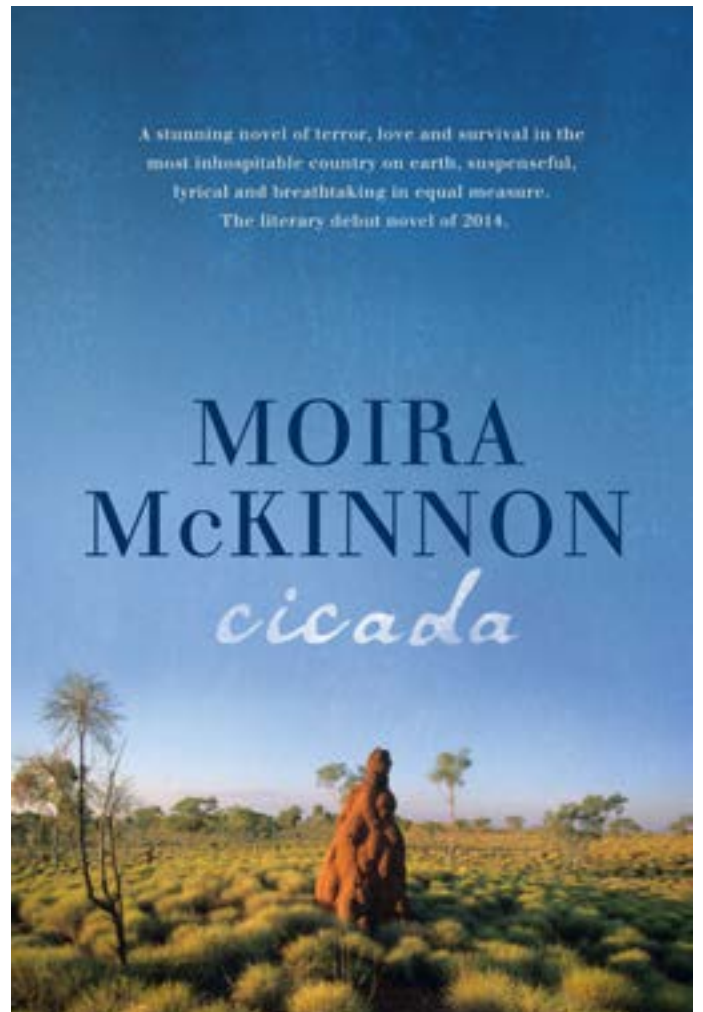


ALLEN & UNWIN



# READING GROUP NOTES

**Contents:** About the book (2) About the author (2)  
The author on writing (2) Suggested points for discussion (3)  
Further reading (4)

## About the book

A stunning novel of terror, love and survival in the greatest wilderness on earth. A lyrical, heartbreaking epic debut.

An isolated property in the north of Western Australia, just after the Great War. An English heiress has just given birth and unleashed hell. Weakened and grieving, she realises her life is in danger, and flees into the desert with her Aboriginal maid. One of them is running from a murderer; the other is accused of murder.

Soon the women are being hunted across the Kimberley by troopers, trackers and the man who wants to silence them both. How they survive in the searing desert and what happens when they are finally found will take your breath away.

## About the author

Moira McKinnon graduated in medicine from the University of Western Australia and travelled widely as a specialist in population health. Her particular interests are emerging infectious diseases and the relationship with global and environmental health. She sees a loss for modern society in the casting away of the knowledge of indigenous cultures and believes understanding the relationship that indigenous people had with the land is an important part of the future of wellbeing of the environment and humankind.

Dr McKinnon's essay, '*Who Killed Matilda?*' on indigenous health, religion and social progress, was joint winner of the 2011 Calibre Prize and was published in the *Australian Book Review*.

*Cicada* is Moira's first novel. She currently lives in Canberra with her husband and two children.

## The author, Moira McKinnon, on writing *Cicada*

I began *Cicada* as an exercise in writing a 'racy' piece to improve my skills at story writing – having mainly written non-fiction previously. I decided on a hunt story in a place I had lived and worked in – the Kimberley.

I had already mapped out a plot when an opportunity came to work briefly in the Kimberley again. As I stepped out of the plane the land seemed to rise up around me saying 'Hey, I am your main character!' I began to see so much more than I had ever seen before. Although I had worked with Aboriginal people many times, this time I asked detail about bush tucker and to the older people, about life 'back then'. Their eyes lit up and the laughter and stories spilled into the evenings. Aboriginal people were incredible survivalists and their life was so intimate with the land they did not see themselves as separate. I discovered that the 'skin system' was not limited to humans but that every living thing was conferred a name which gave them a relationship to all other living beings including people. Every tree was related perhaps someone's aunty, someone's mother.

The direction of my book changed, the characters came to life, modified the plot and put colour vibrancy and passion into the story. My main job was to bring them into line!

Concerned that the story had detail of Aboriginal life and legend that perhaps I did not have the right to put on paper I took *Cicada* to a Gidja elder, Josie Farrer. Josie reassured that most was correct, wondering how I knew all those stories, and encouraged me to keep writing, advising me on language and providing more stories.

## For discussion

- Do you think Emily betrayed William? If so, were the betrayal and the birth of Joseph the cause of William's madness?
- In discussing her work, Moira McKinnon states that she 'knew that the main actor would be the land'. Consider the ways in which the landscape is written in *Cicada*. Did you feel it was a character in its own right?
- From the opening scene, a clash of religions is established between the Indigenous Australians and white settlers. How does this manifest throughout the story? How do the beliefs of Wirritjil differ from those of Emily and William?
- Consider the following extract on p. 141;  
*Wirritjil sat in the sand and examined the drawing. She shook her head. 'Never had 'em yedderday, damorra den kardiya come.'*  
*'Everybody has a yesterday and tomorrow. Except the day you are born and the day you die.'*  
*'Yes, miss'*  
In what ways does *Cicada* challenge the viewpoint that time is linear?
- Discuss William and Emily's marriage - was it doomed from the beginning, or was the brutal frontier the reason for its collapse?
- 'No-one knew how to fit whitefella into the way things should be.'* (p24)  
Does *Cicada* challenge the concept that a 'civilised' race is superior to a 'savage' race? What are your thoughts?
- Do you think John Calhoon was a bad man? What was it in his life that shaped his character?
- What were the main aspects of Emily's transformation during the story? Why do you think the author ended the book the way she did, and what does it tell us about Emily and her experiences?
- Wirritjil remains essentially the same throughout *Cicada* as a main character. Why did the events not change her in contrast to the changes Emily went through?
- Can you say that Aboriginal mythology is just that, mythology, not real?
- Is there anything in these characters, in this story that could give hope for reconciliation in our time between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people?

## Suggested further reading

*Yorro Yorro* - David Mowaljarlai Jutta Malnic

*Jandamarra and the Bunuba Resistance* - Howard Pedersen and Banjo Woorunmurra

*Jilji: Life in the Great Sandy Desert* – Pat Lowe and Jimmy Pike

*An imaginary Life* - David Malouf

*Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* - Doris Pilkington

*The Secret River* - Kate Grenville