



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

A luminous and courageous story about the hopes and dreams we all have for our lives and relationships, and the often fraught and unexpected ways they may be realised.

Angela Savage draws us masterfully into the lives of Anna, an aid worker trying to settle back into life in Australia after more than a decade in Southeast Asia; Meg, Anna's sister, who holds out hope for a child despite seven fruitless years of IVF; Meg's husband Nate, and Mukda, a single mother in provincial Thailand who wants to do the right thing by her son and parents.

The women and their families' lives become intimately intertwined in the unsettling and extraordinary process of trying to bring a child into the world across borders of class, culture and nationality. Rich in characterisation and feeling, *Mother of Pearl* and the timely issues it raises will generate discussion among readers everywhere.

About the author

Angela Savage is an award-winning Melbourne writer, who has lived and travelled extensively in Asia.

Her debut novel, *Behind the Night Bazaar*, won the 2004 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for an unpublished manuscript. All three of her Jayne Keeney PI novels were shortlisted for Ned Kelly Awards. *The Dying Beach* was also shortlisted for the 2014 Davitt Award.

Angela has taught writing throughout Australia and overseas. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing from Monash University, and is currently Director of Writers Victoria.

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Reviews

'This is a story of family and motherhood, and also a story of culture and exploitation that asks us to think through the costs of our insatiable desire in the West to have everything. What I find remarkable about this novel is how it refuses easy and lazy judgement, how it takes seriously questions of loss, longing, and our human need to connect with each other.'

Christos Tsiolkas, author of *The Slap*

'A beautifully crafted novel from an incredibly gifted writer. Angela Savage explores the ethical minefield of international surrogacy through the stories of three women, desperate but determined to repair the broken parts of their lives. The prose is as precise as it is poetic, the characters so deftly drawn. I read this book compulsively, racing to its poignant conclusion with my heart in my throat.'

Melanie Cheng, author of *Australia Day* and *Room for a Stranger*

Previous works



Winner of the 2004 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for an unpublished manuscript

'Both an engrossing crime thriller and an exploration of skewed notions of love, social responsibility and cultural superiority.' Judges' report, Victorian Premier's Literary Awards

'Thought-provoking it is but [Savage] does so in the context of a thoroughly readable and, yes, entertaining story... Keeney emerges as an appealing character, emotional and yet capable of cold-eyed action. She smokes too much, speaks Thai fluently and likes a drink and a shag. She has a well-developed moral compass... Better still,

Keeney is built to last and this debut has all the makings of a long-running serial... I'm looking forward to the next instalment.' Jeff Glorfeld, *The Age/The Sydney Morning Herald*

'Coolly elegant with a lovely sense of place, Savage directs her authorial tuk-tuk into the literary precinct without sacrificing the requisite violence, corrupt police, edgy social commentary and the need for her heroine to become a lonely social crusader in the best hard-boiled tradition.' Graeme Blundell, *The Weekend Australian*



Shortlisted, Ned Kelly Award for Best Fiction, 2011

'This is a gripping novel; an unromanticised travel guide to today's Thailand; a critique of Western missionary endeavours; and a warning to naïve young people who stumble into volunteer work without the necessary skills.' Australian Bookseller & Publisher

'One of the most satisfying aspects of this series is its sense of place ... Stylish and witty ... with rich characterisation and the portrait of a complex culture under threat from both within and without. Savage has an important point to make.' Sydney Morning Herald



Shortlisted, Ned Kelly Awards, Best Crime Novel, 2014 Shortlisted, Sisters in Crime, Davitt Awards for Australian Women's Crime Writing, 2014

'Savage writes with dry humour and a beguiling sense of place, but a hard-boiled quality of menace underpins the light cleverness of her prose.' Weekend Australian

'With its intricate narrative structure, use of multiple points of view and occasional flashbacks, this is Savage's most ambitious and accomplished crime novel to date. It is also her most touching.' Saturday Age/Sydney Morning Herald/Canberra Times

