

## DRIVING INTO THE SUN

MARCELLA POLAIN

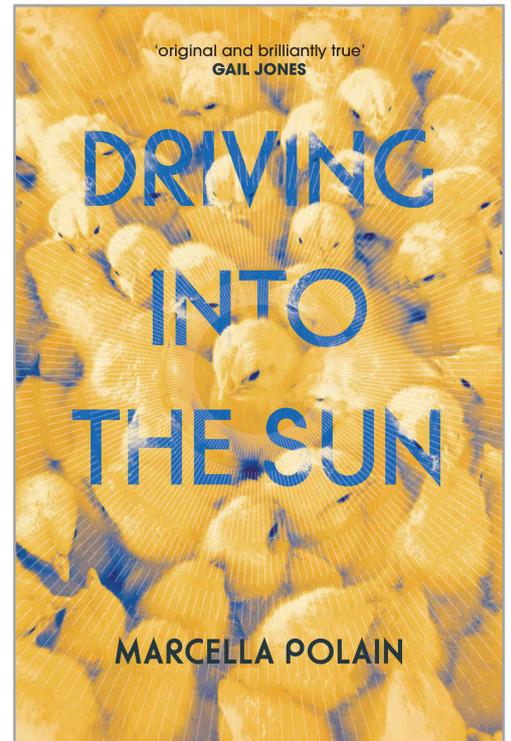
For Orla, living in the suburbs in 1968 on the cusp of adolescence, her father is a great shining light, whose warm and powerful presence fills her world. But in the aftermath of his sudden death, Orla, her mother and her sister are left in a no-man's-land, a place where the rights and protections of the nuclear family suddenly and mysteriously no longer apply, and where the path between girl and woman must be navigated alone.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcella Polain was born in Singapore and immigrated to Australia at the age of two with her Irish father and Armenian mother. She writes poetry, narrative fiction and lyric essays; her work has been published nationally and internationally, and in translation. Her first novel, *The Edge of the World* (2007, Fremantle Press), was shortlisted for a Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Marcella's short fiction has twice won the Patricia Hackett Prize. She has published three collections of poetry: *Dumbstruck* won the Anne Elder Poetry Award; *Each Clear Night* was shortlisted for the Western Australian Premier's Prize for Poetry; and *Therapy Like Fish: New and Selected Poems* was shortlisted for the Judith Wright Prize. In 2015, she was awarded the Gold Medal by the Writers' Union of Armenia, and the International Grand Prize for Poetry in Curtea de Argeş, Romania. She is Senior Lecturer in the Writing program at Edith Cowan University in Perth.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Beginning with the very first chapter, we witness the death of Orla's father, and then it is repeated in subsequent chapters. Why do you think the author has chosen to do this?
2. What kind of a child is Orla? Would you describe her as 'an ordinary little girl'?
3. In what ways is Orla's character defined by the fact she is just entering adolescence?
4. How would you describe the relationships of Dan and Henrietta with each of their daughters? Do you think that Hen loves her girls?
5. What particular kinds of challenges does Hen face as a widow?
6. How does Kit fit into this family? What is her relationship to Hen, Dan and the two girls?
7. In chapter 16, Orla and Deebee are taken to the zoo. Why do you think the author has chosen to send them there rather than to their father's funeral, which is taking place at the same time?
8. What kinds of male characters do we encounter in this novel, directly or indirectly?
9. What kinds of dichotomies does Polain establish between her men and her women – and between adults and children?
10. *Whenever a ventriloquist appeared on TV, Deebee hid. Their mother would say, 'There's nothing to be scared of; it's just a silly doll.' And Orla knew her mother was wrong. Silly wasn't the word for the way its mouth moved. Orla didn't hide when she saw the dummy because she knew how the trick worked. It wasn't the doll she needed to watch.* (p.143) What is the bigger meaning here behind Orla's realisation?
11. *Suddenly she felt very tired, closed her eyes, leaned towards him. She couldn't. She just. She thought of her sister— her clothes, haircut, questions. What it is to be a girl.* (p.289) In the context of this novel, what do you think it is 'to be a girl'? How does the Eimear McBride epigraph on p.5 set the reader up for what is to come?
12. What is Orla's realisation on p.237? What is the thing *she had no idea she'd been holding*?



13. Why do you think this novel is called *Driving into the Sun*?
14. How does the jacket design relate to the story itself?
15. Why do you think the author ends the novel where she does?

