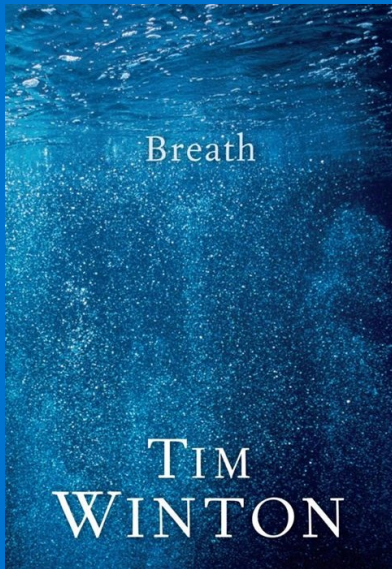


# Breath

## Tim Winton



### Author Background

- Birth—August 4, 1960
- Raised—Albany, Western Australia
- Education—Curtin University of Technology
- Awards—Booker Prize; named "Living Treasure" by National Trust; Centenary Medal; Miles Franklin Award; Commonwealth Writers Prize; many, many regional awards.
- Currently—lives in Western Australia

Winton has been named a Living Treasure by the National Trust and awarded the Centenary Medal for service to literature and the community. He is patron of the Tim Winton Award for Young Writers sponsored by the City of Subiaco, Western Australia. He has lived in Italy, France, Ireland and Greece and currently lives in Western Australia with his wife and three children.

While attending Curtin University of Technology, Winton wrote his first novel, *An Open Swimmer*. It went on to win The Australian/Vogel Literary Award in 1981, and launched his writing career. In fact, he wrote "the best part of three books while at university." His second book, *Shallows*, won the Miles Franklin Award in 1984. However, it wasn't until *Cloudstreet* was published in 1991 that his career, and economic future, was firmly established.

In 1995 Winton's novel, *The Riders*, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, as was his 2002 book, *Dirt Music*. Both are currently being adapted for film. He has won many other prizes, including the Miles Franklin Award three times: for *Shallows* (1984), *Cloudstreet* (1992) and *Dirt Music* (2002). *Cloudstreet* is arguably his best-known work, regularly appearing in lists of Australia's best-loved novels. *Breath* was released in 2008.

He writes for both for adults and children, and all his books are still in print. His work is published in eighteen different languages and has been successfully adapted for stage, screen and radio. On the publication of *Dirt Music*, he collaborated with broadcaster, Lucky Oceans, to produce a compilation CD, *Dirt Music—Music for a Novel*.

Winton draws his prime inspiration from landscape and place, mostly coastal Western Australia. He has said "The place comes first. If the place isn't interesting to me then I can't feel it. I can't feel any people in it. I can't feel what the people are on about or likely to get up to." His themes often centre on an issue that is well described by the character Gail in *The Turning*. She says that "every vivid experience comes from your adolescence."

Winton re-uses place and, occasionally, characters from one book to another. Queenie Cookson, for example, is a character in *Breath* who also appears in *Shallows* and in one of the Lockie Leonard books.

Winton is actively involved in the Australian environmental movement. He is the patron of the Australian Marine Conservation Society (AMCS) and is passionately involved in many of their campaigns, notably their work in raising awareness about sustainable seafood consumption. He is also patron of the Stop the Toad Foundation (Inc). Winton has recently contributed to the whaling debate with an article on the Last Whale website, and he is a prominent supporter of the Save Moreton Bay organization, the Environment Defender's Office and Australian Wildlife Conservancy.

In 2003, he was awarded the inaugural Australian Society of Authors (ASA) Medal in recognition for his work in the campaign to save the Ningaloo Reef.

Winton keeps away from the public eye, except when a book comes out, unless it is to support an environmental issue. He told reviewer Jason Steger that "Occasionally they wheel me out for green advocacy stuff but that's the only kind of stuff I put my head up for."

(From Wikipedia.)

# Breath

## Tim Winton

### Book Summary

#### ***Breath***

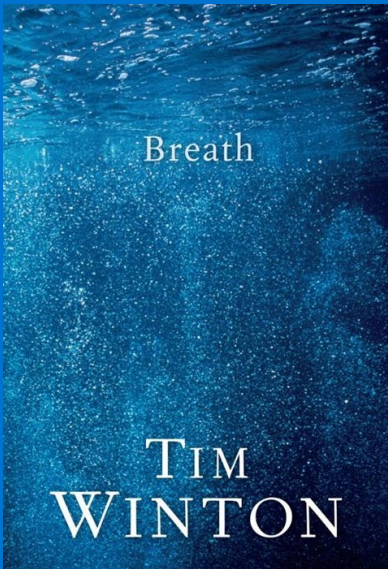
*Tim Winton, 2008*

*Macmillan Picador*

*218 pp.*

*ISBN-13: 9780312428396*

Book Groups @ Blue Mountains Library



Tim Winton is Australia's best-loved novelist. His new work, *Breath*, is an extraordinary evocation of an adolescence spent resisting complacency, testing one's limits against nature, finding like-minded souls, and discovering just how far one breath will take you. It's a story of extremes—extreme sports and extreme emotions.

