

GREEN DOT

Madeleine
Gray

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BRIGID DELANEY

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JESSIE TU



anovel 

Praise for
GREEN DOT

‘I felt so much joy reading this utterly assured writing. *Green Dot* is written with such poise, such confidence, I could not look away. I was mesmerised by its sheer brilliance.’

JESSIE TU,
author of *A Lonely Girl is a Dangerous Thing*

‘I am obsessed with this book. I am obsessed with Hera, with her dad, her friends, her dog. I am obsessed with how funny she is, and how hopeful and dark and tender and bleak the world is through her eyes. *Green Dot* is a book about love, and how stupid and funny and absolutely beautiful life can be. I would read it forever if I could.’

LAURA McPHEE-BROWNE,
author of *Cherry Beach*

‘Laugh-out-loud funny and beautifully, brutally relatable – *Green Dot* is a book that will stay with me for a very long time.’

EWA RAMSEY,
author of *The Morbids*

‘Incredibly funny and a bit too real. This debut novel captures the zeitgeist.’

BRIGID DELANEY,
author of *Reasons Not to Worry and Wellmania*

Madeleine Gray is a writer and critic from Sydney. She has written arts criticism for *SRB*, *Overland*, *Meanjin*, *The Lifted Brow*, *The Saturday Paper*, *The Monthly*, etc. In 2019 she was a CA-SRB Emerging Critic, and in 2021 she was a finalist for the Walkley Pascall Prize for Arts Criticism, a finalist for the Woollahra Digital Literary Non-fiction award, and a recipient of a Neilma Sidney Literary Travel grant. She has an MSt in English from the University of Oxford and is a current doctoral candidate at the University of Manchester, researching contemporary women's autobiographical literary theory. *Green Dot* is her first novel.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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For the workers in song

I am falling in love and I don't know what to do about it
Throw me in a haunted wheelbarrow and set me on fire

Hera Lindsay Bird, 'Monica'

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For some years of my twenties I was very much in love with a man who would not leave his wife. For not one moment of this relationship was I unaware of what every single popular culture representation of such an arrangement portended my fate to be.

Having done well in school but having found little scope in which to win things since then, it is possible that my dedication to this relationship was in fact a dedication to my belief in myself – that I could make a man love me so much that he would leave what he had always known, all his so-called responsibilities, purely to attain my company forever. I offered nothing but myself, you see. I was not rich; I had no assets or important connections. I did not have children or things that tied me to anywhere, really. Whereas he had all of these things – so settled into the couch of his life and just approaching middle age! I craved the stability he seemed to exude – I was intoxicated by the promise of ordinary happiness implied by his cargo shorts, by his chemist-bought sunglasses. I was besotted with the way he combined a high-powered job with the nervous shyness of someone who was bullied in primary school and has since taken on knowing timidity as an endearing personality trait. My god, how I wanted him. And I just knew that if I did enough, put in enough energy, waited long enough, was understanding enough, kind enough, funny enough, horny enough, accommodating enough, I could have him. And then I could have a life which didn't require me to make decisions anymore. I would adjust myself to snuggle in with him, into his life couch. No more anxiety about what to do or who to see or how to spend my evenings. I would be his, and that would be enough, and I could rest.

PART ONE

In high school, my classmates would often speculate about their dream jobs, and about which degree they should pursue to attain that dream job. In our final year of school, we would sit around on the deck at lunchtime, girls from different social groups and hierarchies, girls with different skirt lengths, all of us united in filling in the blanks of this vague hypothetical time of ‘when school is over’. As I was one of the highest achieving in our grade, the ball was inevitably lobbed my way. I was supposed to say a dream job that required a high leaving certificate mark, and an exclusive university degree, and then everyone would nod because the things that I said would have made sense.

Although I was clever, I had never conquered my times tables or evidenced any aptitude as a woman in STEM, so my options included lawyer, journalist and academic. Lawyer: money. Journalist: exciting. Academic: worthy. I just had to pick one, I knew this, and then the conversation would flow on like a bounce pass from a wing defence to a nimble centre.

But I couldn’t do it. I fobbed the pass. I intercepted my own shot. (This is something I have made quite a habit of, as you’ll see.) In a condescending monotone I said, ‘Well, I don’t really want to do anything but learn or, like, read because everything else seems kind of tragically depressing and meaningless and on the way to school I see people on the bus who are going to work and they look fucking devo.’

My friend Soph was on the deck with me, and I looked to her for support. She gave an encouraging grimace; I read this as her giving me the go-ahead to dig in, dig deeper.

