

READING GROUP NOTES

SORROW AND BLISS



SORROW AND BLISS

BY MEG MASON

“HOW CAN SOMETHING THIS TENDER BE THIS DARK? HOW CAN A BOOK THIS FUNNY BE SO SAD?” ASKED AUTHOR AND SYDNEY MORNING HERALD COLUMNIST JACQUELINE MALEY OF *SORROW AND BLISS*, A NEW NOVEL BY MEG MASON.

THE PERFECT PICK FOR YOUR NEXT BOOK CLUB, *SORROW AND BLISS* IS A LOVE STORY ABOUT THE END OF A MARRIAGE, A COMING OF AGE ABOUT FAILING TO GROW UP, A COMEDY THAT WILL MAKE YOU CRY... WITH THE MOST UNLIKEABLE HEROINE YOU’LL EVER FALL IN LOVE WITH.

Martha has known since she was 17 that there is something wrong with her. It’s shaped her entire adult life, her marriage, friendships and career, it’s cost her the one thing she has always wanted. And at 40, she still doesn’t know what it is. Soon, she will find out. But when is it too late to solve the mystery of your existence? And if not knowing has made you who you are, what will be left after the finding out?

Although you will draw comparisons to Sally Rooney’s *Conversation with Friends* and Gail Honeyman’s *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, to *Fleishman is in Trouble* by Taffy Brodesser-Akner and *My Year of Sleep* by Ottessa Moshfegh, *Sorrow and Bliss* is like no book you’ve read before.

MEG MASON ON WRITING *SORROW AND BLISS*

Once you've found yourself on thesaurus.com looking up other words for "said" it becomes much harder to sustain the belief that the novel you're working on is going well. Harder still is keeping up the conviction that you have the skill and passion required for a long and prolific career in fiction since you've evidently exhausted your own stock of verbs two books in and lost all joy in the process while trying to produce a third.

When I arrived at that point in December 2018 - sitting miserably at my desk, wondering whether to make my character exclaim, declare, assert or utter whatever uninteresting thing he was going to say - I was a year into the task. I had realised, painfully early, that the premise which I'd been turning over for a year before that wasn't going to stand up, that its technical constraints were too many, that my characters were dull and unconvincing. But I didn't have another idea and I had sold this one, so I pressed on hoping it would come right.

It didn't. And now it was due. Because I am a journalist with a mortal fear of missing deadlines and because I wanted my publisher to see that I had tried hard before giving up, I dragged the manuscript that was 85,000 words long and dreadful from start to finish into an email, apologised, asked her not to read it and pressed send. Then I burst into tears and went on seek.com.au to see what other jobs exist for someone who has only ever wanted to do one thing and now finds she isn't capable of it.

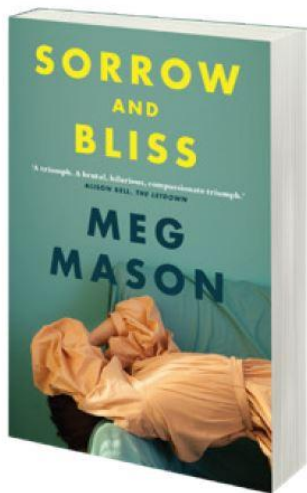
I do not know where publishers find such reserves of kindness and patience and encouragement for authors who aren't the easiest, most secure or emotionally hardy people you'll meet, even when they aren't grappling with failure and the devastation of their dreams. Mine took me out the following week and while I wept into the champagne that had been planned as celebratory and was now

medicinal, she told me that there were bits of goodness in what I had sent her. That she was sure the book could be salvaged, with more work, another draft or two. But I should take a break and then at some point, she said, I'd rediscover the joy of writing. And, she assured me as we were leaving, nothing is ever wasted. I did not believe her on either point because I had year's-worth of proof against the idea that writing can be joyful and nothing to show for all those miserable hours at my desk, but I hope I nodded and smiled before saying goodbye.

I wouldn't say fast-forward a few months since time doesn't tend to whiz by when you are bereft and rudderless. But one day, in March of 2019, a little picture dropped into my mind - of a couple at a wedding reception who notice a woman standing on her own. They decide to go over and introduce themselves but just as they do, the woman puts a canapé in her mouth. Unable to manage it in one bite, then unable to bite it in half or discreetly extract it, the following attempt at conversation is mortifying for all of three of them.

