



Author a master to the end

Andrew McGahan
knew he wouldn't see
his seventh novel
published, writes
Jason Steger.

For a man who knew he had only a few months to live, Andrew McGahan, the Miles Franklin-winning novelist who died on Friday at the age of 52, seemed remarkably cheery.

It was late October and we were sitting in the backyard of the Sunshine home he shared with his partner, Liesje Grieve, and talking about his life, his writing and the pancreatic cancer that decreed he wouldn't survive to see publication later this year of his final novel, *The Rich Man's House*.

It will be his seventh novel. In 1991 his first, *Praise*, won the Vogel Award, the launching pad for many great Australian novelists, and his fourth, *The White Earth*, won the Miles Franklin. He also wrote four young-adult novels in his *Ship Kings* series - "the most fun I ever had writing" - and the script for the film of *Praise*, for which he won an AFI award.

McGahan was a highly regarded writer for whom his loyal readers had great affection. He popped up publicly when he had a book to discuss but never sought the spotlight. With his death, Australia has lost a significant novelist.

But on that spring morning with the couple's several cats in attendance he had no qualms about discussing his predicament; chatting about death was not something he avoided: "I don't think about it lightly all the time. Because I just have to think about Liesje and things and that brings me straight back down to a very serious level.

"It [the diagnosis] was a shock at the time," he said in his direct way. Then he laughed. Yes, he was on painkillers and blood thinners, but he had early on dismissed the idea of chemotherapy because "with this you've lost the battle

by the time you get the diagnosis". What he wanted was quality of life rather than longevity. Midway through our long conversation, his phone beeped to remind him to take more palliative drugs.

"I'm OK with dying. I don't have any existential angst about it. Leaving Liesje is what hurts. The life we had planned together, losing all that hurts. I haven't felt any anger or bitterness or 'why me' sort of thing. I felt quite relaxed with that side of it, surprisingly. I keep waiting for something to happen, but it hasn't." He spoke about how only a few days before

his diagnosis he and Liesje had taken one of their regular 30-kilometre walks.

His publisher had contacted me in September about his situation and sent me the first draft of the new book. McGahan, now lean, greying and with a thin beard, was still working on his "haunted-house novel", but said he wouldn't get to finish it. "I'm not killing myself to get the book edited. I'm doing what I can every day" - Liesje interjects: "That is so inappropriate" - "I'll do as much as I can ... That's why I can stand the fact that you've read the first draft and not go crazy."

As we talked, he drank coffee - "the first for ages" - and rolled his own cigarettes. He gave them up at 40, but "when I was really sick I couldn't drink, I couldn't eat much and I thought I need something so I'll take up smoking again; there's no harm now."

McGahan's books were always readable, invariably different from each other, yet with certain elements that he relished and that recurred - nature, natural wonders (see his most recent, *Wonders of a Godless World*), houses and extreme weather.

When I told him I had recently reread *Praise*, his autobiographical first novel set in a Brisbane boarding house and full of drink, drugs and sex, he wondered how it stood up after all these years. I told him it was still a great book.

McGahan dipped into it occasionally and was always amazed by how succinctly he could write. "I can't do that

any more. I write these long meandering things. Back then it was bang, bang, bang, really crisp and clear."

As the morning ebbed away, I told him I didn't want to keep him from his work, but he wasn't planning any more, talking was tiring. "You are striking me on a good day. Other days I just feel stuffed all the time."

I thanked him for having me round. "I'm glad it was you, Jason. At least I know you; you're not a hard person to talk to."

It was Sylvia Plath who wrote in *Lady Lazarus*, "Dying, is an art, like everything else." On top of writing, Andrew McGahan seems to have mastered that art as well.

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