I have a habit of scratching my neck when I am nervous to feign casualness and what I imagine to look like cool impropriety, and I certainly did this then. Attention was on me. I was aware of my body, my pose – which I’ve been told can read as defensive. Holding myself in, using my arms as a cage. But what is defensiveness if not a waving hand above a drowning body? It seemed to me that surely, any day now, I would be caught out. I used my words, my wit, to deflect from my trembling fingers, to divert attention from the fact that my thighs chafed as I walked, no matter how little

I ate, no matter how far I ran. Outside the school walls I struggled to retain agency – my lack of confidence in engaging with members of the opposite sex correlated to a direct deflation of my human capital out there. Inside the school walls, however, with words, and with girls, I could do it, I could direct the play.

At this moment I had not entirely lost the crowd. I could see others thinking back to their own morning commutes, I could see them reflecting on the dejected faces of those wearing skirt suits with trainers and running miserably for the bus. But then one of the boarders, sounding exasperated that she even had to explain something so simple, piped up: ‘Yeah but my dad says if you love your job you’ll never work a day in your life.’

A Greek chorus of other boarders murmured in assent. Without the support of the boarders I could not hope to win the popular vote: their numbers were simply too vast.

I knew then that I was about to be mean and I just didn’t have the self-restraint to stop myself; I was powerless to resist the temptation of a clap-back barb.

‘What does your dad do?’

‘He’s a farm manager.’ Arms crossed against plaid polyester, back against bench legs, territory claimed.

I looked to Soph for reassurance, to confirm that I could go on, hook the blade. Her expression was impenetrable; she’d evidently decided that she was just going to sit there, observing. She’d watch me make a mess, like she had done many times before. Unlike me, Soph always knew when to stop.

I had one more chance to not be a dick, and I did not take it.

‘Right, well your dad is either an idiot or a liar, unfortunately, and that sucks for you.’ And then I gave a little comic grimace, to convey that I did not relish telling her this bad news but, regrettably, someone had to.

This did not go down too well, as you might imagine. Some of the popular girls snorted laughter but most didn’t, because even though what I had said was funny, it still wasn’t cool to be an outright cunt. I did know this, I had gleaned this before, but my anger at the prospect of a future of remunerative labour must have briefly obscured my social self-preservation instinct. Or, perhaps more accurately, I had spied a window of opportunity in which I could confound, upset, confuse, and so I took it, because I was angry with the world and I didn’t know where else to direct my anger, except at people who seemed more content with their lives than I was.

The boarder was upset; I could see that I had hurt her feelings. Soph looked at me with love and with pity. I think that's how she looked. That's how I read it, at least. It seemed to me that she was thinking, *Oh, my sweet Hera, when will you learn?*

I made a half-baked attempt to apologise to the boarder, but I hadn't yet internalised the word 'systemic' and so my apology-cum-explanation lacked the rhetorical gravitas I could have given it a few years later. More to the point, I had learned self-hatred but I had not learned humility. What I actually said was that I was sorry I was right.

The moment after I said this, I regretted it, but it was too late to take it back. Then, before the next stage of the conversation could unfold, the lunch bell rang, and, physically tethered to the structured patterns of our days, drawn inexorably by the summons like plates of sushi on a train, we knew we must dissipate back to our various locker rooms to collect our folders and pencil cases for periods five and six. The boarder was mutely crying as she passed me, and her boarder friends gave me death stares. I averted my gaze, no longer broiling with the conviction that had directed my acidic tongue just moments before. I wanted the scene to be played out, done, and so I waited on the deck until it was.

That afternoon, however, I was walking past the school staffroom and I overheard my favourite history teacher narrating a not totally inaccurate version of the exchange to a young substitute teacher, and rather than being disapproving or grave, both of them were cackling with laughter, so it was very hard for me to feel as guilty about being a bitch as I should have been. By the end of the school day the zing of my cruelty had been transfigured into an amusing anecdote among my friends. Only Soph did not join in the laughter, and I wondered how much of me she could see: I feared her recognition as much as I wanted desperately to be known.

As a teenager I presumed that in life I would encounter rooms I wanted to enter more fervently than the teachers' staffroom at lunchtime, but this has so far not proved to be the case. Each one of the teachers, even the substitutes, must have had some sort of life before coming here. And yet they had all decided that this room was it for them. I was desperate not just to impress the teachers but to know them. I wanted to know which teachers liked which other teachers, and which students were universally detested by them. I wanted access to all the schoolyard anecdotes from the perspective of those whose social lives were not determined by those anecdotes. I wanted to know why Mrs Vale had left Ireland, and why she always had such a sadness in her eyes when she plotted our assessment marks on the whiteboard like a passive aggressive Rorschach test. I wanted to understand why Mr Simmons was so obsessed with e e cummings – who had hurt him? I wanted them all to tell me candidly what they thought of the outside world, and whether they recommended ever entering it.

