

Andrew McGahan

(10 October 1966 –)

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BOOKS: *Praise* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992; New York: Carroll & Graf, 1993);
1988 (St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1995; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997);
Last Drinks (St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 2000);
The White Earth (Crow’s Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 2004; New York: Soho, 2006).

PLAY PRODUCTION: *Bait*, Brisbane, Metro Arts Theatre, 1995.

PRODUCED SCRIPT: *Praise*, motion picture, Emcee Films, 1998.

OTHER: “Kill the Old,” in *Paradise to Paranoia: New Queensland Writing*, edited by Nigel Krauth and Robyn Sheahan (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1995), pp. 155–164.

Andrew McGahan’s life has traced an arc from a comfortable childhood in rural Queensland to an urban slacker period in Brisbane and back to financial and domestic security in Melbourne. By his own admission, his life to date has been an essentially quiet one; nevertheless, his adult years can be divided into two stages, described in a 2002 interview with Rodney Chester as “life before *Praise* and life after.” Indeed, the reception of *Praise*, his 1992 novel, ushered McGahan from a state of unemployment and unskilled work into sudden literary recognition, enabling him to evolve over the subsequent years to the status of an established novelist who nevertheless lives largely outside of the literary limelight.

The themes central to McGahan’s writing range widely from the personal to the more broadly social. His writing began by focusing closely, even claustrophobically, on the lives of particular characters, tracing their attachments to alcohol, drugs, and sex as well as their struggles with unemployment, boredom, self-loathing, and nihilism. The social imperatives of work, health, and productivity are ridiculed in these early



Andrew McGahan (photograph by Tim Mehrtens; from the dust jacket for the 1997 American edition of McGahan’s 1995 novel, 1988; Richland County Public Library)

works, but in a character-driven way that avoids the course of overt social critique. While McGahan’s later fiction is still strongly character driven, its scope has broadened considerably, so that the avowedly nonpolitical writer has placed his characters within clearly drawn ideological and political backdrops characterized by government corruption, neo-White Australian movements, and indigenous land-rights battles. So far, all of McGahan’s novels have been set in his home state of Queensland, despite his claim that the state has no special significance for him as a writer.

Andrew David McGahan was born on 10 October 1966 in the small town of Dalby, situated in Queensland's wheat belt some 211 kilometers northwest of Brisbane. His father, Jack McGahan, was a wheat farmer, and his mother, Florence (Buchanan) McGahan, was a schoolteacher. McGahan grew up surrounded by books, though mostly nonfiction, and as an adult he still professes a preference for factual reading. The ninth of ten children, McGahan has enjoyed a success somewhat different in nature from that of his siblings, several of whom have careers as medical practitioners, pathologists, and teachers. Memories of his family and of Dalby are captured in McGahan's first two novels.

McGahan attended St. Columba's and St. Mary's Catholic schools in Dalby up until year ten, after which he boarded at the Marist Brothers in Ashgrove, Brisbane, for his two senior years. He then enrolled in an arts program at the University of Queensland in 1984 but withdrew before completing the degree. After leaving the university, McGahan worked in Brisbane for the next few years in a succession of part-time unskilled jobs, including a job sorting the outgoing mail for the Department of Social Security and a stint as an attendant at a drive-through liquor store. Both of these jobs came to feature in his writing as depictions of the alienated world of menial, low-waged work.

McGahan had wanted to be a writer since childhood, although he frequently admits that he was more attracted by notions of a "writer's lifestyle" than by the idea of actually producing literature. Not until his post-university years, however, did he begin genuinely to pursue fiction writing. Prior to his published novels, McGahan wrote poetry as well as prose fiction influenced by the American horror writer Stephen King. An early novel, which McGahan wrote in a year after withdrawing from the university, was rejected by publishers, a fact not lamented by the author. Also during this period, he wrote the manuscript for the novel *Praise*, which went on to win the 1991 *Australian/Vogel* Award for the best unpublished manuscript submitted by a writer under age thirty-five. Published the following year by Allen and Unwin, this novel established McGahan's place in the Australian—and later the international—literary scene.

