

VUP Book Club Notes

Misconduct by Bridget van der Zijpp

Some Notes on the Plot

Burn it. she decided. Drive it behind the disused factory near the polluted creek at the industrial park, and set it alight. p9

In the first few pages of *Misconduct* Simone steals and burns the car belonging to her former partner. It is not exactly an intentional act of revenge, though. Simone is struggling with her life. She's recently lost her partner, her job, her driver's license, and her chances of having a family are not looking good. It is not so much the sighting of her ex that triggers her action, but more that he appears so unaffected, while she is devastated.

When he left the café he called out something funny to the girl behind the counter and walked out the door still laughing, and the fact of him walking around casually dispensing jokes only emphasized again how unaltered he was, and how incapacitated she'd let herself become by his leaving. p8

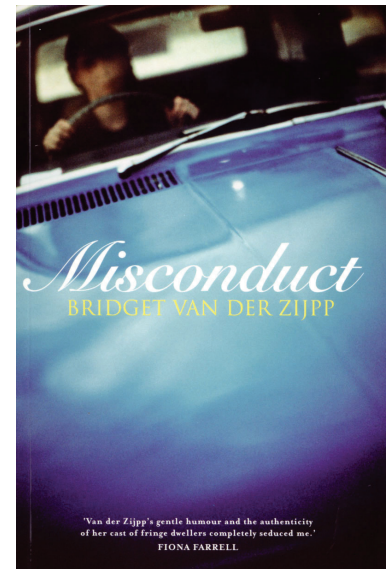
Simone is a bundle of human failings, but when somebody is driven to take such drastic action there is inevitably an untamed emotional intensity behind it. Having verged on alienating herself from her friends as well, there is plenty for Simone to contemplate as she moves away to the beach. Arriving at her new home she is at a low ebb, and tries at first to value her isolation

She found she couldn't quite admit to Lexie that she was quite grateful for all the crowded surfaces and toppling piles. This was a place where she could feel free to completely let herself go for a while. p27

Her new neighbours soon draw her into their lives, and slowly we discover that in their own way they are all struggling a little too. Central to their lives is the need for some ongoing social connection. Simone, having tried and failed to have a baby, is adjusting to the idea that it may not be possible for her. But none of her new acquaintances are living a conventional family life either. Zita, at 90, is more or less left by her family to cope on her own. Marjorie's husband is incarcerated and her only son lives overseas. Toss's son lives in an institution. Hanife is going it alone after kicking out her cheating spouse. And Clara and Charlie didn't have children together, so Clara is left to cope with his Alzheimer's disease on her own. It has all made them more dependent on each other and towards the end of the novel, when Simone contemplates leaving, she finds that she has become attached to them in a way that is not entirely unlike a family.

It was the word daughter, she supposed, uttered in the garden so ingenuously. They'd both laughed but at the same time a seam of warmth had run through her. Without any particular mindfulness the barnacled old anchor rope she'd been trailing had snagged on something that, while not quite as contractual as family, still had some of its casually involved affection ... After a time the heart quite likes its little involvements. p248

As Simone goes about her new life, she begins to see her relationship with Fraser more clearly. Despite having committed such terrible acts towards him she still initially retains a tendency to admire him and highly value his artistic talent. Throughout the relationship she has been inclined to put his needs before her own, allowing him to go about his life in a fairly hedonistic manner. Even after he has committed an infidelity and abandoned her, she still pines for him and does not entirely blame him.



To look at his work was to see some inner working part of him, some conjurer's power to bring an idea alive from nothing He made things she could marvel at. She'd never been able to separate loving his art from loving him. His work was special, which made him special, which made her make allowances for him. If he was flaky, if he was capricious, if he needed a certain messiness in his life to feed his art, to feed himself, he was entitled. p49

As the novel progresses she begins to understand how this has been to her detriment, and that there is a certain culpability on her part too. If he behaved badly towards her, she also allowed him to.