Back then, what was difficult to convey to others was that I really was not being disingenuous when I said that I had no specific career ambitions. I did not want to have a job. Obviously we would all need money to feed and house ourselves when school was over; I didn't not foresee that. Maybe for most of us this would mean having to do stuff for companies or whatever happened in business. KPIs? P&Ls? Circling back? But why were we all talking like the way we *wanted* to subsist was via indefinitely spending most of our waking hours doing something with very little relation to the formation and development of our selves, a development which, until this point, we'd been told by our teachers and parents was very important? Why would anyone dream about having a job? I felt like the world was trying to trick me. I felt like the butt of a joke I did not understand.

I'm aware that some people have terrible school experiences, and so creating a life for yourself on your own terms might seem like a really appealing prospect. But far from feeling bridled by restriction in my school uniform and my timetabled classes and the school gate that locked stragglers out at 8.45 am, I must admit that I enjoyed this little haven, sundered as it

seemed from the rest of the world. Here, we had no obligation to anything but our own learning. Sure, the system was set so that our knowledge about Sparta would eventually transmute into a leaving certificate mark that would gain us entry into a profitable university degree, but just for now, if we experienced this chunk of our lives in the abstract, the goal was simply to learn about the hoplite phalanx and the socioeconomic stratification of ancient civilisations and metaphors in Australian poetry and the relation between Anselm Kiefer's indexical traces and the collective guilt of post-war Germany. It was a girls' school: there were no boys to distract us from our bizarre fixations and antics. It was a girls' school: we were insane and brilliant.

Disappointingly and confusingly for my guidance counsellor, who prided herself on her ability to 'match' students to their perfect future careers by asking them five questions about their interests and aims, I worked hard in school because I liked learning and because I saw school as a perfect little realm of intellectual industry and competition that could act as a litmus test for my own potential. I wanted to confirm my own suspicion that if I put my mind to it, I could beat everyone I knew. I wanted direct evidence that I was not like the other people, and that if in life I did not gain money or professional accolades this was not because I was less capable than others, but because I chose not to engage in systems that presented careers as rewards.

Others would be rich, but I'd have the music, or something to that effect.

I thought that if I beat every other person my age in high school, then as the years rolled by and the disparity between their incomes and my own grew ever larger, or maybe they felt happiness and contentment and I didn't, I could comfort myself by knowing that I was smarter than all of them. Much like when I lost a tennis match (or, indeed, any game I played as a child), I totally could have won if I'd tried.

As someone who now writes this without money or my own Spotify subscription, I suppose if I were either cruel or even pragmatic I would report back to seventeen-year-old me and warn her that her logic would actually bring her neither the riches nor the music. But I am neither cruel nor pragmatic, and she'll find out soon enough, with or without help from me. It might also be helpful to tell her that 'Dance Me to the End of Love' is actually about the Holocaust, so perhaps best not sing it to boys at parties like it's a seductive come-on – but no, you're right, she'll work it out.

When I first meet my married man, I have not yet worked it out. I have been through a fair bit of pain and I am aimless and sapped, despite still being in my mid-twenties, which seems young to most people but not to people in their mid-twenties. I feel like I have lived for a very long time, and the prospect of having to keep doing it until I die is exhausting. I am in Sydney, the city of my birth, and I am living in my father's house because I do not have any money on account of the choices I've made. I've spent the years since school trying to kick and scream into existence a life I care about and have a stake in protecting and cultivating. I have loved someone but not enough to want to stay with her forever, and she deserves more than that and so do I. I've finished degrees in other cities and now I have them and I don't really know what else to think about them, these degrees, these bits of paper. My degrees are the years of freedom from work that I have bought with money aka loans. Unfortunately there are only so many degrees you can do before it occurs to those around you that your passion might actually be less for study and more for not working a job. You can do one PhD, but if you do a second people tend to ask what is wrong.

After another day of being twenty-four years old and living in my father's house and listening to his records and wondering when he will be home from work because I look forward to talking to him, I decide to answer The Smiths' immortal question: soon is, in fact, now. I need to go on Seek and find myself a job, and then do that job, and then 'start' a 'life'. I cannot think of ways to put it off any longer and I have listened to Morrissey's emphatic drawl too many times. Our dog, Jude, who acknowledges my position as second-in-command when Dad is not home, follows me from the lounge room to Dad's study. I place my laptop on the desk and sit myself in Dad's chair. Jude lies down with his chin on my feet.

