



*Four women win the lottery
and suddenly everything changes.*

Di MORRISSEY RIVER SONG

AUSTRALIA'S FAVOURITE STORYTELLER

READING GROUP NOTES

ABOUT RIVER SONG

The arrival of a hotshot New York composer brings a rare touch of glamour and excitement to the peaceful country town of Fig Tree River. For Leonie, Madison, Sarita and Chrissie, four women involved in the local musical theatre, it's a welcome distraction from the pressures of daily life.

Then a lottery ticket, bought together on impulse, changes everything.

The winnings, shared between the four friends, are all they ever hoped for ... and all they ever feared, bringing dreams, dilemmas and disaster.

When their new lives start to fall apart, will the women have the strength to find the song inside their hearts once more?

ABOUT DI MORRISSEY

Di Morrissey AM is one of the most successful and prolific authors Australia has ever produced, publishing twenty-nine bestselling novels. She trained as a journalist, working in newspapers, magazines, television, film, theatre and advertising around the world. Her fascination with different countries, their cultural, political and environmental issues, has been the catalyst for her novels, which are all inspired by a particular landscape.

Di is a tireless and passionate advocate and activist for many causes. She is an avid supporter of Greenpeace, speaking out on issues of national and international importance. She established The Golden Land Education Foundation in Myanmar (Burma), and is an Ambassador for Australia's Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children. For many years, Di also published and edited a free community newspaper, *The Manning Community News*.

In 2017, in recognition of her achievements, Di was inducted into the Australian Book Industry Awards Hall of Fame with the prestigious Lloyd O'Neil Award. In 2019, she was made a Member of the Order of Australia.

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SYNOPSIS

**** PLEASE NOTE, CONTAINS SPOILERS ****

Four women from the New South Wales country town of Fig Tree River are about to experience a year that will change their lives forever.

Recently widowed Leonie is trying to implement new farming practices on her property while raising a twelve-year-old son, but her real passion lies in running the town's amateur theatre group, the Riverside Players.

Sarita works in a clothing store and, together with her husband, supports her three teenaged sons, but money is tight. She designs and makes the costumes for the Riverside Players' productions.

Chrissie is a busy mother to two young children and wife to a local loudmouth, Troy. Having been brought up to know her way around a tool shed, Chrissie helps design and build the sets and backdrops for the theatre group's shows.

Madison, known as Maddie, is a twenty-one-year-old school leaver who works at the local café and wonders what to do with her life. She loves creating and playing music, but she never learned to read or write musical notation and is too frightened to perform in public.

Then American composer Fleur Livingston comes to town. Fleur writes and produces musical theatre and is in Fig Tree River for some peace and quiet to work on her latest project: a musical production about Australian composer and musician Percy Grainger and his wife Ella. When Fleur hears about the Riverside Players, she has an idea – why not ask the group to give the musical, *Percy and Ella*, a bare-bones trial run?

Fleur and Leonie meet and hit it off, and the idea is launched. The Riverside Players set about gathering the cast and crew together and auditioning for the major roles. Having met Maddie at the café, Fleur convinces her to try for the part of Ella, and despite her nerves, Maddie is delighted to accept the role. Other townsfolk – Wade, a local policeman, and Charlie, a young videographer, join the group. Soon everything is coming together, but it takes longer – and a bit of trickery – to find someone talented enough to play Percy. A young pianist of no fixed abode, Julian, is finally pinned down and rehearsals begin.

As the date of the performance nears, Fleur, Maddie, Chrissie, Leonie and Sarita meet for lunch and afterwards, on a whim, the four Fig Tree River women buy a lottery ticket to share. They could do with some luck, they figure: there have been rumours that the council wants to redevelop the site of the old Riverside Playhouse, which could spell disaster for their group. Council has also tabled plans to create a new dam near Leonie's land, with potentially dire environmental consequences. To top things off, a fire in Chrissie's shed ruins the backdrops for the show at the eleventh hour.

Despite these obstacles, the show goes ahead and is a terrific success. Charlie creates a film which Fleur plans to use to help produce the show in New York, and he and Maddie

begin a romantic relationship. Fleur returns to the States, and life in Fig Tree River settles back to normal.