The course is often set, she decided, in what you don't do, in the words you don't say, in the things you don't ask for, and in the accumulation of actions you quietly permit. p245

Things really begin to change for Simone with two new arrivals at the beach - Joey (who she already has a confused relationship with) and Alice's son Ethan. To some extent they provoke a new direction for her, and a new (but not necessarily good) way of looking at things:

His testing her, trying to find out if she was dangerous enough, made her feel hemmed in by the scent of something. The tang of hellfire and sin. She could still fall for it, just as easily as the next girl. Fast drinking. Slow talking. Tough nut. Bad men. She was tired of lying around in her little patsy-girl despondency. She wanted to be bad. She wanted to be used. She wanted somebody to hurt her in some way she could understand. p 217

Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think Simone stole Fraser's car and broke into his house? Do you think it was a conscious act? Was retribution her motivation? Or was it more a cry for attention? If Simone was your friend and you found out she had done these things do you think it would've changed your opinion of her? What would you have advised her to do afterwards?
2. What do you think made it so hard for Simone to come to terms with the end of the relationship? Why do you think she wanted Fraser back after he had behaved so badly towards her? Do you think her age was a factor – if she had been 30 and not 40 do you think this would've made a difference?
3. In their relationship Fraser didn't like to acknowledge the need for fertility treatment or any particular desire to have children. For him it was a simple matter of good chemistry, or virility. It was not a medical science. Not something to force or face up to.p77 Do you think this is common? Simone is scared to discuss it with him in case he 'runs out the door'. And after the miscarriage Lexie suggests that Simone had 'clammed up'.(p193) Do you think that if Simone had found a way to be more open with Fraser about the problems their relationship would've been healthier? Or would he still have sought out the woman next door?
4. While Simone is living at the beach there is a police raid and Simone discovers that Toss has been growing marijuana to use mostly for medication purposes. Do you think this is a crime?
5. On page 209 Hanife asks Simone the following question:

“If God comes and asks you pick between a baby and the great love of your life what you choose?”

What would you choose?

6. At one stage Marjorie suggests to Clara that she should consider putting Charlie in a home and Clara responds by saying “...**hardly a day has passed by when I haven't felt grateful to him for saving me from a different kind of life. So why would I not make a few sacrifices now for him, in his hour of need?**” p127. Much later in the book Clara confesses to Simone that Charlie has hit her and is becoming more unmanageable. In that same conversation she also reveals that Charlie had many affairs throughout their marriage “**It feels like I'm competing against the biggest affair of them all, but this one's really got her claws into him and is finally taking away everything he had left over for me.**” p230 Do you think Clara is right to limit her own life for Charlie's sake?

7. The following is the last paragraph of the book:

Ethan had a soundly loyal reliable beam that landed absolutely on her. So unambiguously, so solidly that ... well, she had to wonder, and she did think of the wondering as a kind of weakness, but where in all this, in this thing that came to her so swiftly and so easily, was the challenge for the heart?

What do you think is meant by this? Has Simone really learnt anything?

Author Biography

Bridget van der Zijpp grew up in the small country town of Ruawai in Northland, on a dairy farm. With a BCom from Auckland University under her belt, Bridget headed overseas and lived for a time in England. She also backpacked around France and spent a while in the Netherlands, her father's homeland.

On her return to New Zealand she started work at Classic Hits Radio Northland. This led to a very successful 10 year career at the Radio Network where she rose to become Director of Marketing for the then 52 station network.

The desire to write fiction eventually led Bridget to resign her position. She moved to Wellington to complete the MA in Creative Writing and began work on her debut novel *Misconduct*, published in April 2008.

While completing *Misconduct* she also worked as a publicist/marketer in Wellington. Her projects included Douglas Wright's tour of Black Milk, Cuba St Carnival, and the Wellington International Jazz Festival. Last December she was appointed to the board of Arts Wellington, the Wellington Regional Arts and Cultural Development Board.



Misconduct is set in a beach town, and while the setting is not specified Bridget says a childhood spent on Northland beaches like Glinks Gully, Waipu Cove, Bayleys Beach and Mangawhai Heads was highly influential.