



'The story of Iris  
had to be told, and  
McGregor has  
produced the  
roughest but most  
invaluable diamond.'

TONY BIRCH

# IRIS

Fiona  
Kelly  
McGregor

READING GROUP NOTES



*Sergeant Lillian Armfield leans forward.*  
*What about Black Ada's, Webber? I know you two went there.*  
*What sort of people go there?*  
*Iris smiles.*  
*The sort of people you coppers like to bash.*

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## *Who is Iris Webber?*

A thief, a fighter, a wife, a lover.  
A scammer, a schemer, a friend.  
A musician, a worker, a big-hearted fool.  
A woman who has prevailed against the toughest gangsters of the day, defying police time  
and again, yet is now trapped in a prison cell.  
Guilty or innocent?

Rollicking through the underbelly of 1930s sly-grog Sydney, Iris is a dazzling literary achievement from one of Australia's finest writers. Based on actual events and set in an era of cataclysmic change, here is a fierce, fascinating tale of a woman who couldn't be held back.

## ABOUT FIONA KELLY MCGREGOR

Fiona Kelly McGregor has published eight books, most recently the photoessay *A Novel Idea*, and essay collection *Buried Not Dead*, which was shortlisted for the Victorian Premiers Literary Awards. Other books include short story collection *Suck My Toes/Dirt* which won the Steele Rudd Award, and the underground classic *chemical palace*. Her novel *Indelible Ink* won Age Book of the Year and was published in French translation by Actes-Sud. McGregor is also known for a substantial repertoire of performance art, which has been seen internationally. She has held residencies at Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris; Carriageworks, Sydney, and the BR Whiting Studio, Rome. When in Sydney, McGregor lives and works on Gadigal land.

## A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO *IRIS*

**\*\* Please note, this introduction contains spoilers \*\***

*Iris* is a novel based on the life of Iris Eileen Mary Webber, nee Shingles (1906–1953), up to and including her trial for the murder of Alfred ‘Slim’ Maley in 1937.

The novel is told in two parts: firstly, as Iris waits in custody, and secondly, as we see her live the events that led to the alleged crime. These parts are told in subtly different ways; the former in third person present tense, and the latter in first person past tense.

Through these narratives we experience Iris’s childhood and early adulthood, which were spent mainly in the Northern Tableland town of Glen Innes. She went into service in the town as a teenager, later marrying Edwin Webber, who was twenty years her senior. After following her husband, a railway fettler, from job to job, she eventually returned home. But when Edwin failed to pay her maintenance for several months or pay off a debt to her mother, Iris tracked him down in the town of Carrathool, near Hay, and shot him in the buttocks, for which she was placed on remand and eventually acquitted.

On her release, Iris struck out for Sydney. She lived variously in Darlinghurst, Glebe and Surry Hills, and initially made a living through prostitution and shoplifting. Over time she began busking with a piano accordion, an occupation she maintained for the rest of her life, and for which she was frequently arrested and charged with ‘gathering alms’.

When she lived in Clisdell Street, Surry Hills, Iris befriended her neighbour, Kathleen McLennan, and through Kathleen met the woman who would become her lover, Maisie Matthews. It was to Iris that Maisie fled one night with McLennan when Alfred ‘Slim’ Maley, Maisie’s then partner, became violent. When Maley arrived at Iris’s home the next day, Iris shot him and he later died.

After six weeks on remand for the murder, Iris was acquitted and released.

For readers interested in what of Iris's life is on the public record, Fiona Kelly McGregor's exegesis can be accessed here: <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/handle/10453/123265>. In *Iris*, the author fills in the gaps, lending Iris Webber the depth, humanity and presence she must have had in life.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The book opens with two epigraphs:

*Yer talk about me bein' cruel and callous.*

*It's the game that's cruel, not me.*

Jonah – Louis Stone

*To those who hurt me, I give back in kind. I am the queen  
of spades, I am the wasp that stings, I am the dark serpent.  
Days of Abandonment – Elena Ferrante*

In what ways do these epigraphs relate to the book that follows? Do you think they are fitting? Why or why not?

