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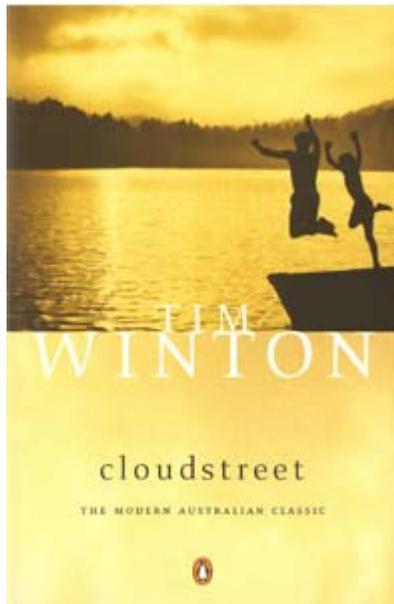
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## CLOUDSTREET

### Author

Tim Winton

## Dreams of Belonging: Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*

Essay by Lyn McCredden

Reading Tim Winton's rollicking, heartbreaking, hopeful saga, *Cloudstreet*, you are immersed in Australia: its histories, its peoples, its changing values, and its multiple longings. It is Australia imagined large and sprawling, but also in ordinary, intimate detail from a particular dot on the map: working class Perth, Western Australia, from the 1940s to the 1960s. Humorously, lyrically and poignantly, the novel probes questions of where and how to belong. Always already transient and haunted, belonging is a precious but fragile dream, in the midst of family, friends and neighbours. As the Pickles family move into the big, trembling house at number one Cloud Street,

It's just them in this vast indoors . . . there's a war on and people are coming home with bits of them removed . . . women are walking buggered and beaten looking with infants in the parks . . . [the Pickles] have no money and this great continent of a house doesn't belong to them. They're lost. (Winton p. 51)

The novel is, of course, only one person's re-imagining of place and time, and for some critics there are omissions, blindnesses and flaws in this vision. However, the fact remains that *Cloudstreet* is a phenomenon; an astoundingly popular novel, made into a television mini-series, adapted to stage, and in 2012 voted the most popular Australian novel by viewers of the ABC's *First Tuesday Book Club*. For Australian playwright Nick Enright,

**Publisher**

Penguin Australia

**Date of publication:** 1992

**ISBN:** 9780140273984 (print)

co-author of the stageplay of *Cloudstreet*, 'People get that look in their eye, that *Cloudstreet* look'. For him, the novel has 'leapt the fence in Australia, it's in the bloodstream of the nation' (Morrison p. 133).

*Cloudstreet* is a marvelous, affecting amalgam. It combines the recognisable and everyday with dream-like, uncanny aspects. The boisterous, haunted house on Cloud Street, which gradually, painstakingly becomes home to the novel's two families (the satirically-named Pickles and Lambs) is a believable, earthed, suburban setting. It is rendered recognisable to Australian readers (though perhaps not to non-local readers) through Winton's use of colloquial speech, well-known suburban landmarks in post-war Perth, and by the many contradictory myths of Australia that wander through the house. Split down the middle by the two families, the house is ramshackle, noisy, and full of individuals, but it is also emblematic of raw, working class, post-war family life. It is a ship in which many set sail, willingly and unwillingly: the honest plodder; the righteous, hard worker; the lazy luckster; the anorexic daughter; the sexy drunk; the mentally deficient; the dreamer; and the ghosts.

Cloud Street as a place is also a teetering, satirical, dream-like fiction. The house is awash with history; in the memories and reminders of its early life as a home for Aboriginal girls; in the sorrowing figure of the Aboriginal girl who committed suicide there; and in the appearances of the red-shoed, sometimes naked Aboriginal man, met with at times of crisis. Written across the period of Australia's Bicentenary and published in 1991, this novel is in part an imagined history of white Australia haunted by its relationship to Indigenous Australia. Some critics feel that the novel is *too* white, that it is even a white man's 'dreaming', and that Indigenous Australia is left in the margins, in its ghostly absences. Whether the novel should be judged for these so-called peripheral visions of Indigenous Australia, however, is up to each reader to decide, but there is no doubt that in the midst of this saga of white Australian desire for belonging in the mid-twentieth century, Indigenous Australia continues to prompt the inhabitants of number one Cloud Street.