Praise introduces the reader to McGahan's best-known character, the narrator-protagonist Gordon Buchanan, a listless and willfully unemployed would-be writer who spends his time drinking and smoking in his squalid boardinghouse quarters. The novel charts the degenerating course of Gordon's intense but destructive relationship with Cynthia, an emotionally and sexually voracious former heroin addict. Despite their raw and sometimes grotesque sexual encounters, Gordon and Cynthia's relationship is poignant, revealing the tender-

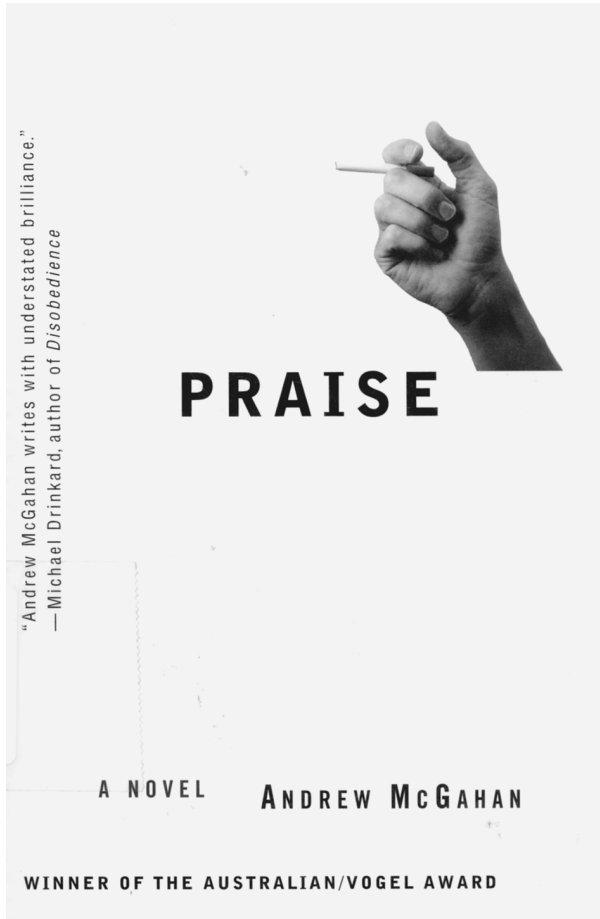
ness and beauty that can exist beneath the surface of squalor. While there is seemingly little action in the novel, its impetus lies more in the emotional life of its characters. The influence of American writer Charles Bukowski, the laureate of the Los Angeles flophouses, is clearly evident in both the scenario and McGahan's deadpan style, with the author himself admitting in a 2000 interview with Helen Elliott that "*Praise* grew out of trying to imitate Bukowski. Badly." The novel also introduces the reader to the voice that has come to be regarded as distinctive to McGahan's early work: impassive, scatological, yet appealingly humorous and self-deprecating.

The critical reception of *Praise* was crucial to McGahan's early profile as a writer—a profile that was unsought and largely unwelcome to the author. Although he was writing more out of allegiance to Bukowski, *Praise* was, in the words of Kirsty Leishman, "retrospectively nominated as the founding work" of what came to be known as Australian "grunge" or "dirty realist" fiction. More a publishers' marketing phenomenon than a genuine literary movement or genre, the grunge label was applied to a clutch of diverse younger writers based on a loose collection of shared interests and experiences. In Leishman's words:

It was . . . claimed that grunge charted the territory of Australia's inner cities and the disenfranchised young people who lived there; gritty, dirty, real existences, eked out in a world of disintegrating futures where the only relief from ever-present boredom was through a nihilistic pursuit of sex, violence, drugs and alcohol.

Although grunge fiction was said to have divided audiences into generations, with under-thirty or "Generation X" readers responding with recognition to the world described by McGahan, in fact *Praise* garnered favorable commentary from older reviewers and was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for best first book in the Pacific region. It was also short-listed for the Victorian Premier's Literary Award, the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature, and the Canada-Australia Literary Award. Though the grunge label led to McGahan's being placed in a category with other young writers, he has repeatedly expressed his discomfort with the literary world and continues to profess few such associations.