It is hard to convey to those who have been fortunate enough not to have been jobless and browsing Seek how truly soul-destroying the experience is. Imagine you've been in love with a person for years, and your relationship has brought you every good feeling and you find every single thing they say interesting and holding them brings you a comfort you hadn't known was

possible. This person embodies everything you've ever hoped for, all the ways in which your life might mean something. Now imagine that this person is, for a totally arbitrary reason, removed from you, and instead a random stranger places a rock in your hand and says, 'This rock is what you have now. You don't have your partner; you have this dirty rock.'

That is kind of like what it is like to scroll through Seek, except on Seek the rock is, for unclear reasons, a hot commodity that everyone wants, and you might not even get the rock. For every rock, there are two thousand other people who want the rock. And at the end of the day the one person who gets the rock ... gets a rock.

As I have three variations of arts degree under my nonexistent belt, I am vaguely competent in reading, writing and knowing rudimentary things about a lot of different areas of the humanities. I could once have told you the three major classical column types used in ancient Greece. At twenty-four, a few long years out from Introduction to Art History, I could perhaps tell you two. Sitting at my father's desk, scrolling the Seek home page, I know that Zoroastrianism is very old and has something to do with duality. I know that the trolley problem is tricky for all involved and that utilitarianism does not sit right with me, but I do not have a better or more practical alternative when asked for one. I know that content production is not my calling but at this point it looks like my options are content production or working in a call centre, and I know I can't work in a call centre because a few years ago I interviewed to work in one fielding donations for firies and I was rejected by the manager because the average Joe would find my accent a bit uppity, he thought.

Fair enough, content production it is, I say to myself as I stretch my fingers like Mr Burns.

There are a lot of content producer jobs because, as far as I can tell, content production is pretty much just everything there is. From the job descriptions I read, I intuit that the main difference between content production and journalism is that content production pays a bit more and, unlike journalism, it actively prefers that the content produced evidences absolutely no subjective input from its creator. A content producer sources images (googles photos and then uploads them to a company website). A content producer writes engaging copy (paraphrases marketing emails and uses the word 'dynamic' a lot). A content producer uses social listening to monitor audience engagement and edits content accordingly (glances at

which topics are trending on Twitter and then uses those topics as SEO tags for corporate posts about optimisation).

Am I fluent in Photoshop, Seek wants to know. I reason that I know what Photoshop is and I know how to use Google, so yes. I affirm my competence in most of the 'required key attributes' by the same reasoning.

Do I enjoy working in a team? 'Enjoy' 'working'. These two words juxtaposed as if they aren't fundamentally incompatible! I do not enjoy collective work any more than I enjoy lonesome work, but I can't say this if I want to secure a position in an agile multidisciplinary team in a transformational environment. Clicking on the 'further details' hyperlink for this particular job precis, it becomes apparent that 'agile multidisciplinary team in a transformational environment' actually means 'rural local council office'.

You know when you've not slept well and it's 11 am and you're at the electronic barrier at the train station and you just keep tapping your card, tapping your card, and nothing is happening and you curse technology and you curse your own life, and eventually an old woman next to you points out that the card you have been tapping with mounting frustration and audible sighs against the scanner thingy is in fact your health insurance card and might this go some way to explaining why the gate is not opening? That is how I feel writing cover letters for content production jobs, armed as I am with four facts about art history, two about religion, one about philosophy, and the ability to type with only three fingers out of the traditional ten.

However, I soon get into a rhythm. The key here, as it is for many things, is disassociation. The key is to sit at the laptop like the Buddha, if he were unemployed and on Seek. You must ease yourself into a state of Zen-like ambivalence, allowing buzz words to course through your veins and onto the blank document without ever consciously noting what it is that you are typing. Sometimes it helps to recite Virginia Woolf's great mantra as the page fills with the corporate gibberish that you yourself, apparently, are writing. I am rooted but I flow. I am rooted but I flow. I am rooted but I flow. Jesus Christ I will kill myself. Sometimes the odd stray thought slips in but ignore it, recite the mantra, keep typing.

My bum hurts from sitting on my father's wooden chair for so long. My posture is bad which does not help. I've removed the clock from my home screen's taskbar, and I've placed my phone upside down and on aeroplane mode more than an arm's reach away. I must fend off all distraction.