In daring to imagine the past and the future of Australian life, and to ask how the past impacts on the values being created in Australia, *Cloudstreet* faces up to the country's myths about itself. Myths – those jostling, often contradictory stories the nation and its peoples tell themselves, again and again – are worked and reworked here. The novel is fascinated with the myth-making propensity of Australians: their idealising of the battler, the heroic figure of the ANZAC, rural and suburban identity, the idea of the lucky country. It probes the contradictions between these myths, seeing place and belonging as both life-giving, *and* annihilating – Australia as the lucky and unlucky country, the land of the fair-go and of new possibilities, but also a land of rivalries, prejudices and violent pathologies. The 'Nedlands Monster' haunts the quiet, open-doored houses and streets of suburban Perth.

The myth of Australia as the lucky country, for example, is teased apart in the character of Sam Pickles, the lovable, hapless gambler who sometimes wins and often loses. To Sam, his new, industrious neighbours are incomprehensible:

Those Lambs. No joke, it took his breath away to see them go at it. You'd think they were carrying the nation on their backs with all that scrubbing and sweeping . . . Stinking dull work, the labour of sheilas at best . . . Making luck, the hardest donkey yacker there is. (Winton p. 99)

Sam watches the labour of the Lambs as they make their side of the house their own, but he prefers to hang around on his back step, to believe in luck – good and bad – and to rely on 'the shifty shadow', or games of two-up, or the next winning horse. He feels at home with '[a] swearing, moneyflicking, beery mob of blokes dancing to the music of the toss, the dance of chance' (Winton p. 359). The myths of Australian identity are not simply re-told in this novel, but are seen through the psychologies, actions and relationships of individual and intimately drawn characters; characters who readers obviously care about. Australia as lucky and unlucky country? Land of working class battlers who fail, or heroes who make their own way? *Cloudstreet* seems to embrace the contradictions between these mythic elements without coming down heavily on those who spin myths, perhaps recognising that fiction writers are implicated in such makings.

But what seems to disturb some critics of *Cloudstreet* is this very openness to so *many* strands of Australian myth-making; the novel's refusal to judge the past too harshly, its apparent optimism based on a nostalgic (white? male?) view of Australianness. For one critic:

Winton is quite explicit . . . about the novel's nostalgia for lost places, for an Australian accent and culture that are pre-American, pre-modern, pre-1960s . . . This goes a long way toward explaining the popularity of the novel, at least for a certain generation of readers, the baby boomers, who were the major cultural force in the 1990s, when the novel was published. But nostalgia is by its very nature conservative: it prefers the past to the future; it is at best ambivalent about modernity; it prefers the local and the traditional to the global. (Dixon p. 247)

Is *Cloudstreet* nostalgic? Do these novelistic acts – looking and imagining backwards in order to construct Australia's possible futures, and being open to (indulgent of) the obviously contradictory myths of Australian identity-making – produce a nostalgia that is 'by its very nature conservative'? Does the novel prefer the past to the future – a traditional, local, familiar Australia, rather than a global modernity? No doubt, readers of the new century will find ways of addressing these questions through their experiences of the novel. But it is also in a consideration of the ways in which Winton *imagines* that we might measure the vision we

are presented with in *Cloudstreet*.

As a writer Winton is, first of all, a realist. His preoccupation is with the material, earthed world of trees and water, backyards and houses and fish; with bodies and emotions; with the constructing of characters that are psychologically complex and changing. On his lone journey away from the suffocation of family life, and his guilt over the near-fatal accident of his young brother Fish, Quick Lamb takes to the water – as so many of Winton's characters do – to get away, seeking solitude fishing.

He pulled across to the narrow point of the bottleneck where the river squeezed out in a cool tea-coloured trickle to the sea and the disturbance of the two bodies meeting caused a roily, chopbroken channel that led out through the surf to the deep beyond . . . He heard the squeaking and creaking and the airbrake sound of his breath, the bow lifting under him, pushing his bum cheeks together. The sensations were clear and momentous. The sight of foam cracking down the sides and rushing astern, the smell of salt and paint and his bait prawns on the turn. Above him, the sky like a fine net letting nothing through but light and strangeness. (Winton p. 285)

Here we have the eye and imagination of the realist, alive to the mass and colour and sound of the sea and river, and to the body and breath of Quick as it works with and against the movements of the water. The neologisms – 'a roily, chopbroken channel' – and the colloquial vigour of the passage create the sense of a present, lived world. So often in *Cloudstreet*, and in many of Winton's other works, the sea is a powerful, salty and fecund materiality. But more than this, it is a place of transformation. In this passage, and in the now famous scene of the young brothers, Quick and Fish, rowing the family's new boat through the night towards home, Winton's writing is both realist and more than realist. Some critics have investigated this style as 'magic realist', or what Alejo Carpentier calls the 'marvelous real':