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

### ***Why did you choose to set this novel in 1968, and where did the character of Orla come from?***

There is a lot I could say in reply to this question; one idea leads to another. I'll try to be succinct. Life and art, including writing, intersect all the time. Fiction usually has its roots in experience. My own father died in 1968 but that year is also a watershed in a number of ways, among them: the civil rights movement in the USA; assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr and Robert Kennedy; the space race; Prague Spring; the escalating Vietnam war and anti-war protests; the student uprising and general strike in Paris; demonstrations across the world. So it was a momentous year for my family and me but also for many other people. I considered setting it in other years – the 70s, for instance, and also the current decade, but came back to 1968. This decision was also driven to a considerable degree by a conversation more than 15 years ago. I mention this in the Acknowledgments. I was completing my PhD, writing the manuscript that became *The Edge of the World*, and PhD colleagues a little older than me were reminiscing about Perth in the 1960s. I was struck by their nostalgia for it, that their experiences were not at all in keeping with my memories of that time and place. In that company, sitting at a lovely cafe by the Swan River on a beautiful spring day, I think it was clear to me, for perhaps the first time, just how much class affects our lives. I knew then that I wanted to write back against the pervasive and seductive idea that the world was better back then, because it wasn't. Of course there were good things about Perth then – more space, quietness, a cleaner environment, a life lived more outdoors and more in one another's actual company – but there was an awful underbelly. I wondered if my colleagues had missed the awful underbelly because they grew up in more salubrious areas, but then I remembered Eric Cooke.

I think it's important to fight against a cultural tendency to revise history. For whom was the past better? Certainly not for women or people of colour or our first nations people or same-sex attracted people or people who don't fit binary ideas of gender. Perhaps it was better for those who held, and still hold, power and privilege, but I'm not convinced of that, either; most men drank too much and there was a lot of undisclosed violence. And they, their brothers, and their fathers, had lived through war. I think men were, and are, just as damaged as anyone else by the need to conform to constrained ideas of what and how a man is.

Writers often acknowledge that characters are a version of them, and that's true of Orla. In some ways she's like me and in others she's not. I created her to reveal that children have complex inner lives. Children have historically been treated badly and are still treated badly, as if their feelings are unimportant – or worse, as if their feelings don't even exist. I'm tired of hearing how resilient children are, as if they will get over anything and it doesn't matter what the adult world does to them. We know this is not true, yet we still console ourselves with the lie. Children are precious and vulnerable and need protection; in my view, they have as many rights as adults have; they are as individual and as multifaceted; their feelings are as deep and they are acutely observant – their lives depend on negotiating the adult world, so of course they are – and their knowledge should be valued and respected.

***The novel is often, but not always, written from the point of view of Orla. What kind of tensions did the limited third person point of view enable you to explore?***

I wrote early drafts of some sections in first person before settling on generally using limited third person. It allows the story to follow Orla – and of course that’s important because I want her experience, that of a girl on the cusp of puberty, to be privileged – but to also have some distance from her from time to time, and to allow a gap to sometimes be revealed between Orla’s understanding and ours. She’s eleven years old; she doesn’t fully understand the world, and this needs to be shown. She also can’t be everywhere and know everything that happens, so sometimes we follow other characters, and we need to do that in order to gain information she isn’t privy to but that affects her and her family. It also allows the chance reveal that others (e.g. Deebee, Henry and Kit) have their own concerns, struggles and strategies, some of which reverberate strongly through Orla’s life in ways she can’t control and sometimes doesn’t even realise.

***What was the most difficult thing about telling this story?***

Without doubt, the most difficult aspect was returning to my child self and the experience of my father’s death. This was necessary in order to write Orla’s experience as authentically as possible. It wasn’t that drawing on personal history invoked any unresolved grief. Rather it was that I felt so sad for Orla and Deebee (and Henry, also), each so isolated and struggling in their grief. It doesn’t have to be like that, of course; if children’s grief is recognised and respected as much as is adults’, then it is possible for the grieving adults and children to comfort one another, and there is no need for such loneliness.

The other difficult aspect was the persistence needed to complete the manuscript. It took a decade and encountered several setbacks and disappointments. Some of these would make a pretty funny novel in themselves, actually. But sometimes it was hard to keep going.

***Your novel is very rich in domestic detail. Were you drawing on some particular time and place when you constructed this world of kitchens, paddling pools, back yards, bus stops and neighbours’ fences – as well as the more sinister elements of men lurking in the shadows and peering in through windows, which give it a gothic air?***

I was drawing on my memories of my 1960s and 1970s childhood. The bones of the story are from lived experience – my father’s death, our migrant family experience (which, I believe, was more acute for me than for my brothers who were born here), a prowler who did target us at one point. We lived in many different houses when I was a child, moved around a lot, and I used remembered details of these locations to – I hope – create a strong sense of place and time. It helps, I guess, that I am a collector – I love objects and artefacts both antique and vintage. So that aspect was very pleasurable and immersive.

As for the lurking men, it was my experience, too, that once my father died I was aware of the orbit of men with unsavoury intentions. I don’t know how different this may have been if my father had lived – that is, how much of this is a consequence of merely growing up female – but I believe my experience is reflected in research confirming children (and their mothers) become more vulnerable in this way when biological fathers are absent. I recognise that this is not always the case. However, this sense of being unsafe, of life being precarious and unpredictable, is my most pervasive memory of growing up in the 60s and 70s – the flip side of the nostalgia I heard in that conversation years ago. The underbelly story is also a legitimate one.



@FremantlePress



Sign up for enews



fremantlepress.com.au