

# A Novel Idea



*Madeleine Gray's piercing, laugh-out-loud analysis of millennial travails has made her one of Australia's most promising literary talents. Here, she discusses her sophomore novel, navigating sudden success and her 'fairy godmother', Nigella Lawson*

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a drink to thank her for her support. "We had a beautiful dinner and now when I go to London, we catch up," shares Gray. "She's been a real fairy godmother of my writing. She's spectacular."

Unexpectedly having a hit on her hands, Gray experienced "a bit of an existential crisis" about what to tackle next. "My plan was not to write a book and then to write another, because I didn't know if anything would happen with the first," she recalls. In the afterglow of the book's launch, she describes feeling totally frozen for around three months – which, she acknowledges, "I think is a reasonable response".

Gray's wife, the ARIA-award winning musician Bertie Blackman, reassured her that the post-success comedown was part and parcel of releasing art into the world. "[Bertie] said to me, 'It's second-album blues, but it's also third- and fourth-album blues. You've got to just recognise that and give yourself time and grace.'"

The genesis for Gray's second novel, 2025's *Chosen Family*, stemmed from a conversation she had with a friend about tinkering with the traditional definition of parenthood. "We're in our early thirties and our friends had started having babies," recalls Gray. "We were talking about why it is that you would have to wait for a romantic partner to have a child if you really wanted to have one. We started spitballing: what would it look like if you raised a child with a platonic friend? What if one of you got a partner? Could it be done in a non-normative, queer and exciting way?"

*Chosen Family* charts the ebbs and flows of a friendship over some two decades, toggling between the protagonists' early teens, when the pair are discovering their nascent sexuality against the backdrop of a toxic Sydney private girls' school, and the women's present day navigating parenthood – all pierced with Gray's trademark dry sense of humour.

Gray has been delighted with the response to her vivid, often hilarious and occasionally heartbreaking novel. "My queer readers have taken to it with beautiful vehemence because representations of queer love and longing in Australian literature, but also around the world, are quite sparse," she reflects.

Recently, Gray has been taking some well-earned time out, swimming most days ("I'm a Pisces – a water baby," she quips) and dreaming up the mythology of a coven of imaginary witches with her five-year-old son. "There's one witch, Esmeralda, who lives in New York and has hair like spaghetti," she explains. "You know, that kind of thing."

She's in the early stages of a third novel, which she describes as "Germaine Greer-meets-Monty Python". "It's [about] finding humour in the way the left sometimes eats itself," elaborates Gray. "In a generous way – I'm not bagging on the left – but it's taking topics that we sometimes see as sacrosanct and finding the levity in them."

*Green Dot* is currently being developed into a TV show by Drama Republic, the British production company behind the hit 2024 Netflix adaptation of David Nicholls' beloved 2009 novel, *One Day*. Gray is serving as executive producer, a role which looks like "reading scripts, giving feedback, talking about casting – every so often, giving my two cents", she shares.

In a previous iteration of her career, Gray worked as a bookseller at Newtown, Sydney bookshop Better Read Than Dead, a role that has provided perspective when navigating the world of publishing. "When I've put books into the hands of readers who've come back and said, 'This made me feel these things' or, 'Helped me go through this' or, 'Made me laugh in a tough time', that's the best feeling," she reflects. "Even if my book only reached one person like that, it would've been worth it." HB

**G**reen Dot popping off was just the wildest thing," says Madeleine Gray of the runaway success of her debut book. Published when Gray was only 29, the 2023 novel is raw and relatable, charting the doomed office love affair between the book's whip-smart protagonist, a young woman struggling to carve out her way in the world, and her older, married colleague. It also enjoyed critical acclaim, winning the Richell Prize for New Writer of the Year at the 2024 Australian Book Industry Awards and the State Library of New South Wales' 2025 Russell Prize for Humour Writing.

Gray began writing *Green Dot* at the tail end of her PhD on feminist literary theory, which she earned from the University of Manchester; she also holds a Master of Studies in English from the University of Oxford and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Sydney. She had previously written literary criticism for the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Guardian* and

the *Sydney Review of Books*, a publication which awarded her its inaugural Emerging Critics Fellowship in 2019.

It was when Gray noticed readers she might not have predicted picking up *Green Dot* that she realised she'd achieved more than she had ever anticipated. "[My sister] is so cool and very different to me," laughs Gray. "And when I saw her girlfriends reading it, I was like, *This is interesting*."

*Green Dot* attracted some big-name fans too, including Gillian Anderson, who posted a selfie holding *Green Dot* on her Instagram in April 2024. "*Green Dot* is a sparkling debut," raved Anderson. "[Gray] is a dazzling writer – just a huge talent." Similarly complimentary was Nigella Lawson. "[Gray] is such a major talent," she wrote on Instagram. "I haven't been as stopped in my tracks by a first novel for longer than I can remember."

"As a queer woman, Gillian and Nigella were two of my original crushes growing up. I was like, *Oh, my God, this is a lot for me to handle*," reflects Gray of her newfound celebrity fandom. When Lawson visited Sydney, Gray offered to buy her

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