But not for long. One day, Leonie receives a call informing her that the group has won ninety million dollars in the lottery. The four women are ecstatic, but Leonie cautions them that lottery winners sometimes report that the money brought them nothing but trouble and that they will need to be careful.

Six months later, the women's lives have changed dramatically. Leonie has been able to take on more help for the farm and is planning a holiday with her son. She now also has the means to fight the proposed dam and the redevelopment of the Playhouse. Chrissie and her husband have moved to an up-and-coming coastal region an hour away and are living in a highrise apartment. Sarita and her husband Ray have moved to a bigger house, sent their sons off on a road trip and are planning a tropical holiday themselves. Maddie has quit her job at the café and taken up a music course.

But all of them face problems. Maddie's parents are fighting over the money and want her buy them a new home – except they can't agree on where, and are heading towards a separation. After a luxurious holiday in Fiji, where her mother was from, Sarita becomes consumed with the idea of buying an island, much to her husband's dismay. Leonie decides to save the Riverside Playhouse by buying it herself, and is approached by a heritage architect, Alistair, who claims to want to help her in the process. But everyone apart from Leonie herself can see that he is taking advantage of her. Meanwhile Chrissie is miserable in her new home. She has no access to her tools, nothing to do, and her husband Troy is spending the lottery money like there's no tomorrow. In addition, Troy's overbearing and controlling behaviour, which Chrissie has always hidden from the outside world, is worsening. Eventually he begins to hit her.

Despite Ray's objections, Sarita buys an island in Fiji and sets about building a grand house on it for her family. However a cyclone hits, and everything is destroyed. Deeply shaken, she decides a better way to connect with her Fijian roots is to set up a foundation for local people to use the island for research and as an environmentally protected space. On returning home, she and Ray decide to spend the rest of their money on their sons' education.

Leonie and her son are in a car accident, which puts off their holiday plans and allows Alistair to move in even more, eventually striking up a romantic relationship with Leonie. However Sarita's brother, Brett, an environmental lawyer, is able to prove that Alistair has been spending Leonie's money on unnecessary procedures and processes, all the while funnelling it to his own contacts and friends. Realising she was lonely and an easy target, Leonie breaks things off with Alistair.

After a particularly violent act, Chrissie finally flees from Troy's domestic violence with her children. But Troy is able to track her car and phone, and he finds her and threatens her.

A friend connects Chrissie with a refuge, and she is able to take the first steps towards leaving Troy for good, although she despairs of ever being properly free of him. When she

returns briefly to Fig Tree River to collect important documents, Troy, who has been lying in wait, takes the children. After a car chase they are safely retrieved, but in an attempt to escape, Troy's car hits a tree and he is catastrophically injured.

Maddie eventually accepts that her parents' marriage is probably over and buys each of them a new home. Then she invests the rest of the money and wonders what to do next. Inexplicably, her relationship with Charlie has foundered, and Charlie eventually admits he was both jealous of her connection with Julian and didn't want to be the reason Maddie stayed around after her windfall, when she could go or do anything. Frustrated, Maddie decides to take up Fleur's offer of a visit to New York, where her eyes are opened to the possibilities the music world offers. When Charlie appears after a few weeks, having been hired by Fleur to make another film, the two young people reunite and decide to stay in NYC for the time being.

