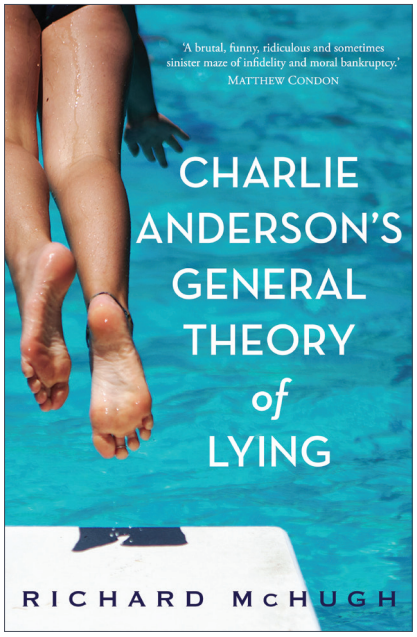
# Charlie Anderson's General Theory of Lying

By Richard McHugh | Viking | 2015




This novel, which is the author's first, concerns events affecting Charlie Anderson, his wife Anna Kyriakou and their three daughters over a period of several months. It is set in Sydney. Charlie runs his own, very successful, consultancy business. Anna is the head of retail at one of the major banks. The eldest daughter is at university, the younger two at school.

The novel is broken generally into relatively short chapters which makes it an ideal novel for a bus or ferry ride from Middle Harbour, where the protagonists reside. The chapters are themselves gathered into four parts and there is an epilogue, although the story flows from one part into the next directly. Although some paragraphs and sentences are lengthy (the longest of which *Bar News* can recall being aware is a paragraph of more than two pages within which is a sentence of 18 lines), this does not interrupt unduly the flow of the narrative.

Many readers will find particularly enjoyable the author's telling of everyday matters. For example, the difficulty of trying to get a parking spot at Westfield on a Saturday morning. Or, when seeing a film, the fact that it was 'outrageous how much a choc-top costs these days'. Most readers will have had the same reactions. For those readers who are current or former members of the bar, the author's description of Samuel Lawson of senior counsel, whose chambers are on the Eight Floor of Wilberforce Chambers and whom Charlie Anderson is required to visit towards the end of the novel, will give much food for thought: who, or of what amalgam of personalities, is he?

In a similar vein, some of the most humorous aspects of the novel are contained within certain of the events told which have no direct relevance to the primary story. For example, in the first part of the novel, there is a father-daughter school camping trip. The description of the various characters on the trip is set out in an amusing manner. Indeed, the various analyses set out of different characteristics of the parents of children – and of the children themselves – at private schools is particularly witty. Many readers are likely to be able to identify some parent or child who fits one or other of the descriptions. Many readers, equally, will have sat through a concert akin to the Hettie Hope Concert: 'It was always a long, long night. Every girl in every ensemble ... had to play ... it was exceptionally poor form to laugh at a performance at the Hettie Hope. You could never know if the po-faced woman sitting next to you was that tone-deaf French horn's mother.'

There is some delightful language employed: a guest at a party is an 'Ayn Randian Tory, whose twenty-eight years had got lost in his navy sports jacket, gold buttons and paunch'; how much more pleasant is the word 'antimacassar', which the author uses, than some prosaic equivalent such as 'chair cover'. Equally, however, there is a very liberal use of the 'f' word and its derivatives – and worse – which will not be to every reader's taste. The most intriguing expression is 'frisson of hardness'. Austlii suggests that that phrase does not come up often in arguments before the High Court.

There are a couple of curiosities about the novel. The first is that although Charlie Anderson is portrayed as a philanderer, that aspect of his character is not the main story thread in the novel. The author outlines Charlie's set of 'Rules for Dealing with Women' with which Charlie does not comply entirely in the novel. However, the rules and his dalliances are almost *en passant* to the events which precipitate the primary story and which events themselves occur towards halfway through the novel. There is a moment when the author creates cleverly a situation of great unease whereby the counterparty to one of Charlie's affairs becomes mixed into Charlie's family dealings. It is a skilfully-presented twist. However, that twist does not develop into a significant, stand alone issue.

The second curiosity concerns the title of the novel, *Charlie Anderson's General Theory of Lying*. The 'General Theory' is referred to only three times, so far as *Bar News* could identify. It is explained on page 60. It is referred to again in the middle of the novel and, then, on the second last page of the novel with a modification following the events narrated. It is clear that Charlie Anderson tells lies. However, that fact also does not form the basis of the actions leading to what becomes the primary story of the novel.

The novel is an entertaining romp of intrigue. Richard McHugh is to be commended for *Charlie Anderson's General Theory of Lying*.

**Reviewed by Daniel Klineberg**