The marvelous begins to be unmistakably marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of extreme state. To begin with, the phenomenon of the marvelous presupposes faith. (Zamora p. 85-6)

It seems indisputable that Winton has sat at the feet of magic realist writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Toni Morrison. His writing shares with them a knitting together of real, palpable and ordinary materiality with the fantastic, otherworldly, or marvelous. Not all critics agree with Carpentier that 'the phenomenon of the marvelous presupposes faith', but in the case of Winton's work it is important to register his preoccupation with what has also been

called the sublime or the sacred (Ashcroft p. 295-98). As Quick wrestles with his hooks and bait, and with his own guilt and fear, having no good luck with either, something unexpected begins to happen:

About five hundred yards out, over a wide patch of sandy bottom, he dropped the hook and felt the boat hang back on it. He baited up and then it began. The first bite rang in his wrist like the impact of a cover drive, a bat-and-ball jolt in his sinews . . . Now the boat vibrated like a cathedral with all these fish arching, beating, sliding, bucking, hammering . . . as they leapt into the boat of their own accord. (Winton p. 285-86)

This is the magic real, the marvelous, with an Australian set of references and a hyperbolic twist of humour. Winton's version of the biggest fish tale. Quick, here, is the epic, fortunate fisherman almost capsized by his luck. But he is also a witness, in his cathedral boat, to the plenty; the excess of blessings which transport him beyond nullity and guilt. The references are peculiarly Australian and quirky, pointing towards a sense of the sacred, or the otherworldly in this world. Some critics do not like Winton's sacred, seeing it as too narrowly Christian. However, conversely, it might be argued by readers that sacredness in Winton is given a particularly earthy (or perhaps sea-washed) breadth; and that the sacred in *Cloudstreet* is working – poetically, humorously, and in the curve of the narrative – towards new possibilities, new ways of imagining how to belong and to make meaning in contemporary Australia.

So where does this popular and literary Australian saga lead us? The narrative of *Cloudstreet*, gathering up all the many threads of its short, poetically-titled sections, does curve towards hope. While the gothic elements of the 'Nedlands Monster' episodes pock the latter part of the novel, so too do the vibrant, volatile stories of Fish, Quick and Rose, Oriel and Lester, Dolly and Sam. Not everything, however, is polished up for a happy ending. Love, courtship, marriage, temporary set-backs and a new life at Cloud Street are the stuff of literary Comedy and Romance, and of the possibly marvelous.

But then there is Fish. Samson Lamb, the little boy everyone loved, has come to his adulthood, a static, brain-damaged child – a loved, cared for, but aching burden in the lives of his family. He will never know the full promise or pain of his life. His accident and its consequences are the beginning of suffering and disbelief in his religious family; but they are also the source of wonder and longing for something better than the partial world, a longing which circles round and round in this novel. The disembodied narrator at the end of the novel watches Fish the boy-man as he pats his old pet pig:

Down in the yard at Cloudstreet, down there in the halls and channels of time Fish and the pig exchange glances . . . But I can't read your face. I stare back at you in the

puddles on the chilly ground, I'm waiting in your long monastic breath, I travel back to these moments to wonder at what you're feeling and come away with nothing but the knowledge of how it will be in the end. You're coming to me, Fish, and all you might have been, all you could have hoped for . . . No shadows, no ugliness, no hurtings, no falling down angry. Your turn is coming. (Winton p. 529-30)

This passage disturbs any purely literary, technical reading of the novel. We stop to wonder about who this intimate, disembodied narrator is, and realise with a shock that it is Fish himself, speaking from another, better dimension. Yes, this scene is in the utopian genre; but it arguably is not contained within this generic boundary. As with all utopian writing, it asks the reader to go *with* the strangeness of the narrative: here is a brain-damaged boy, grown into an awkward adult body but deprived of his life, who is being addressed by another self, one who exists beyond the shadowed, hurting world. The inner monologue of a non-existent character sees more than all the living characters, and offers up a prayer, a hope, a dream of fulfillment, of: 'Being Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Everyplace. Me' (p. 558).

Some readers might want to emphasise only the (Christian? Marvelous? Sacred? Utopian?) hope of this novel, found in its narrative ending and its miraculous, comic and Romantic moments. They might want to dream, with the novel, of a place of belonging where there are 'No shadows, no ugliness, no hurtings, no falling down angry' (p. 530). But the novel draws us back, prompting us to acknowledge also the hauntings and the contradictions which bristle through *Cloudstreet's* marvelous, imagined world.

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