A few months later, the four lottery winners meet up in LA prior to attending Fleur's off-Broadway production of *Percy and Ella*, and look back on the last eighteen months. Chrissie has put Troy in a nursing home and is looking forward to a new life with her children. She plans to run Women's Sheds and set up refuges for victims of domestic violence. She and Leonie are taking their children to Disneyland. Maddie is about to begin recording some of her own music. No one could have predicted what a burden and a gift the lottery winnings were to be, but they all agree it is what they do next that will define them.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which different elements of the novel does the title, *River Song*, refer to, in your opinion? Do you think it is a fitting title for the novel?
2. The Prologue ends with the line, 'But for these four women, life was about to change.' How does the author set up the expectation of transformation in the lives of the characters? How does this anticipation of change impact your reading experience?
3. What are some of the ways in which the arrival of an outsider, Fleur Livingston, in Fig Tree River changes the normal course of events for our story's characters? Does her visit change Fleur herself, as well?
4. What signs are there early in the novel about the nature of Chrissie and Troy's relationship? Did you suspect what was going on? Why do you think the other characters in the novel didn't notice anything was seriously wrong, and what do you think this says about domestic violence in our society today?
5. Four of the women in this novel win millions of dollars each in a lottery. What would you do if you won the lottery? What do you think of each of the women's decisions about how to spend the money?
6. Page 221. '*Why is it so hard for people to just be happy for me? Money shouldn't change anything.*' '*Money changes everything,*' said Leonie quietly.
In what ways, both good and bad, does the lottery win change Maddie, Leonie, Sarita and Chrissie's lives? Could these changes have been anticipated, and any problems avoided?
7. Successful people have been known to say: 'I've got to where I am because I've made my own luck' or 'The harder I work, the luckier I get!'. The idea of luck – both good and bad – is one of the major themes in *River Song*. In your opinion, how big a part does luck play in the characters' achievements (or lack thereof)?
8. Sarita's experiences in Fiji shine a light on the effects of climate change and how it might affect the island nation in the future. What are your views about the different types of tourism in Fiji? Do you sympathise with Sarita's desire to buy an island?
9. Several of the minor characters try to take advantage of the lottery winners when they sense they have come into a sum of money. On the other hand, others show their loyalty and friendship without asking for any handouts. Can you identify characters in both categories? Discuss their behaviour, both virtuous and underhanded.
10. Maddie grew up in Fig Tree River and has rarely been anywhere else. It is hard for her to envision a life beyond the confines of her small town. In what ways do you think it might be harder for young people in rural places to access the same opportunities in life that people in urban areas often have?

11. Percy Grainger was a real historical figure who is now little known in Australia despite leaving an impressive canon of work behind. After reading *River Song*, are you interested in finding out more about him, and his wife, Ella? What did you think of some of the more colourful aspects of his life?
12. Which of the characters did you relate to the most, and why?
13. The fictional small town of Fig Tree River is the major setting of the novel. How does this setting influence the story's events, and what unique aspects of small-town life are highlighted?
14. Music plays a significant role in the narrative, not only as a part of the production but also in shaping relationships and revealing character traits. Discuss how music is used to enhance the storytelling. What emotions or themes does it evoke?
15. Leonie protests against things she believes to be unjust or simply wrong, such as the sale of the Riverside Playhouse to developers and the establishment of a dam that will damage the environment around it. Have you stood up for issues in your local area? If so, was it a rewarding experience? Why do you think many people disengage from issues in our society?
16. Consider Maddie's journey from playing her own music at home and being unable to read music, to forming a production company and professionally recording her music. What does this say about the themes of growth and learning in the novel? Which other characters show significant growth through the novel?
17. Characters like Fleur and Sarita have ambitions that drive the plot forward – whether it's bringing a deeply held creative project to life or pursuing a personal vision of paradise. How do these ambitions affect their relationships and decisions?
18. There is an underlying tension between preserving heritage, as seen with the Riverside Playhouse, and embracing change, like the council's possible plans for the Playhouse, Leonie's ideas about rewilding her land, and Sarita's island project. Discuss how this theme of heritage versus change is explored throughout the manuscript.
19. The production of *Percy and Ella* is a major element of the novel. How does the manuscript portray the role of art and music in personal and community life? Can music and performance truly change a community's fate?
20. Leonie and Fleur show different kinds of leadership in the manuscript. Discuss how their vision for future projects impacts the people around them. What qualities make them effective or ineffective leaders?
21. Discuss how external threats to the Playhouse and Leonie's land symbolise wider challenges to local culture and traditions. How does the community respond to these threats, and what does that say about their values?
22. The manuscript showcases a strong sense of community and collaboration, especially in scenes where the group comes together to prepare for the production, to help each other on a personal level, or to fight to save the Riverside Playhouse. How does this collective effort reflect on the importance of community in achieving common goals?