Soon after winning the *Australian/Vogel* award, McGahan was coincidentally dismissed from his job at the Department of Social Security. However, the success of *Praise* enabled him to leave behind the world of unskilled jobs in order to concentrate on writing. His next novel, *1988* (1995), was written on an Australia Council Literature Board fellowship. Drawn, like *Praise*, from events in McGahan's early life and forming a prequel to the earlier novel, *1988* recounts the six months



Cover for a 1998 American edition of McGahan's first novel (originally published in Australia in 1992 and the United States in 1993), which depicts the squalid relationship of an unemployed writer and a former drug addict and which has been credited with inaugurating "grunge" fiction in Australian literature (Richland County Public Library)

spent by McGahan's alter-ego protagonist, Gordon, and his equally indolent companion, Wayne, at a weather station at Cape Don, in the remote top end of the Northern Territory. Set against a backdrop of bicentenary celebrations, Gordon's discovery of his creative incapacity goes hand in hand with his growing sense of alienation from the Australian landscape. While the novel never loses its sense of humor, it gradually degenerates into a hallucinatory nightmare as Gordon's initial insouciance turns to self-loathing and chaotic destructiveness. At one level, nothing happens; but at another, the novel exposes the bankruptcy of national mythologies of landscape and manhood. The portrayal of contemporary indigenous Australians is also unsettling in its refusal to romanticize their relationship with their ancestral lands.

1988 was greeted with a far more mixed critical reception than *Praise*. While some critics were resistant

to its apparently relentless nihilism, others admired what Angela Bennie in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (27 December 1995) called its "scathing look at Australian society today" as well as its challenge to the bildungsroman tradition and, as Rosemary Sorensen noted in *The Age* (14 October 1995), its "transparency" of style. The scholarly response to McGahan's second novel was more consistently positive, particularly about its critiques of Australian machismo culture and McGahan's "construction of masculinities, which are confused, contradictory, exhausted and disempowered as they grapple with the 'incoherence' of masculinity in the postmodern world," as Linzi Murrie wrote.

In late 1995 McGahan's stage play *Bait* was performed by the Renegade Theatre at Brisbane's Metro Arts Theatre, under the direction of Shaun Charles. Commissioned and work-shopped by the Queensland Theatre Company in 1992, it was not performed by them, as it was deemed less suitable for the company's audiences and more suited to the production style and scope of an independent theater such as Metro. Its 1995 performance received a Special Commendation from the Queensland Theatre Critics Choice award. It was performed again in 2002 at Metro Arts Theatre, directed this time by Linda Hassall. As yet unpublished, *Bait* is not well known, which is surprising since it is a sequel to *Praise* and is frequently referred to as the third installment of "the Gordon Trilogy." In this play, Gordon is working in the mail room of the Department of Social Security, a detail that, although based on McGahan's own life, also arguably recalls Bukowski's novel *Post Office* (1971), based on the many years Bukowski spent as a U.S. postal worker. Through the plight of his characters in *Bait*, particularly the alcoholic and prematurely aged poet Arthur, McGahan exposes his audience to the predicament of the working poor, whom he depicts as trapped between the deadening security of underpaid drudgery and the insecure "freedom" of unemployment. His customary deadpan humor allows McGahan to expose the absurdities and cruelties of Australia's social security bureaucracy. As the final installment of Gordon's story, *Bait* concludes with his antiheroic capitulation to a grim future in the public service; as McGahan told Chester, "there is nowhere for him to go."

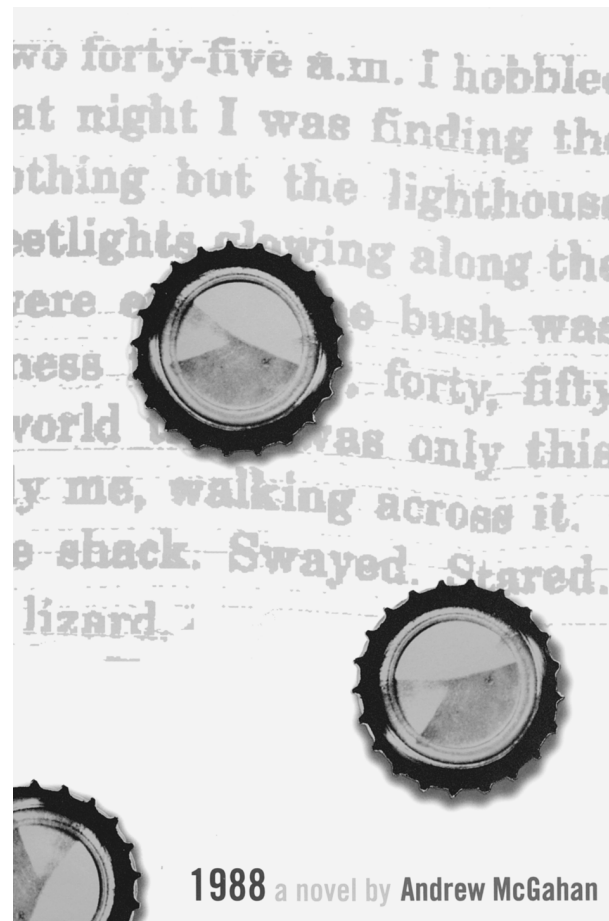
Also in 1995 McGahan's short story "Kill the Old" was included in the anthology *From Paradise to Paranoia: New Queensland Writing* and reprinted in the U.K. literary journal *Pre/text* in 1999. The voice of the unnamed narrator in "Kill the Old" is strongly reminiscent of Gordon's, with the same evocative apathy and bleak outlook; but the engaging irony of Gordon's voice is absent, making this tale McGahan's most unrelentingly dark work to date. The story, which includes

