



READING GROUP NOTES

Contents: About the book [1] About the author [1] Reviews [2]
Points for discussion [3] Suggested reading [6]

About the book

An almost deserted town in the middle of nowhere, Nebulah's days of mining and farming prosperity – if they ever truly existed – are long gone. These days even the name on the road sign into town has been removed. Yet for Pete, an ex-policeman, Milly, Li and a small band of others, it's the only place they have ever felt at home.

One winter solstice the birds disappear. A strange, residual and mysterious mist arrives. It is a real and potent force, yet also emblematic of the complacency and unease that afflicts so many of our small towns, and the country that Murphy knows so well.

Partly inspired by the true story of Wittenoom, the ill-fated West Australian asbestos town, *Soon* is the story of the death of a haunted town, and the plight of the people who either won't or simply can't abandon all they have ever had. With finely wrought characters and brilliant storytelling, it is a taut and original novel, where the people we come to know and those who are drawn to the town's intrigue must ultimately fight for survival.

About the author

Lois Murphy has travelled widely, most recently spending six years exploring Australia in a homemade 4WD truck, working mainly in small or remote towns, before settling in Darwin for a number of years.

She has won a handful of prizes for her writing, including the Northern Territory Literary Award and the Sisters in Crime Best New Talent Prize.

The majority of *Soon*, her first novel, was written while living in a caravan park in Carnarvon. Lois currently lives in Melbourne, Victoria.

<https://loismurphy.wordpress.com/>

Reviews

'A dark and powerful novel that takes the reader on a journey through a disturbingly new and hostile world. Lois's characters carry their old ways into this new order with grave consequences if they don't heed the signs. Her haunting and persuasive tale which nods at the tropes of genre fiction while subverting and elevating them heralds a compelling new talent.'

Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, Kate Gordon and Chris Gallagher, Judges, Tasmanian University Prize, Tasmanian Premier's Awards

'A powerful literary thriller where the dark, yet poetically beautiful detailing of events will draw you into a nightmarish world that will have you questioning your understanding of love and loss, and the very nature of your reality. Atmospheric, intense and thought provoking.'

Dominique Wilson, author of *That Devil's Madness* and *The Yellow Papers*

For discussion

- Discuss the difference between terms 'mystery', 'thriller', 'noir', 'horror' and 'suspense' as applied to fiction.
- What is the novel's overriding theme?
- '*A tiny word but immensely weighty when pondered at length. Was it advice, warning, threat, instruction?*' [p119]. Discuss the significance of the title *Soon*. Did your interpretation of the title change after reading the book? In what ways and why?
- *Soon* is written in the first person, from Pete's point of view. What effect does this have on the story? How does it influence the reader's understanding of both Pete and the other characters in the novel?
- What other stylistic techniques did you notice in reading this novel? How do these affect the story?
- In *Soon*, landscape and individual houses are characters in their own right. What are their actual and metaphorical roles in the unfolding of this story?
- How would this story differ if set in a suburb? In a city? Discuss.
- The Barrys don't label Li's produce as 'local', in case people think it's infected. How much influence does one's perception of a place have on which products we will or will not buy? Give examples to back up your argument.
- '*... there are places, too, where something terrible has happened, where the energy from the trauma has stayed on*' [p 91]. What are your thoughts about this statement? Have you ever experienced such a place? Discuss.
- Travelling to places that have experienced disaster, or been associated with death and tragedy, has long been a feature of the touristic landscape. Discuss dark tourism as depicted in *Soon*. What other such places do you know of, both in Australia and overseas? What do you think prompts people to visit such places?
- What is the role of the media in covering events such as those depicted in *Soon*? Is Pete's [and other characters'] opinion and treatment of the media justified, or does the public need to know what is happening in Nebulah? Why/why not? Where do you draw the line between newsworthiness and sensationalism?
- Discuss which formal behaviours have been abandoned by those still living in Nebulah. How important is formal behaviour in society? Does it differ between country and city? Which is more important – the rules of behaviour set by the society we live in, or those we set for ourselves?
- Pete tells Alex in anger '*no one ever actually gives a shit about what it's like for us, having to exist like this.*' [p 63] So why do you think he, and the current inhabitants of Nebulah, chose not to leave when the mist started. What possible benefits does staying there give any of them?
- Discuss Pete and Gordon's treatment of looters [pp 46-48]. Is it fair? Are they justified in accepting '*the generous offer of the contents of their wallets?*'