For discussion

- *Mother of Pearl* is written from multiple points of view – what effect does this have on the story? Could it have been written as effectively in a single point of view? Whose?
- Apart from issues related to natural pregnancy versus IVF versus surrogacy, what other themes does Savage explore in *Mother of Pearl*?
- Discuss the differences between the West and Southeast Asia that are highlighted in this book.
- When Anna visits an orphanage where all children are HIV positive, she does not pick up a child, '*mindful of the vagaries of "orphanage tourism"*' [p 177]. What is orphanage tourism? What are its benefits and/or disadvantages?
- Compare and contrast Meg and Anna's personalities. Which sister did you like most? Why? And who do you think is the stronger person? What about Nate? Did you see him as a strong character?
- Compare and contrast Meg's and Anna's relationship with each surrogate, and in particular their relationship with Mod.
- When Mod looks at the children trying to catch fish from a pool with rice-paper nets, she now '*recognised it as a lesson, a reminder of the impermanence of the material world*' [p 8]. What is Savage foreshadowing here? What other foreshadowing did you recognise in this book?
- When speaking of his and Stephen's daughter's surrogate, Willem states '*There's no biological relationship between her and Isabella*', whereas Anna thinks sharing a blood supply for nine months qualifies as a biological relationship [p 26]. Whom do you think is correct? What does Willem mean exactly, and if Anna is correct, where does one draw the line at what constitutes such a relationship [ie: what about with blood donations, organ transplants etc?]
- Consider what Nate, and especially Meg, went through to try become parents [pp 31-32]. What are your views on IVF and on surrogacy? Should people continue trying by whatever means, or is there a point where they should draw the line? If so, where, exactly, do you think that line should be? And who should draw it?
- Did you consider the lengths Meg went to, to have a child, reasonable, or did you see it as an obsession?
- Regarding payment for surrogacy – should women get paid, other than having medical costs covered? In what situation should/shouldn't they get paid? What about if the surrogate is a family member?
- One of the questions asked in this book is whether overseas gestational surrogacy is really, as Anna puts it '*...exploitation. Rich Westerners ripping off poor Asian women*' [p 46]. Is it exploitation? Why/why not?
- Do you agree with Anna that '*surrogacy was like sex work: both lousy choices, both subject to demand that went largely unchallenged*' [p 50]? How is it similar and/or different? And what demands exactly is she referring to? And why is it unchallenged?
- Or do you think surrogacy is mutually beneficial to all parties, with the benefits outweighing the disadvantages? What about regarding sex work?

For discussion [continued]

- In your opinion, does the fact that money is involved influence the issue of informed consent?
- Later, Anna states that surrogacy is different for Stephen and Willem because they did not have the same options that Meg and Nate had [p 46]. So should there be rules as to who can and cannot use a surrogate? If so, who can, and who decides?
- Online media articles from surrogate clinics made references to *baby factories* and *baby joy* in equal measure [p 35]. Which do you think is the most appropriate description of such places?
- When thinking about her work in Southeast Asia, Anna asks herself: *What good, if any, had she done? What difference had she made? Was any of it worth what she'd given up?* [p 40]. Do such people/agencies actually do any good? Do they do harm? Or are they simply a band-aid solution for greater problems? Discuss.
- Consider the idea of merit in Thailand? How does it work? Is there anything similar in Western society?
- Compare what is required of parents wanting to adopt to what is required of those wanting surrogacy. Why do you think the requirements are so different? Do you think, then, that surrogacy commodifies children? Why/why not?
- *'More than once Meg had thought it would be easier to know that there was no hope, that she would never have children. But no doctor or nurse, not a single professional she had dealt with, ever suggested she give up'* [p 56]. Why do you think this happens? Do you think it wrong of the medical profession? Do you believe there is really is always hope, or do you think there may be other reasons why they continue to encourage potential parents? Discuss.
- Compare and contrast the Thai characters' view of surrogacy to the Australian characters' view, including Anna's, Meg's, Fon's, Mod's, Mod's mother and aunt, and so on. How do they differ and/or are they similar?
- Considering the low socio-economic backgrounds and limited education that most of the women agreeing to become surrogate mothers came from, do you feel the contract they were asked to sign was sufficiently explained?
- Did you feel the rights of the surrogate mothers were adequately considered in the contract they were asked to sign? Which clauses did you feel were fair and which unfair? Explain.
- When Mod is being interviewed, she finds it exciting – *'She'd never imagined anyone taking such interest in the details of her life. Not even her mother asked so many questions.'* [p 73] What does this tell you about Mod's upbringing? Do you think it influenced her decision to continue with the surrogacy?
- In your opinion, were the emotional/psychological needs of the surrogate mothers met or considered by either the clinic or the potential parents throughout their pregnancy and after? What techniques does Savage use to show the psychological effect of surrogacy on surrogate mothers?
- What are the legal issues regarding the embryos [how many are used, what happens to those not used etc]? Did you feel any characters were aware of these issues?

