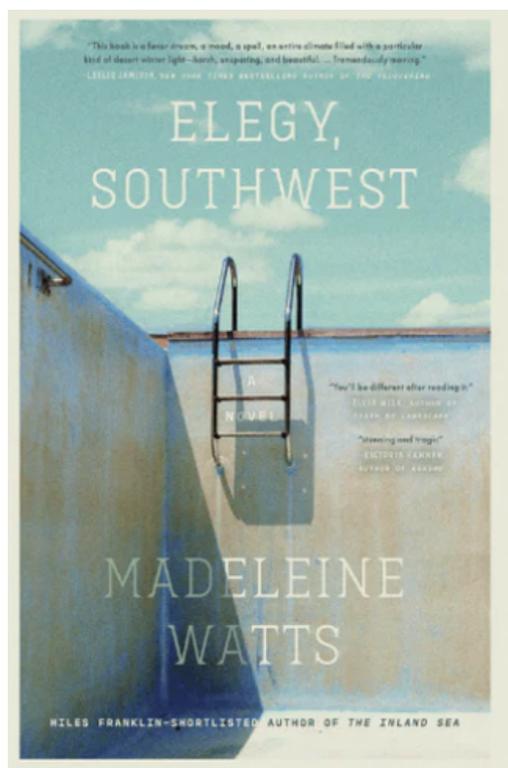


## March 2026

***Elegy, Southwest*** by Madeleine Watts is a novel about an American road trip, with all the trimmings of billboards, old motels, and dodgy food including date shakes. It's told in the second person by Eloise to her husband Lewis –you, as a retrospective from the future.



In November 2018, Eloise and Lewis, rent a car in Las Vegas and take off on a two-week road trip across the American southwest. They make their way through Nevada, California, Arizona, and Utah, tracing the course of the Colorado River. Bushfires rage in California as they travel. The couple, based in New York, appear to be very much in love as we hear about their back story.

Eloise, an Australian expat is an academic studying the history and future of the river for her dissertation. We learn of the river's stories both First Nations American and the development by the settlers and its impending demise from over extraction. There is a constant dialogue from Eloise of environmental loss and despair with things like water fountains in shopping malls in a desert.

Lewis is an artist working for a prominent land art foundation. He frequently films or has someone film his dance sequences, often in public toilets by

himself. He is grieving the recent premature death of his mother from cancer. On the road trip they visit his father and brother in Phoenix. The mother's journey of dying is described. He also loses his job when the foundation discovers he may have had a part in the coverup of the destruction of the project they funded. Lewis spirals into drug abuse.

Scattered throughout the novel, Eloise reflects on their last year together. An example: *'the utter poverty of language in the face of calamity...you hated that I was always trying to render things into words...I was stealing your ability to move through life freely.'*

Over the course of their trip, Eloise suspects she might be pregnant. Her alcohol intake despite this, is alarming and she doesn't inform Lewis. Her subsequent miscarriage is described graphically and again she doesn't inform him.

The novel is infused with many references to American culture i.e. books, films, icons, literature about death, the environment, philosophy and so on. The author includes a bibliography that helps to inform us of her thinking and extensive research.

The author, when interviewed, agreed with her host that *Elegy* is about grief, love and water.

Our readers had varying opinions about the book. Some found it compelling, melancholic, distressing, poetic. Others found it jarring, monotonously compelling, almost dystopian, personal interactions were stilted, a mixture of irony, pathos, tragedy & slapstick humour. We did agree that we were left with a sense of loss for the environment and melancholy for those lost.

**Ratings:** Janet 3.5, Viv 3.5, Lesley 4, Nicola 3, Hetta 4, Dianne 3, Pauline 3, Veronica 3, Sandy 3.5

## Other Books We Read

The Odyssey by Homer, translated by Emily Watson, 4.5

The Nightingale by Kristen Hannah, 4

The Idea of Perfection by Kate Grenville, 2

The List of Suspicious Things by Jennie Godfrey, 2.5

Little by Edward Carey, 3.5

The Safekeep by Yael van der Wouden, 3.5

Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë, 4

The land in winter Andrew Miller, 3.5

The Secret Year of Zara Holt by Kimberley Freeman, 2

Lessons by Ian McEwan, 3.5

Mother Mary Comes to Me by Arundhati Roy, 4

The Power of Choice by Neale Daniher, 3.5