifth novel, published in 2006, was shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Literary awards and the Aurealis awards.

## Andrew McGahan on writing *Wonders of a Godless World*

In terms of evolution, *Wonders of a Godless World* began with an idea of trying to write a story which involved no spoken words. The urge came from the dissatisfaction I was feeling while working on passages of dialogue for my previous novel. I don't know the source of that dissatisfaction exactly, because I'm not normally bothered by dialogue, but I kept thinking about how nice it would be to have a book where there was no dialogue to worry about because there would be no one who could speak.

In fact, I thought, what about having no human characters at all? No conscious beings whatever? As it happened, I'd also been searching for some way to indulge my school-boy fascination with natural disasters, and with the weirder and wilder aspects of nature and the planet. So, I wondered, why not a book where natural forces are the characters—the only characters, not merely bit players for human characters to react against?

Of course it didn't turn out like that. I couldn't quite think of a way to convert elemental forces into protagonists capable of supporting a whole story. So the alternative idea sprang to mind of using a person who is profoundly in tune with those elemental forces – but also, profoundly out of tune with the rest of humanity, and thus incapable of most forms of communication. And with that thought, the figure of the mute orphan formed pretty much instantly, as did her home in a tropical island mental hospital. And as indeed did her nemesis, the foreigner, a Flying Dutchman kind of figure, cursed by his own complex relationship with nature to an unhappy immortality, and all too eager to harness the orphan's abilities and disabilities for his own ends. Those two characters established, I could then use their relationship to go to town with as many bizarre and cataclysmic disaster scenarios as I liked.

That was the starting point, anyway, although plenty of other stuff came in too. The orphan's strangely innocent perspective on everything immediately gave the story an otherworldly, mythic tone, and from there it seemed natural that the tale became an interplay of archetypes. The archetypes of nature—earth, fire, water, air. The archetypes of mankind's response to nature—fear, exploitation, worship, rejection, indifference and affinity. And caught in between, various archetypes of madness and religion and sex and death ...

## Discussion Questions:

- ☞ 'Whether McGahan is writing about racial hatred or deviant sexuality, his primary rhetorical gambit is bluntness.' (The Australian) – firstly, do you find this comment true for this novel? And, secondly, discuss your reactions to the 'discomforting intensity'?
- ☞ Do you believe that the action of the story was entirely in the orphan's head or that it actually took place in the world where the novel is set?
- ☞ What do you think the novel says about ability and disability? Has it changed your perception of people with a mental condition?
- ☞ What effect did the use of archetypes, both for names and characterisations, have on your reading?
- ☞ To what extent do you think the foreigner is responsible for the deaths of the duke, the witch, the archangel and the virgin?
- ☞ In the absence of names and specifics about place and time, *Wonders of a Godless World* is a modern fable. Traditionally fables are designed to communicate a moral. Do you think that McGahan intended to convey a moral message? If so, what was it? If not, how do you think his intentions were realised?
- ☞ How did you feel about the foreigner's relationship with the orphan? Do you think that he was just exploiting her or that he had some genuine feelings for her?
- ☞ The author says above, '...from there it seemed natural that the tale became an interplay of archetypes... The archetypes of mankind's response to nature—fear, exploitation, worship, rejection, indifference and affinity.' Do you agree that these are mankind's response to nature?

☞ The Canberra Times reviewer responded to Wonders of a Godless World in this way: 'There are some books that, when you've finished reading them, you feel that you've barely scratched the surface of what they're trying to say, and Wonders of a Godless World is one such book. Part of me, as I read, was totally swept up by the passion and energy of McGahan's writing, the hint of something truly profound lurking within the narrative. But another part of me experienced nagging misgivings, wondering whether it wasn't all just a magnificent illusion.' Discuss.

## Recommended Reading:

- ☞ The Cave Jose Saramago
- ☞ Underground Andrew McGahan
- ☞ Doctor Faustus Thomas Manne
- ☞ Life of Pi Yann Martel