

# Black Inc. Book Club Notes

**TITLE:** A Couple of Things Before the End

**AUTHOR:** Sean O'Beirne

**ISBN:** 9781760641283

**PRICE:** \$27.99

**SUBJECT:** Literary Fiction

## Book description

This brilliant collection mixes the storytelling originality of George Saunders and Lydia Davis with a sensibility all its own, taking the reader on an extraordinary tour of an old and a new Australia.

A woman on a passenger ship in 1958 gets involved with a young, wild Barry Humphries. A man looks back to the 1970s and his time as a member of Australia's least competent scout troop. In 1988, a teenage boy recalls his sexual initiation, out on the tanbark. In 2015, two sisters text in Kmart about how to manage their irascible, isolated mum.

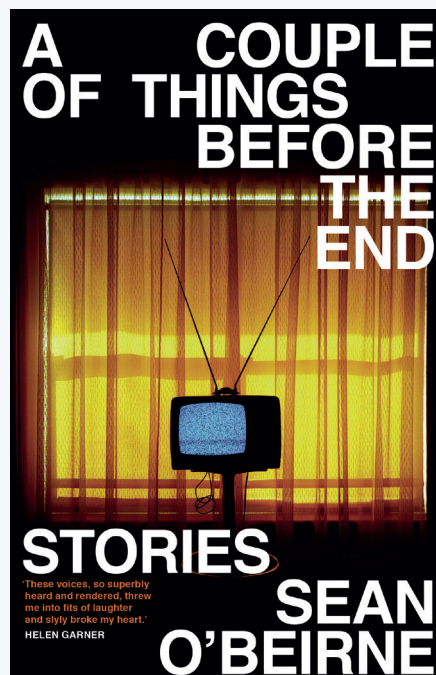
Then, in the near future, a racist demagogue addresses the press the day after his electoral triumph. As the cities heat up and lose their water, a lady from one of the 'better suburbs' makes every effort to get her family into an exclusive gated community.

Outstandingly original, biting satirical and written in a remarkable range of voices, *A Couple of Things Before the End* is a powerful vision of where we are – and where we may be headed.

## About the author



Sean O'Beirne is a bookseller and critic. He grew up in Melbourne's outer suburbs, and studied arts, law and acting. This is his first book.



## Praise

'These voices, so superbly heard and rendered, threw me into fits of laughter and slyly broke my heart.'

—HELEN GARNER

'Astonishing ... an inventive collection of missives from the end of history. Complicated and savage and difficult and funny and melancholy, it's both harsh and a caress. How do we speak and write into a future? I think Sean O'Beirne is showing us one way of doing it.'

—CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS

'O'Beirne inflects his identifiably Australian characters with a darkly comic and empathetic voice ... altogether, this collection invokes [our] questionable past, ironic present and disturbing future.'

—BOOKS+PUBLISHING

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**SPOILER WARNING: Do not read on if you haven't finished reading the book.**

Themes: class, structures of power, sexuality, masculinity, media, family, relationships, First Australians, refugees, war, Australian values, environment, climate change, media, consumption

- While each story in the book is self-contained, a pattern emerges so that by the book's conclusion we have been shown Australia's past, present and possible future. How did your experience of the book change as it moved from light-hearted nostalgia to something more sinister?
- How does O'Beirne use voice in the book? Many of the stories present one side of a conversation and we, the reader, must fill the gaps. Why do you think he did this? How easy was it to fill the gaps?
- The book paints a vivid portrait of suburban white Australia, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. As we progress through the stories from the past to the future, how does that portrait change?
- Nostalgia is a strong theme in the book, both for the characters – from a man remembering his time as a scout to Jack's 'memoirs of a life' – and for the reader. What elements of the book did you relate to in your own life? In which characters did you see yourself, or someone else?
- Discuss the characters in each story. Can you think of people in real life to whom they might be a satirical nod?
- What does the book say about class, capitalism, structures of power, and the media?
- Masculinity is a common theme in the book. Discuss how it is expressed, and the specific Australian masculinity that is presented throughout the book, particularly in stories like 'A Night with the Fellas' and 'The Anzac Spirit'.
- Discuss the book title, *A Couple of Things Before the End*, and your interpretation of its meaning.
- In the story 'Scout', is the narrator negative about his childhood experience, or positive?
- What is happening in the story 'Nathan and Jordan'? How did it make you feel?
- In the author's portrait of Australia, as presented in the book, who is seen and who is unseen?
- The 2019/20 fire season in Australia has been the longest and most severe. We are now seeing evidence of the global climate crisis that can't be ignored. Discuss the relevance of stories such as 'Missy' and 'Bunker' in the wider conversation about our planet's future, and how fiction plays a role in changing perspectives on real life events.
- The final story, 'Bunker', is open-ended. Where do you think the story might have gone from there?