

## THE LOST CHILD

by Suzanne McCourt

Text Publishing

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This début novel by Melbourne writer Suzanne McCourt is a coming-of-age story set in the wild coastal landscape of the Coorong in the 1950s. Writing from the point of view of a child, McCourt captures the heightened sensibility of her narrator, Sylvie, to portray a family in devastating close-up and a natural world teeming with smells and sounds and sights.

Sylvie, budding scholar and wild child, grows up in a stifling household, sleeping head-to-toe with her mentally unstable mother. As the family breaks apart, Sylvie tries to put it back together, to make sense of it. McCourt's dialogue, which boldly animates the rural Australian characters, provides the child with clues. Sylvie, at the edge of family conversations and struggling to understand, asks for definitions of unfamiliar words ('The Trollop', 'divorce').

The meticulously structured narrative launches into a series of dramatic events, starting with the father's small cruelties, which send shock waves through the neighbourhood. Within the escalating and gripping tension, McCourt maintains a light touch. The 1950s are brought into vivid and sometimes comic relief by cultural references: *Archie*, *Superman* and *Phantom* comics, Turf cigarettes, John Kennedy's assassination, and thalidomide babies. By the beginning of the 1960s, Sylvie is fifteen and coming to terms with a world torn apart and a landscape threatened by oil explorations on her uncle's land.

Always vivid and precise, it is in portraying nature that McCourt's writing is at its most fluent. Originally from South Australia, she depicts the Coorong with the eye of a painter and a poet, evoking the firetails and finches, the boobialla and the marshy wetlands that provide a refuge, both comforting and dangerous, for the child. The author integrates the wilderness into the heart of this compelling story, a disappearance echoed in other losses and family tragedies.

Carol Middleton

This final episode is given short shrift here; Mead refuses to instil it with the meaning it has been accorded by many Eliot biographers. Instead, she lets 'the event stand in its singular, perplexing strangeness, one episode in Eliot's life, but not its defining one'.

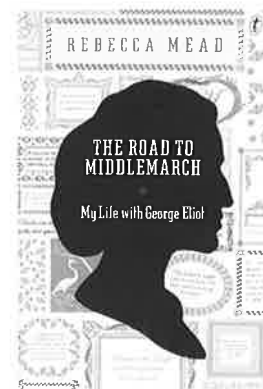
Mead emphasises Eliot's extraordinary capacity for literary sympathy, believing that '[g]enerating the experience of sympathy was what her fiction was for'. Mead extends her own sympathies to an array of characters in Eliot's life and work. Victorianists will enjoy the presence of Barbara Bodichon, Herbert Spencer, and the perpetually appalled Eliza Lynn Linton. Eliot's relationship with her stepsons is beautifully rendered and linked to Mead's own marriage in her mid-thirties to a man with three sons; Mead explores the tricky terrain of inherited motherhood and the unexpected revelations of being, in Eliot's words, 'up to my ears in Boydom'. Mead is even generous towards Alexander Main, an obsessive Eliot fan who edited *Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings in Prose and Verse, Selected from the Works of George Eliot* (1872). This inherently reductive offering, combined with Main's 'almost stalker-life' devotion to Eliot, is abhorrent to Mead. Yet she reads his letters, tells his story with compassion and recognises 'an awkward fellowship with him' as another impassioned Eliot admirer. (Given Mead's disdain for the decontextualised quotation, it is interesting to consider what she thinks of the 'accessible' cover design for *The Road to Middlemarch*, with its series of pithy bookish phrases in pretty frames.)

Published in the United States as *My Life in Middlemarch*, the revised title of Mead's book emphasises the abundance of metaphorical and literal journeys it contains. There is the requisite literary tourism: the author's birthplace; the pub that may or may not be the one in the novel; the encounter with the writing desk; the regional museum displays of artefacts that may or may not have been used by the writer herself. After trips to Nuneaton and Coventry, where Eliot's childhood homes are now defined by beer mats and pokie machines, Mead goes to the site of the Priory, the London house Eliot shared with Lewes.

[The road] terminated suddenly at an entrance to an electrical substation that lay behind a high brick wall that was topped with a wire fence. Yellow and black hazard signs were posted along the wall's length. 'Danger of Death,' they read, and in that melancholy moment, as I discovered Eliot's home not only gone but her street erased, the sign took on the aspect of a grimly humorous memento mori.

This sort of appealing self-mockery is a feature of Mead's journeys on *The Road to Middlemarch*. The tone is never cloying; alongside loyalty and love, there is also critical precision. Mead is not your usual literary tourist, and her access to Eliot's history is scholarly and privileged; her encounter with the *Middlemarch* manuscript at the British Library is especially well handled.

*Middlemarch* devotees might have certain quibbles. Mead doesn't explore the feminist possibilities of the novel. *Middlemarch's* great theme of reconciled ambition is not given its due, and there is perhaps too much of the investigative journalist's accounting of the research process. But this reader approved of Mead's *Middlemarch* and was left with a feeling of kinship. As Mead writes, sometimes 'we find a book we love has moved another person in the same ways it has moved ourselves, and one definition of compatibility might be when two people have highlighted the same passages in their editions of a favourite novel'. ■



Claire Thomas is the author of the novel *Fugitive Blue* (2009). See: [www.clairethomas.com.au](http://www.clairethomas.com.au) ❖