

Adult Onset by Ann-Marie MacDonald

About the author:

Ann-Marie MacDonald is an author, actor, playwright and broadcaster. She trained as an actor at the National Theatre School of Canada and has appeared in numerous independent Canadian films. She earned a Genie nomination for her role in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, and won a Gemini Award for *Where the Spirit Lives*. Her first solo-authored play, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* won the Chalmers Award, the Governor General's Award, and the Canadian Authors' Association Award. Her other works for the stage include the libretto for the chamber opera *Nigredo Hotel*, book and lyrics for the musical *Anything that Moves* (which garnered several Dora Awards, including Outstanding New Musical), and *Belle Moral: A Natural History*.

Ann-Marie's first novel, *Fall on Your Knees* (1996), was a critically acclaimed international bestseller. It won the Commonwealth Prize, was short-listed for the Giller Prize, and won the People's Choice Award and the Canadian Booksellers Association Libris Award for Fiction Book of the Year. In 2002 it became an Oprah's Book Club selection. It has been translated into 19 languages. Her second novel, *The Way the Crow Flies* (2003), was an international bestseller, a finalist for the Giller Prize, and a Good Morning America Book Club pick. It has been translated into 13 languages.

Ann-Marie is presently host and narrator of CBC's *Doc Zone*. She lives in Toronto with her partner and their two children.

Source: Penguin Random House Canada (<http://penguinrandomhouse.ca/>)

About this book:

#1 National Bestseller

Finalist 2014 – Lambda Literary Awards' Lesbian General Fiction Award



From the acclaimed, bestselling author of 2 beloved classics, *Adult Onset* is a powerful drama about motherhood, the dark undercurrents that break and hold families together, and the power and pressures of love.

Mary Rose MacKinnon--nicknamed MR or "Mister"--is a successful YA author who has made enough from her writing to semi-retire in her early 40s. She lives in a comfortable Toronto neighbourhood with her partner, Hilary, a busy theatre director, and their 2 young children, Matthew and Maggie, trying valiantly and often hilariously to balance her creative pursuits with domestic demands, and the various challenges that (mostly) solo parenting presents. As a child, Mary Rose suffered from an illness, long since cured and "filed separately" in her mind. But as her frustrations mount, she experiences a flare-up of forgotten symptoms which compel her to rethink her memories of her own childhood and her relationship with her parents. With her world threatening to unravel, the spectre of domestic violence raises its head with dangerous implications for her life and that of her own children.

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Discussion Questions:

1. Did you feel a connection to Mary Rose (MR) and her plight even if your own life is very different? If you are a parent, what elements of her experience, her struggle, the absurdities, could you most relate to?
2. On the surface Mary Rose is living a charmed life: she is a doting mother taking a break from her career as a successful writer, she is in a loving relationship—and she knows where the IKEA Allen key is. But the façade of perfection is tenuous. Under the surface, Mary Rose is ostensibly waiting for tragedy to strike, perhaps even the “midlife cancer disaster that was stalking [her] generation.” Are her quirky anxieties red herrings for a more serious issue? Is she overly critical of herself? Can you relate to her neuroses? Discuss.
3. What did you think of Kitty McRae? Where does she fit in versus Mary Rose’s “real” life?



4. What did you think of the structure of the book? Was a week enough time to spend with Mary Rose to fully understand the emotional upheaval stirring beneath the tedium of her daily life? If you spent another week with Mary Rose and her family, what do you think would unfold? Is she headed towards another breakdown? Discuss.

5. Mary Rose's wife Hilary talks her off the ledge a lot, and for the week the narrative takes place their relationship seem less of a partnership, more dependent. What pushes Mary Rose to test her relationship with Hilary?

6. Mary Rose's "remembered pain" leads her to spend a lot of time rooting around in and questioning her memories, seeking out the supposed crux and truth behind her physical and emotional pain, and mental strife. How reliable are our memories, especially when they aren't shared and are taken out of context? How much do you think Dolly's talking about "dead babies" could be affecting Mary Rose's state of mind? Examine the connection between Mary Rose's past trauma and the anxiety that permeates her present life.

7. What is Mary Rose's biggest fear?

8. "Your parents lived to adulthood before you came along and are thus equipped to recognize themselves in a world without you. But you have never known a world without them" (p. 208). Most people see their parents, and even their childhoods in a different light when they become parents themselves, and there is a natural evolution of the relationship between parent and child. How is Mary Rose different as an adult child than she is as a parent? In their own ways, both Dolly and Mary Rose are pushed to the brink. Examine and compare their experiences of motherhood.

9. How does Mary Rose ultimately reconcile her mother's actions/parenting skills?



10. Mary Rose repeats the mantra that she is a “nice mother” throughout the book. She is perpetually doubting her parenting skills, struggling with anger management and worrying about whether or not she is a fit mother. What does it mean to be a fit mother? What constitutes abuse?

11. Were you shocked by Duncan and Dolly’s reaction to Mary Rose’s coming out? Have you ever experienced exile within your own family?

12. What do you think stopped Duncan from intervening on behalf of Mary Rose when Dolly repeatedly denigrated their daughter in the immediate aftermath of her coming out? Why do you think he behaved this way, considering the relative closeness of their relationship otherwise?

13. Can you forgive what you forget? Do you think Mary Rose possesses a healthy ability to move on or does she ignore reality? “Love is blind, forgiveness is blind in one eye.” (p. 370)

14. This is MacDonald’s third novel and while it is the most autobiographical, she has drawn from her own life experience in all three. Do you see any thematic similarities between *Fall on Your Knees*, *The Way the Crow Flies* and *Adult Onset*? *Adult Onset* is the first book MacDonald has written as a parent, do you think there is a noticeable difference in her writing style? What do you think of her take on this particular time of life?

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