


A REMARKABLE WOMAN

A woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a light blue, long-sleeved, button-down dress with a white belt, is walking away from the camera through a lush green field. She is holding a light-colored straw hat in her left hand. The background shows a line of trees under a clear sky.

‘Delightful! Fashion, French culture and sweeping Australian landscapes – what’s not to love!’

TANIA BLANCHARD

‘An enchanting, uplifting story of a formidable woman and an impossible choice.’

SALLY HEPWORTH

JULES VAN MIL

READING NOTES

BLURB

Twenty-six-year-old Frenchwoman Avril Montdidier sails from Paris to Australia with a suitcase and a dream: to start her own fashion business.

1950s Melbourne is very different from the chic atelier of Dior where Avril once worked, but she is determined, courageous and resourceful.

When personal circumstances force her to flee Melbourne, she travels to a cattle station in southern Queensland to work as a governess. It is here that Avril meets Tim: the eldest son of her benefactor and heir to Monaghan Station.

Avril must grapple with her twin desires – her love for Tim, who is set to marry someone else, and her yearning for independence.

THE AUTHOR

Jules Van Mil has lived the fashion life. In her late teens, she modelled for the McGann Agency, doing fashion parades for David Jones, fashion catalogues for Myer, and making television commercials. However, she was always happier designing clothes rather than modelling them.

She has a degree in Education and started her career as a primary teacher. Then she studied fashion, worked as the Assistant Designer for a women's wear label in Sydney during the 1980s, and taught fashion at a tertiary level. She loves the fashion industry and established, ran and eventually sold her own bridal couture business.

Fashion is a central theme in the books Jules writes. She explores how styles and expectations have changed throughout the eras and the impact this has had on the lives of women.

DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS

1. The prologue begins in France in the final months of World War II. Why do you think the author chose to open the book with these scenes? What is the effect of these scenes on the reader?
2. The book's protagonist, Avril Montdider, works in the dressmaking and fashion industries. What elements of her past inspired this choice of career? What do you think it is about Avril's personality that makes her suited to this work – and so good at it?
3. Along with many other Europeans fleeing their war-ravaged countries, Avril emigrates to Australia in the early 1950s. What are some of the positive – and negative – experiences she has as an emigrant in Melbourne? What qualities does Avril possess that help or hinder her in making a life there, both personally and in business?
4. After an unpleasant episode with her uncle, Avril takes up the opportunity to spend time on a remote cattle station in southern Queensland. How does Avril's personality help her break into this usually quite tight-knit world?
5. How does Jules Van Mil portray the natural world around Monaghan Station? What impression do you get about the landscape, the climate, and the way life is run at Monaghan?
6. In contrast, how does the author describe the French settings? What sets them apart?
7. If you could step back in time and experience a particular location or event (eg, postwar Tours or Paris, the Flemington horse races, Monaghan Station, Flinders Lane in the 1950s, the department stores of Melbourne, the cafés and restaurants, the art galleries of the day), which would it be, and why?
8. How are the Meredith family typical of or different from your idea of a wealthy country family of the time? What is it about Tim Meredith that Avril finds so attractive, in your opinion?
9. The mental health issues Tim Meredith experiences after his return from WWII would today be recognised as PTSD. What other medical or social concerns are portrayed in the story? What progress do you think has been made in Australia in terms of addressing domestic violence and substance abuse, for example?
10. Although James Carmody is a perfect match for Avril on paper, she is never able to love him as she loves Tim. What do you think is the reason for this?

11. Homosexuality was, of course, a taboo and controversial subject in the 1950s and 1960s, and often a very dangerous secret for people to keep, potentially leading to serious mental health issues, violence and excommunication of family members by their loved ones. Did you guess Duncan and Jordy's secret? How has their homosexuality affected their lives? What do you foresee for their future together?
12. Avril's experiences with domestic violence lead her to open a safe house for women and implement better working conditions for women in her businesses. In this she is ahead of her time. How do incidents of domestic violence affect our other characters, in particular Josephine, and Duncan and Lizzy, whose father was violent towards them and their mother? How has it shaped their lives?
13. Rachel is a deeply unhappy character. But on the surface, she has a life of privilege and wealth. Why is Rachel so determined to entrap Tim in marriage, do you think? What were the social norms and pressures of the 1950s that might have contributed to this?
14. What qualities does Avril have that make her the remarkable woman of the title? Do you think anyone is capable of doing what Avril does? What, if anything, allows Avril to rise above the potential limitations of her time, situation and upbringing?
15. Are there other remarkable women in the novel? If so, who are they, and why?
16. It could be said there are several remarkable men in the novel, too. Do you agree? Who are they, and what sets them apart from other men of the time?
17. Which male character did you connect with the most and why?
18. If you could go back in time and have lunch with any three characters in *A Remarkable Woman*, who would you choose, and why?