one particularly shocking scene in which a paralyzed old woman is sexually degraded by her alcoholic son, exhibits several features characteristic of McGahan's early fiction: a focus on the marginalized (this time the old as well as the poor and the alcoholic), a dystopian portrait of the urban and suburban environment, and deeply disturbing images of physical and spiritual decay.

A movie version of *Praise* was released in 1998. McGahan adapted his own novel into the screenplay, which went on to win four awards (AFI best adapted screenplay in 1999, AFCC best screenplay in 2000, Gijon International Film Festival best screenplay in 2000, and the Queensland Premier's Award). Produced by Martha Coleman and directed by first-time director John Curran, the movie starred erstwhile rock singer Peter Fenton as Gordon, while Cynthia was played by Sasha Horler, who won the 1999 AFI best actress award for her fearless portrayal. While some observers were displeased that the movie had been shot in Sydney despite being set in Brisbane, the overall critical response was overwhelmingly positive. Internationally, the movie was also generally well received, winning the International Critics' Award at the 1998 Toronto Film Festival. Elvis Mitchell described it in a review for *The New York Times* (30 June 2000) as "Pungent, poignant, and full of honest sentiment," with "a complicated emotional intelligence that is hard to come by in movies these days."

While McGahan described to Catherine Keenan his life around the time of the movie's success as settled and comfortable, he also arrived at what he later characterized as a career crossroads, as he felt he needed to write a novel using his imagination rather than drawing on past experiences. Casting around for inspiration, he started several novels that did not progress. Finally, in order to overcome writer's block, he decided to try the crime genre, using its established conventions as a framework within which to develop his next novel, *Last Drinks* (2000). McGahan began writing *Last Drinks* during a period in Sydney in 1998, but wrote most of it on his return to Brisbane. Final editing was completed in Melbourne, where he moved in mid 2000 to enable his partner, Liesje, a veterinarian, to complete further study. Together since 1991, the couple as yet have no children.

Part crime novel, part political elegy, the novel introduces readers to another of McGahan's ultrapassive protagonists: George Verney, a disgraced journalist who is shaken out of both exile and complacency by the horrific murder of Charlie, his former best friend. George returns to Brisbane after a decade in his quest to understand Charlie's death, and his disaffection with the new "cleaned-up" city is intertwined with his remi-



Dust jacket for the 1997 American edition of McGahan's 1995 novel, which chronicles an earlier period in the life of Gordon, the semi-autobiographical slacker protagonist of Praise (Richland County Public Library)

niscences about his drunken, reckless days as a minor figure in the corrupt "moonlight" Brisbane that thrived under Queensland premier Johannes ("Joh") Bjelke-Petersen's government. While George's encounters with his ruined erstwhile comrades drive home to him the futility and waste of his glory days, the elegiac quality of his reminiscences capture his sense of mourning for a compelling, if illusory, world now lost. The novel is also striking as a meditation on alcohol and its seductions, with some of McGahan's most lyrical writing being devoted to this theme.

