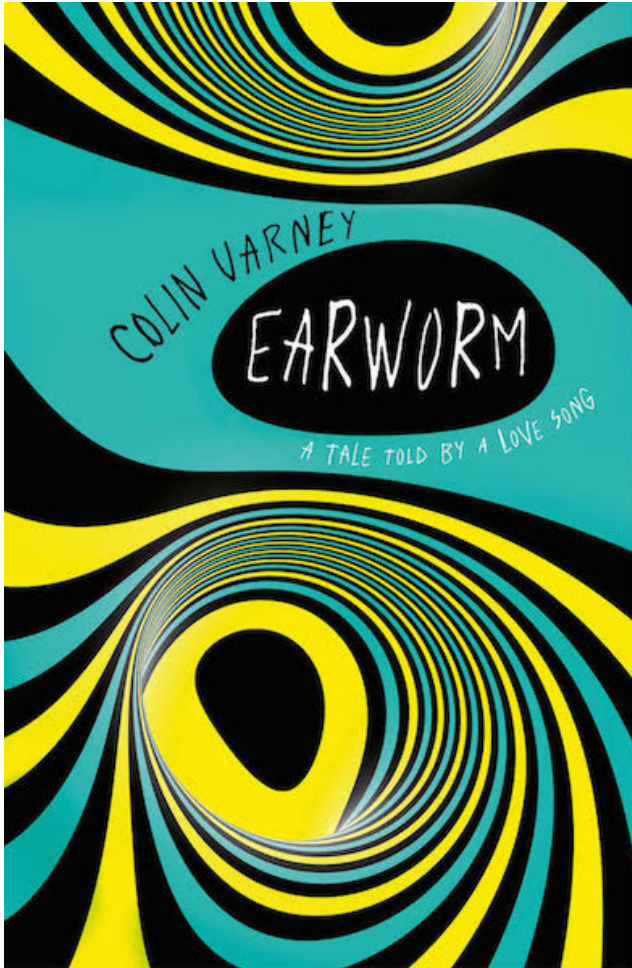




MARGARET RIVER
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Earworm

By Colin Varney

SUMMARY

Earworm is a tale of grief, desire, infidelity and family secrets narrated by a love song.

'Empty Fairground' is a hit from the nineties. Nicole was conceived to it and now it dwells in her head—a living entity accessing her thoughts and dreams. When Nicole discovers her deceased father is not her biological parent, certainties disintegrate and the song strives to separate fantasy from memory and myth from history, building towards an extraordinary crescendo.

Drenched in rhythm and the vividness of pop lyrics, *Earworm* explores the complexities of filial and romantic love, connecting us to our universal communion with music.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colin Varney's short stories have appeared in *Meanjin*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *Island* and *Southerly*. He has written articles for *The Lifted Brow* and satire for *Adelaide Review* and *Tasmanian Times*. His children's book, *Jellylegs*, is widely used to promote protective behaviours.

He completed a Master's in creative writing at the University of Tasmania, mentored by Danielle Wood. *Earworm* is his first novel.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is there a song that has been meaningful in your life? Is there a song that, in some way, defines your identity? If so, did the song somehow mould you, or does it reflect a personality trait already defined or formed?
2. Earworms are also referred to as 'sticky music', 'stuck song syndrome' or, in psychological jargon, 'Involuntary Musical Imagery (INMI)'. When did you last experience—or endure—an earworm? Do you find them enjoyable or irritating? Are they generally triggered by a tune you have heard or by memory association? Or do they just mysteriously materialise from nowhere?
3. Sing the earworm that is going through your head at the moment. Go on. Dare you.
4. Have you read any other novels about music (for example, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan or *Nocturnes* by Kazuo Ishiguro)? Why do you think writers would be drawn to musical themes? Have you read a novel written by a musician or singer, or heard a song with creative input from a novelist?
5. *Earworm* is about filial and romantic love. How successfully does it explore these themes?
6. Does your family have its own myths or rituals? Are any of them as tender or silly as the Cloak of Hanzov?
7. *Earworm* is a tale told by a love song. What do you think of the use of the narrator? Does it bring a new dimension to the story, or alienate the reader from plot and characters? How does it compare with other novels that feature unique narrators, such as *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak or *Time's Arrow* by Martin Amis?
8. The narrator expresses some unsettling opinions, including views on domestic violence and abortion. Do you think these are endorsed by the author? If not, does the author somehow make his own opinions known?
9. The characters in the story reflect the



- political spectrum, from faith in trickle-down economics to middle-class socialism. Does the novel ever settle on a political standpoint? Do you suspect the author is more Andrew Bolt or David Marr?
- 10.** What do you think the song 'Empty Fairground' sounds like? Which genre of pop? Do you think you would like the song if you were able to hear it? Why is the author vague about the nature of the tune and its lyrics?
- 11.** Why do you think the narrator uses song titles to refer to sex?
- 12.** The novel is set in two Australian capital cities. Does it have a sense of place? Do the locations feel varied enough?
- 13.** Who, in your opinion, is Nicole's real father?
- 14.** The middle section of the novel revolves around the sexual frustrations and career disillusionment of a middle-aged man. Is this a tired trope?
- 15.** Have you ever had a synaesthetic experience or something similar? How successfully does the novel explore synaesthesia?
- 16.** What does the novel say about inheritance?
- 17.** Do you have a favourite mondegreen (misheard lyric)?

- 18.** Nicole's spirits disintegrate after the death of her father and the revelation of a family secret. Her non-biological father suffered from depression. How much of Nicole's behaviour can be explained by grief and a sense of betrayal and how much can be attributed to mental instability? Does the novel have a responsible attitude towards mental health?

REVIEWS & ENDORSEMENTS

'I want to have a wild rock n' roll affair with this novel in the hope that our unholy lovechild is as wacky, witty and whimsical as the surprising narrator.'

MINNIE DARKE, author *Star-Crossed*

'Hark! The rarely heard tune of real Australian originality.'

DAVE WARNER, author, musician and screenwriter