For discussion [continued]

- What indications did you find [if any] that the rights of the child have been considered [eg: if the parents separate, or are killed in an accident before he/she is born, if the child want to know its biological mother and so on]?
- When Meg reminds herself that for the donor, '*egg retrieval was just part of the job. The physical and emotional demands were not the same as they had been for her*' [p 111], what does this tell you about Meg's opinion of egg donors? Is it indicative also of her underlying opinion of surrogate mothers?
- '*You spend your whole life helping strangers. Why sympathy for everyone except me?*' [p 179]. Does Anna sympathise with her sister? If not, why is Anna able to sympathise with others but not her sister?
- Is Meg justified in being jealous of Anna, of her brother etc [pp 206-207]?
- Prior to reading Anna's reasons for behaving as she had towards her sister in the past, did you also see her as she sees herself, '*a crap sister ..., self-righteous and judgemental, totally lacking in compassion*' [p 193]?
- Was Anna wise to take Mod for coffee after the ultra sound [p 202-204]? Was she really just being nice or was there some ulterior motive/subconscious reason?
- Was Anna morally obliged to tell Meg and Nate their agreement had no legal teeth? Should she make it clear to the surrogates, including Mod, that they were unlikely to face penalties if they did breach the agreement? [p 232]
- What about her helping the other surrogates with the other terms of their contract – is it her place to do so?
- When Meg takes Mod to see the aquarium without Anna, Anna questions why she hadn't been invited to join them [p 262]. Is her reaction fair? What does this suggest?
- Is Anna correct when she says '*The urge to have a baby, it's ... it's primal. We're programmed for it.*' [p 299], or do you think it's society that programs women to have children?
- Were you surprised to learn of Anna's past pregnancy and abortion? Once learning about it, did you then recognise any foreshadowing of this earlier in the novel?
- Anna decided that '*If only one of them could have a baby, then it had to be Meg. Otherwise, neither of them would.*' [p 301]. What was your reaction to this decision? Did it change your opinion of Anna? Of Meg?
- What does Anna and Mod's visit to the hell garden of the Buddhist temple tell you about each woman's feelings about both the surrogacy and their abortions? About their need to atone [pp 305-307]?
- Is Meg correct/fair in indicating she won't keep in touch with Mod after the baby's born [p 264-265]? Did anything previously in the book suggest this might be her final decision?
- Meg sees the pendant she gives Mod as representing Mod and the baby. But it, and Mod's reaction to it, also symbolises the themes of this novel. Discuss.

Suggested reading

The Handmaid's Tale – Margaret Atwood [Jonathan Cape, 1985]

When We Have Wings – Claire Corbett [Allen & Unwin, 2011]

Origins of Love – Kishwar Desai [Simon & Schuster, 2012]

Avalanche – Julia Leigh [Hamish Hamilton, 2016]

The Farm – Joanne Ramos [Bloomsbury, 2019]

The Night Ferry – Michael Robotham [Sphere, 2007]

The House of Hidden Mothers – Meera Syal [Black Swan, 2016]

Labour of Love: A Story of Generosity, Hope and Surrogacy – Shannon Garner [Non-fiction – Simon & Schuster Australia, 2016]

The Art of Waiting: On Fertility, Medicine, and Motherhood – Belle Boggs [Non-fiction/Memoir – Greywolf Press, 2016]

Mother of Pearl

Angela Savage

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