Clearly, a whole novel could not be hung on a troublesome canapé but I recognised the couple as the two main characters from that awful manuscript but transposed into a different time and place, they seemed suddenly real and interesting to me and I wanted to write that scene, for no reason and for no one except myself.

Another scene presented itself as I finished that one and then another and after that I couldn't stop. In form, what emerged wasn't like anything I had ever written before. It was all telling and no showing. The tone was spare and staccato. It didn't allow adjectives. The characters just said things.



For those reasons I was sure that it could never be published but I didn't care because there was no effort in the writing, no striving, no discipline required. It was all joy and it was all I wanted to be doing.

The moment with the canapé is the first scene of *Sorrow and Bliss*, which I finished exactly a year after abandoning my previous attempt. The process never stopped being joyful. Although the wasted year was painful at the time, it was necessary to produce an entirely different story and a style and characters that I love and hope that readers will love too. One of them is a writer who lives in terror of becoming reliant on thesaurus.com. Nothing is ever wasted.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo taken by Grant Sparkes-Carroll

Meg Mason began her career in the UK at the *Financial Times* and *The Times*. Her work has since appeared in *The Sunday Times*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Sunday Telegraph*. She has written humour for *The New Yorker* and *Sunday STYLE*, monthly columns for *GQ* and *InsideOut* and is a regular contributor to *Vogue*, *Stellar*, *marie claire*, and *ELLE*.

Her first book *Say It Again in a Nice Voice* (HarperCollins), a memoir of early motherhood, was published in 2012. Her novel *You Be Mother* (HarperCollins) followed in 2017. She lives in Sydney.

REVIEW QUOTES

'This book is so good. Compelling, funny, sad, moving; I can't put it down. The feeling readers live for. Wholeheartedly recommend.'

HOLLY RINGLAND, author of *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*

'I just adored this book. It's timely and dark and poignant and funny. It was filled with such eviscerating compassion and rage; I couldn't get enough of it. I inhaled it in a single weekend, unable to put it down. Meg Mason is a searing talent - I am so glad to have discovered her writing and I cannot wait to see what she does next.'

KATE LEAVER, author of *The Friendship Cure* and *Good Dog*

'It's hilarious and warm and touching, while also being devastating. I would classify this novel as an unclassifiable novel.'

JO LEWIN, The Booktopia Books Podcast

'It's incredibly funny, one of the wittiest novels I've read in a long time. It makes Liane Moriarty look dry.'

BEN HUNTER, The Booktopia Books Podcast

'Damn I loved this - make sure it's on your wish list. It's an anti-love love story. Mason has managed to configure a novel about women's mental health and self-sabotage and instead of using high literary stylings as Moshfegh or Broder would she's utilised romance novel tropes and just turned it all on its head making for very accessible and downright delightful reading and yet she's still kept some of the pathos and darkness. Wildly impressive and so damn satisfying to read. It ultimately filled me with hope.'

JACLYN CRUPI, editor and bookseller, Hill of Content, Melbourne

'Meg Mason pulls off an extraordinary feat - this is a novel that is darkly funny and unsparing of its targets, but also gentle and humane. The bone-dry voice of the narrator captures you on the first page and sweeps you along like a fast-moving current. Once you open it, cancel your plans. You won't be putting it down.'

JACQUELINE MALEY, columnist and author of *The Truth About Her*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Sorrow and Bliss is presented as a series of scenes, interspersed with shorter vignettes that are unusually unrelated to the present action. What function do those narrative moments serve? Are they necessary to the story?
2. Dialogue is related in a number of different ways. Would it be the same book if the author had used a single or more conventional method of dialogue?
3. Because of the decisions she makes and the way she treats those around her, Martha is not always “likeable.” How did your sympathy towards her change over the course of the narrative?
4. In the opening scene, Martha thinks about “explaining the drawbacks of being married to somebody who everybody thinks is nice” to a woman she meets at a wedding. Although Patrick is presented as a loving and patient husband, does he bear any responsibility for his wife’s suffering or the failure of their marriage?
5. Although Martha finally receives a diagnosis, the name of her condition isn’t revealed in the text. Why do you think the author chose to present it as dashes? How did it impact your experience as a reader?
6. Would you describe Sorrow and Bliss as having a “happy ending?” In either case, were you fulfilled by the way it ended?