

SEAFARING NOVELS OF JOHN TIM WINTON

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INTRODUCTION

The Australian writers are exploring the themes mainly on the landscape and the rural living which is unknown to many city dwellers. John Tim Winton is one of the most esteemed Australian Novelists, born on 1960 in Perth, West Australia. But he moved at a young age to the regional city of Albany. He currently lives in Fremantle, near Perth with his wife and three children. Winton's works are more famous for his unique themes. He draws his prime inspiration from the sea in West Australia. For Winton, the sea is a source of wonder and calmness. He is greatly inspired by the coastal areas along the seaside nearby. So he chooses the theme of the land and the sea for his novels. Winton is actively involved in the Australian environmental movement. He is a prominent advocate of the Marine conservation. So he wants to raise awareness about environmental conservation through his seafaring novels.

Seafaring Novels of Winton

Winton has described himself as a seafaring novelist with a strong sense of place specifically in the coastal areas of West Australia. He usually writes about small, rural places and people who live there. Winton has a profound interest in describing the sea and situations related to it. He concentrates more on the geography of a particular place rather than the characters in his novels. When he started writing novels, Winton pays much attention on the aboriginal people, their culture, community and the landscape. Later it becomes the central theme of his novels.

The novels of Winton are characteristically antipodean with the landscape and in particular, the coastal areas featuring strongly in both his storylines and imageries. The following works reflect Winton's passion and interest on the theme of landscape and the sea. The sea is the central character in all these four novels:

- *An Open Swimmer* (1982)
- *Shallows* (1984)
- *Blueback* (1998)
- *Breath* (2008)

(A) *An Open Swimmer*

An Open Swimmer is the first novel by Winton, published in 1982. Winton brings his human and environmental themes together in this novel that are always intensely realized and touching. Winton emphasizes the importance of his central theme as

“They think he needs a job but what Jerra is searching for is more elusive.
Only the sea and not anything else.”[77]

Set in three distinct parts, *An Open Summer* is a coming of age novel. It details the late-teen life of a young man named Jerra Nilsam. A considerable part of the novel describes the camping trip taken by Jerra and his childhood friend, Sean in the coastal village.

An Open Swimmer seems to have been influenced by Ernest Hemingway though Winton denies this and says that he owes to the fellow Australian writer Randolph Stow for writing this

novel. The protagonist Jerra is the admirer of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Winton can be compared to Hemingway in writing the themes related to the landscape and the sea. According to Winton, the sea is closely related to the emotions of the characters in the story.

Jerra represents the modern man who is leading a mechanical life in an urban city. The old man in the novel represents the aboriginal and traditional system who is leading a simple life in that coastal village. Winton contrasts these two themes through the two characters- Jerra and the old man. In the concluding part of the novel, Jerra returns to his Kombi, opens the fuel tank and drops a match into it before running. Through this ending, Winton voices for the native people and their way of living instead of the modern man.

(B) *Shallows*

The novel *Shallows* was published in 1985. This novel is set in the coastal town of Angelus in West Australia. Angelus is one of the most famous whaling stations in Australia. *Shallows* deals with the conflict between whalers and a band of environmentalists who set out to disrupt the already dying industry. Winton tries to create awareness about the conservation of environment through this novel along with the theme of aboriginality. It focuses mainly on the relationship between Cleave Cookson and his wife Queenie. Queenie is the direct descendent of one of the aboriginals and whalers. Nathaniel Cooper becomes a passionate protestor against whaling. There was a crusade between them which ends in violence and defeat. Winton ends the novel with a more hopeful suggestion of meaning that the resistant power of the whales appear to touch the spirit of the young couples in their life which other aspects failed to do.

The central character, Queenie is a green advocate who loves her land very much. So she joins the Greenies, the band of environmentalists to make amends for the crimes of her whaling ancestors. She also defies her husband, her ancestry and her community for this anti whaling protest. On the whole, *Shallows* is a rare thing but not a historical fiction. It is a fiction which brings the history of a place to life.