2. The two distinct narrative styles used in the book differentiate between the Iris of 'now', who is in custody awaiting her trial, and the Iris who tells her story leading up to Slim Maley's murder. What is the effect of the two different writing styles?

3. On page 32, Iris narrates:

*There were fights outside pubs at Swill time every weekend.*

Do you know what the Six O'clock Swill is? How does it affect the lives of people at that time? How do you think it compares to Prohibition in the USA?

4. On page 166 we see the conversation:

*Who needs a bloke when all he does is bludge n bash?*

*To act as a shield against the others. That way you only cop it once.*

The dynamics between men and women as shown in the novel feel in many ways confrontingly different from the modern society we know. What are some ways this is conveyed in *Iris*? What are some of the reasons you think things were this way, and how do you think change has come about since those times?

5. On page 82 Iris says:

*Mothers always prefer their sons, Adeline. When they look at us they either see what they had to put up with or what they couldn't have.*

Do you think Iris is right? Why or why not?

6. At Black Ada's, Maisie says to Iris:

*You reckon you're bad? Or just a woman who knows her mind?*

What do Iris and Maisie mean by 'bad' here? Iris's tendency to 'know her mind' causes her trouble in nearly all aspects of her life: with her friends, her enemies, the police, and men in general. Through a modern prism, Iris's yearning for independence and individuality is understandable, but to attain it she must go entirely against the grain of the ideal woman of the 1930s. What are some examples of this in Iris's life? In what ways does she try to overcome the obstacles she faces?

7. What are some of the ways Fiona Kelly McGregor uses language to evoke the feel and voice of the 1930s? How authentic did this feel to you?

8. On page 182, Ada pinches her skin, saying, *This is real*. What do you think she means?

Discuss the nightclub Black Ada's – what sort of establishment is it?

9. On page 215, Iris says:

*Made me think I'd rather be a pervert than a pushover.*

What decision is Iris making here? How does her changing sexuality affect her opportunities and actions? What does the book tell us about the lives of LGBTIQ people in the 1930s? Under these circumstances, what sort of relationship can Iris and Maisie have?

10. On page 240 Iris tells us:

*I knew now I'd never live in a place like that [the Belgenny apartments]. I'd never get a job as a stenographer.*

And later, on page 352: *I didn't dream big anymore. Little was all I had.*

What has changed in Iris's life over the years, both in her physical circumstances and her perspective? Why is she now so sure she won't be able to realise her modest ambitions?

11. On page 301 Detective Rye walks into a party at Kathleen McLennan's place and begins to hand out fines. Why is he doing this? What are the party guests doing wrong? On page 302, when Bert refers to NSW Penal Colony ... what does he mean? How does policing in those days compare to now?

12. On pages 323–329 there is a dialogue between Iris and Sergeant Lillian Armfield. What is the undercurrent here? What do you make of the dynamic between these two women?

13. On pages 351–352, Maybe says to Iris:

*You've seen what they do to Blacks Iris ...*

What is Maybe referring to here? What do you think life in Australia was like for non-white people in the 1930s? How does it compare to now? Pick out one (or some) of the Indigenous and non-white characters in the novel, and discuss.

14. What can we glean from the situation women like Iris, Maisie and Kath were in when the first thing Maisie says after Iris shoots Slim, the man who has come to attack them all, is: *Look what you've done now, Iris!* What does this say about Maisie and Iris's relationship? (Page 432)

15. On page 435 Iris says:

*I wanted to hurt Ned and to murder Bill but I hadn't meant to get Slim at all until those final moments when he stood for all the men I had ever wanted to kill. Of course the Law doesn't serve us all equally, I knew that, everything in my life had taught me you don't get what you deserve you just get what you are served.*

Why were the odds stacked so clearly against women like Iris? How do their attitudes and behaviour reflect this?

16. What are some of the ways in which Fiona Kelly McGregor gives Iris a unique voice in the narrative? Did you relate to Iris?