The reception of this novel was positive, with critics remarking on McGahan's assured transition from his earlier work into a more ambitious and mature writing. *Last Drinks* was short-listed for *The Age* Book of the Year and the *Courier-Mail* Book of the Year and was the winner of the 2001 Ned Kelly Award for best first crime novel. Despite this prize, others pointed to its departures from the crime genre, claiming that its

emphasis on the personal fallout of corruption made it “not so much a ‘whodunnit’ as a ‘whydihedoit,’” as Wayne Smith put it in *The Courier-Mail* (21 October 2000). Others, such as Peter Pierce in *Australian Book Review* (December–January 2000–2001), regarded it as “that most unusual item in Australian literature: an accomplished political fiction.” Despite these differences, critics were virtually unanimous in concluding that McGahan had, with *Last Drinks*, transcended his “grunge” persona, a sentiment echoed by McGahan himself, who was keen to emphasize that he had shed the Gordon alter ego and had taken his place as a mature Australian writer. In the same year, McGahan moved to Melbourne to enable his partner, Liesje, a veterinarian, to pursue further study.

McGahan’s next novel, *The White Earth* (2004), furthered his importance on the Australian literary scene. In this novel McGahan takes up themes of broad cultural and national significance. The famous Mabo decision of 1992, in which the High Court of Australia recognized the validity of native title (land rights for indigenous Australians), provides the background of the story. Although this novel is, like the earlier works, set in Queensland, this time in the Darling Downs, and shares with *Last Drinks* a preoccupation with the political landscape of McGahan’s home state, these concerns are explored through a narrative that combines family saga and political allegory with a strong strain of Australian Gothic. After his father’s death, the nine-year-old protagonist, Will, comes to live in the decrepit pastoral mansion Kuran House with his elderly uncle John McIvor, the reclusive leader of an antinative-title party. As his story unfolds, Will gradually becomes aware of the dynastic hopes invested in him by his uncle and his depressive mother—a burden that becomes increasingly oppressive as he learns of the violent history of the property he stands to inherit. One strength of the novel is its evenhanded portrayal of the passions and delusions underlying rural white Australians’ desire for relationship with the land.

Despite McGahan’s reputation for documenting urban existence, *The White Earth* demonstrates his surprising confidence with the pastoral and includes many evocative descriptions of the wheat-belt country of his childhood. It also strays into what McGahan has described to Chester as “mythological territory,” particularly in a sequence late in the novel as Will, lost in the bush at night, has hallucinatory encounters with the ghosts of those who have died on the property and with the terrifying apparition of a bunyip (a devil-creature in Aboriginal mythology). Also notable in this novel is the shift in narrative style. While readers see the crumbling of Kuran House and John McIvor’s white pastoral fan-

tasies through Will’s eyes, McGahan departs for the first time from his customary first-person voice, achieving a more detached voice that brings with it the effect of a fable.

The White Earth has been extremely well received critically and has been widely hailed as McGahan’s most ambitious and accomplished novel. It has received many prestigious literary prizes, including the 2005 Miles Franklin Award, the 2004 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Best Book for South East Asia and the South Pacific Region, *The Age* and *Courier Mail* Book of the Year awards, and, the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Although some reviewers have pointed out that its bold combination of genres leads to confusion, and others (including Tim Coronel in *Australian Bookseller & Publisher* [April 2004]) have questioned its use of worn Gothic tropes such as a decaying house, a suspicious housekeeper, a reclusive uncle, and a dark family past, many have praised the courageous treatment in the novel of such contentious issues as indigenous land rights, Australian xenophobia, and the violence underlying the history of pastoral settlement.

While Gordon Buchanan is arguably Andrew McGahan’s best-known creation, continuing the lineage of hapless Australian antiheroes reaching back to Joseph Furphy’s *Such Is Life* (1903), McGahan’s profile as a writer has changed over the subsequent years. As he continues to tackle more-complex and encompassing themes, he is emerging as a writer who explores the ugly realities of contemporary Australian life with insight, dry humor, and, ultimately, sympathy.

Interviews:

Helen Elliott, “Life Beyond Praise,” *Australian*, 4 November 2000, p. 10;

Catherine Keenan, “Down and Out in Brisbane,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 November 2000, Metropolitan section, p. 3

Rodney Chester, “Rising to the Bait,” *Courier-Mail*, 26 October 2002, p. 3.

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Karen Brooks, “Shit Creek: Suburbia, Abjection and Subjectivity in Australian ‘Grunge’ Fiction,” *Australian Literary Studies*, 18, no. 4 (October 1988): 87–100;

Kirsty Leishman, “Australian Grunge Literature and the Conflict between Literary Generations,” *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 63 (December 1999): 94–102;

Linzi Murrie, “Changing Masculinities: Disruption and Anxiety in Contemporary Australian Writing,” *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 56 (March 1998): 169–180.