

# RECKONING

Magda Szubanski

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## Praise for *Reckoning*

'A brave and tender book about everything that matters most in life.' Cate Blanchett

'This is a remarkable memoir, that weaves the tragedy of twentieth century history into a personal narrative of coming to terms with family and self, and manages to honour both stories. The writing is assured and controlled, the storytelling expert and thoughtful, the language eloquent and moving. The writing, the story, the voice—all of it is beautiful.' Christos Tsiolkas

## About Magda Szubanski

Magda Szubanski is one of Australia's best known and most loved performers. She began her career in university revues, then appeared in a number of sketch comedy shows before creating the iconic character of Sharon Strzelecki in ABC-TV's *Kath and Kim*. She has also acted in films (*Babe, Babe: Pig in the City, Happy Feet, The Golden Compass*) and stage shows. *Reckoning* is her first book.

## A reader's introduction to *Reckoning*

While several strands run through *Reckoning*, there is one question bringing the threads together – what makes us the person we are? For Magda Szubanski, her family heritage is a significant part of the answer, both from her Polish father, an assassin in the Polish resistance, and from her mother, a sharp-and-soft Scottish woman of Irish descent. Another part of the answer lies in her sexuality, first repressed and then hidden for years. There are other factors too – education, feminism, teachers, friends and mentors, career, creativity.

It is her father who looms largest in Szubanski's emotional landscape, and she has defined herself both by and against his example and expectations. Indeed she talks directly of his legacy of a 'stone of madness' (2), in his case a result of reckoning with his actions during the war; in hers, a result of his fear that his children, including Magda, would turn out to be weak or traitorous.

Her mother's family also has a history of trauma, through the famines and poverty of Ireland, and the trenches of Passchendaele. Szubanski feels that she has inherited this trauma in her DNA, nightmares of limbs in mud and the smell of cordite in the back of her throat.

At the same time as looking back to her parents' families, she captures the family dynamics of her own life – a family where each sibling 'carved out—or were allotted—our own turf' (56). As she looks inwards, she is frank about the difficulties she has experienced. And through this all, *Reckoning* also looks outwards: to the suburbia of her childhood, to the leftist university circles and feminist movement of the 1970s, to the Melbourne comedy scene, and to the trajectory of her career.

*Reckoning* ends with Szubanski reveling in the freedom of coming out, listing her father's qualities, wishing that he had been alive to see her come out publicly, and expressing gratitude that her mother was there for her. For Magda Szubanski, the defining features of her life are intertwined to the end.

## Questions for discussion

1. How does the Magda Szubanski revealed in this memoir match with her public persona?
2. Through all the trauma and emotional difficulties, did you find moments of humour in *Reckoning*?
3. Ultimately, Szubanski realises she is a paradoxical mix of both her parents: 'my Irish talking-paralysis on the one side, and my Polish romantic impulsiveness on the other.' (347). Are we inevitably a product of our parents? What is your take on the nature versus nurture debate?
4. More specifically, how does trauma get passed down from parents to their children? As Szubanski asks, 'Can it be that some dim memory of trauma is carried in our genes?' (344).
5. Is 'the stone of madness' a metaphor or something more literal?
6. After passing the entrance exam to a new school, Szubanski is 'crushed by the feeling that I was just an extension of [my father], there to live his unlive dreams.

More than that. I was there to live Poland's un-lived dreams ... My life and achievements were not my own' (119). What do we owe our parents? Do children of parents who have suffered owe them more? Is rebellion against our parents inevitable?

7. When Szubanski is dropped by her friends at school, she feels that she 'paid too high a price for my moral revolution. We are social animals, and nothing terrifies us like the threat of exclusion. Being cast out from the herd means death' (144). How far should we compromise our morals to remain part of the herd?

8. Szubanski wants to understand the morality of her father's actions: 'My father had risked his life out of altruism but he had also killed' (324). She wants to ask the Dalai Lama whether her father was a good man (328). Can such actions be judged? Would you judge her father as a good man? What do you make of the Dalai Lama's response to the question she did ask?

9. When confronted with the photographic images of her nightmares Szubanski writes: 'Yet again I was unsure which was the mad response—feeling or not feeling. And which was response was the more useful—mindfulness or denial' (343). What do you think?

10. 'Being your real authentic self, when you have felt forced to hide your whole life, is the most beautiful feeling in the world' (370). Other than sexuality, in what ways does society force people to hide their authentic selves? Is there always an authentic self to hide?

11. Do public figures have a duty to come out?

12. At the end, Szubanski identifies with 'the trembling sheep, the frightened horses, the impala at the watering hole' (371) rather than a lion like her father. Does Szubanski strike you as an impala? Or more like a lion? Can only the 'weaklings' show 'real heroism' according to her father's definition (368)?

13. Inherited trauma and depression have been as much part of Szubanski's life as comedy and acting. How are these different sides of her linked?

14. Given the importance of her father and his family to Szubanski's self-identity, why do you think it is 'Ireland and the story of my grandfather Luke that finally cracked open the hard shell around my heart' (336).

15. Do you think this memoir is an exercise in self-exploration, or is it trying to communicate something broader about the world?