For discussion [continued]

- '*...beginnings will never arrive clean and weightless, they always come encumbered with a history.*' [p 79] Do you agree with this statement? Discuss.
- '*Once the news spread, opinions and alliances shattered the town's lethargic harmony.*' Is Pete correct with this statement? In a small country town where everyone always knows everybody else's business, can it ever be truly in 'harmony'? Discuss.
- How would you define a community? How many communities are there in this novel? Can the small group of Pete, Milly and Li be considered a 'community'?
- Small country towns can also secretive and tight-knit. How do you think the way a country town's community reacts to tragedy differs from that of a large city's? Discuss.
- Compare and contrast the characters of Milly, Li and Gail.
- Consider and discuss what roles minor characters played in the thematic development of this novel.
- Do you think Pete was right to refuse to exercise any authority over his wife's psychiatric treatment? Discuss.
- Is Julie fair in her opinion of her father? Why/why not?
- How does shame manifest itself in Pete? How does it shape and affect his sense of self and his relationships with others after his divorce?
- Discuss Stick's and Pete's relationship.
- Compare and contrast the characters of Sean and Denham.
- How fatalistic do you think each of the main characters are?
- What is your interpretation of the mist? What do you think it really is? Where does it come from? For what reason? Discuss.
- The triple-0 operator rung the first night the mist appeared, the council and local government, as well as Julie and her friends in Sydney, are all quick to dismiss any supernatural explanation for the events in Nebulah. '*[We] were treated with tongue-in-cheek condescension or outright hostility*' [p 243]. Do you think these reactions stem from fear, ignorance, or some other reasons?
- What does this novel tell you about the relationships between the 'haves' and 'have nots'? Think in terms of money, power, class etc.

For discussion [continued]

- Discuss Alex's explanation of clairvoyance [p 66]. Do you agree with it? Why/why not?
- Pete interprets the mist's difference the night of Li's funeral as a seduction. Why would it want to seduce Alice, when it has not tried to seduce others, such as Alex, for example?
- Compare Alex to Xandrea.
- Do you think Xandrea truly believes she has psychic abilities, or is it all an act? Discuss what prompted your decision.
- Do you think Alice, Rob and Allen really believe in Xandrea's psychic abilities? What about Polly? If not, why did they go back with her to Nebulah?
- In your opinion, was Xandrea already dead when she first appeared at the cellar window? Was Pete right in refusing to check? Discuss.
- What are your theories about the 15 men in their 5 grey 4WDs? Who were they? What did they want? Why did they appear in the first place, and why did they reappear at the end?
- How do you explain the return of apparent normality – ie: the birds, the echidna, the lack of mist – when everything is anything but normal?
- In *Soon*, Lois Murphy has explored how violence and death both terrifies and fascinates us. Discuss.
- *Soon* also explores the relevance of courage and cowardice in everyday life. Which characters did you see as courageous? Which as cowardly? Discuss.
- Pete asks '*...how do you tell who's won, and who, when the echoes of the cheers have faded, has lost everything in their hand?*' [p 264]. Have any of the characters in *Soon* won anything? If so, what have they won? Discuss.

Suggested reading

Don't Breathe a Word – Jennifer McMahon [HarperCollins Publishers, 2011]

Old Growth – John Kinsella [Transit Lounge, 2017]

The Dry – Jane Harper [Pan MacMillan Australia, 2017]

The Winter People – Jennifer McMahon [Anchor Books, 2015]

The Media and the Massacre: Port Arthur 1996-2016 – Sonya Voumard [Transit Lounge, 2016]

The World Beneath – Cate Kennedy [Scribe, 2010]

Picnic at Hanging Rock – Joan Lindsay [Popular Penguins, 2009 (1967)]

The Well – Elizabeth Jolley [Penguin Modern Classics, 2009 (1986)]

The Broken Shore – Peter Temple [Text Publishing, 2005]

Hell to Pay – Garry Disher [Penguin Random House, 2015]

Riders in the Chariot – Patrick White [Vintage Publishing, 2009]

Carpentaria – Alexis Wright [Giramondo, 2006]

Soon

Lois Murphy

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95 Stephen St

Yarraville

Victoria 3013

Australia

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