(C) *Blueback*

Blueback is Winton's one of the most beautiful seafaring novels published in 1997. It is not only a novel but also a call for environmental responsibility. It has been variously described by reviewers as a novel which clearly articulated the ecological responsibility of a person in which Winton pulls deftly on their heart strings. It is a tale about world ecology that gives a message which is indisputable. The protagonist, Abel Jackson's intimate life with his mother Dora in the environment he lives is the central theme of this novel. The waters and land of Bay both sustain and enrich their lives. Winton expresses his views through Dora who want to protect the bay and conserve the environment. Dora is deeply attached to her place. She values both her son and her land equally. There is an important character in this novel is the fish by the name Blue-black.

Blueblack is very much about the theme of belonging, in particular, belonging to a place. Abel feels that he will wither and die if he is away from his home. The Sea can be both a friend and a foe to him. Its sheer size occasionally makes Abel feel insignificant by comparison. He feels like a speck when compared to the ocean and the coastlines. Winton expresses the feeling of Abel as "*long lonely stretchers... made him feel small*" [77]. Despite the many threats and dangers posed by the sea, it is the great pleasure and wonders for Abel to spend his life there. Abel represents the feeling of nostalgia which everyone has in them. Dora is the mouthpiece of Winton who expresses his thoughts and ideas in this novel. She explains her intimate relationship with the sea by comparing it with her son, Abel. She says that during Abel's absence from their home, the sea substitutes his place by consoling Dora as a son with innate love and calmness.

Winton ends this novel, *Blueback* by suggesting the answer for protecting the sea is that by letting the sea be itself.

The language and dialogues itself expresses Winton's thoughts and ideas about the sea as the backdrop of this novel. There are many beautiful and evocative descriptions about the sea in the novel *Blueback*. The coast and the natural environment are some of the examples for Winton's wonderful use of language. Some of the descriptions from the novel are

- "Sunlight caught the windows of the shack above the beach so that every pane of glass looked like a fire." [1-2]
- "The Shellfish grew round and silver like shiny herb caps" [4]
- "The Sea grew tormented. It buckled and swelled and bunted against the cliffs and headlands, surf hammered the shore and chewed it away" [124]

(D) *Breath*

Breath is Winton's latest book published in 2008. It is one of the notable seafaring novels by Winton. It explores the complicities of relationships and the unexpected influences on life. The novel is set on the wild, lonely coastal village of West Australia called Sawyer. It is near the fictional coastal town of Angelus, which has featured in several of Winton's works like *Shallows*, *An Open Swimmer* and *The Turning*.

It is a familiar territory for those who love Winton's work. There is plenty of salt water in *Breath*. It is a brilliant writing about surfing. This novel depicts the risks taken by the young people in the act of surfing and how they find a way to control their breath in the act of surfing. The surfing is not an ordinary struggle for a person. One should control the forces and emotions which were not easy to understand. The novel is mainly about the sea which is a source of dramatic wonder and soothing calmness to both physical and spiritual. Risk and breath are increasingly linked as Winton who takes Pikelet from river to ocean and from simple surfing to the biggest challenges the sea can offer. He calls it as the enigma of respiration and wonders whether their high jumps were anything more than a rebellion against the monotony of drawing breathes. Winton says that the surfers they do what they do particularly because they hold their breath which becomes an act of resistance to them. He expresses his hunger for wildness and adventure through the protagonist in this novel. Winton is greatly addicted to the sea.

The novel, *Breath* is a slender book which packs an emotional wallop with coastal area backdrop. Winton is much happier in water and he owes to the sea very much. The sea provides him bewilderment, anguish, delight and serenity. He enjoys all these feelings through the act of surfing. Surfing connects Winton's home and the sea with enormous blessings and calmness.

Conclusion

John Tim Winton is the master of seafaring novels and depicts the coastal villages along the sea sides in an excellent way through his masterly use of language and provoking imageries. Water, especially the sea water is his addiction. Winton is still the happiest man in the water and writes a lot about the people living near the sea. He is more intimate to the people in the coastal areas than people living in urban areas. Winton calls the urban dwellers as antsy people who is leading a mechanical life. He is also an advocate for environmental conservation and wants to create awareness to preserve our earth and the sea through his seafaring novels. He uses the sea as a symbol of man's struggle against the environment for over countless centuries and in a variety of culture. The seafaring novels of Winton have the essential aspects of contemporary

issues in the modern world regarding the conservation of the environment and creating awareness among people.

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