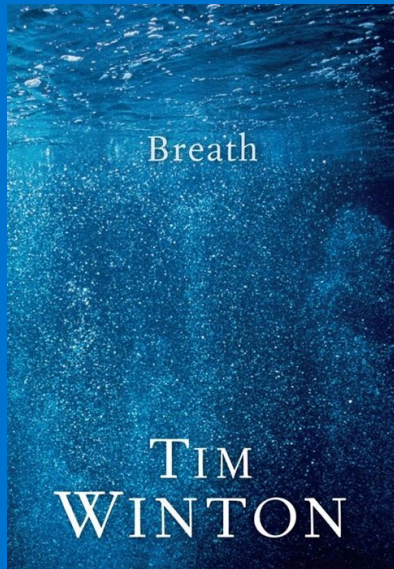
On the wild, lonely coast of Western Australia, two thrill-seeking and barely adolescent boys fall into the enigmatic thrall of veteran big-wave surfer Sando. Together they form an odd but elite trio. The grown man initiates the boys into a kind of Spartan ethos, a regimen of risk and challenge, where they test themselves in storm swells on remote and shark-infested reefs, pushing each other to the edges of endurance, courage, and sanity.

But where is all this heading? Why is their mentor's past such forbidden territory? And what can explain his American wife's peculiar behaviour? Venturing beyond all limits—in relationships, in physical challenge, and in sexual behaviour—there is a point where oblivion is the only outcome.

Full of Winton's lyrical genius for conveying physical sensation, *Breath* is a rich and atmospheric coming-of-age tale from one of world literature's finest storytellers. (From the publisher.)

# Breath

## Tim Winton



### Reviews

Most coming-of-age novels end on a note of triumph. But *Breath* is about moving out of your depth, getting in over your head, having your soul damaged beyond repair... But against all this pointless sorrow, there remains the evanescent beauty of the world, and Winton matches that with limitlessly beautiful prose.

**Washington Post**

Darkly exhilarating...Winton, one of Australia's most acclaimed novelists, excels at conveying the shadowy side of his country's beauty, the way even the most ordinary landscape can exert a paralyzing hold.... Winton's novel succeeds as a tautly gorgeous meditation on the inescapable human addiction to "the monotony of drawing breath," whether you want to or not.

**New York Times Book Review**

This slender book packs an emotional wallop. Two thrill-seeking boys, Bruce and Loonie, are young teenagers in smalltown Australia, circa the early 1970s. Their attraction is focused on the water-ponds, rivers, the sea-but they do little more than play around until they fall in with a mysterious, older man named Sando. He recognizes their daredevil wildness and takes it upon himself to teach them to surf. As the boys become more skilled, their exploits become more reckless; narrator Bruce (nicknamed "Pikelet") has doubts about where all this is heading, while the aptly named Loonie wants only bigger and bolder thrills. This mix of doubt and desire intensifies when the boys make a discovery about their mentor's past.

Surfing isn't the only dangerous game in town. As Sando's attentions and favor flip-flop from one boy to the other, the rivalry between the two, present from the beginning, grows stronger and more sinister. Sando's American wife, Eva, becomes more of a presence, too. She walks with a limp, has plenty of secrets of her own and becomes increasingly involved in Pikelet's life, in ways that even a 15-year-old might recognize as not entirely appropriate.

Winton's language, often terse, never showy, hovers convincingly between a teenager's inarticulateness and the staccato delivery of a grown man: "So there we were, this unlikely trio. A select and peculiar club, a tiny circle of friends, a cult, no less. Sando and his maniacal apprentices." The language manages to summon up both the uncertain teenager and the jaded adult: "It transpired that I was not, after all, immune to a dare," Pikelet tells us at one point, with both the breathtaking unawareness of the boy and the irony of the man.

Told from the perspective of the narrator's present life as a paramedic, *Breath* aims to recapture a long-passed episode in a boy's life and show how this shaped the man he grew into. The story contemplates what it means to be less ordinary in an era when "extreme" sports hadn't even been recognized. (The fear of being ordinary is one of the terrors that drives these daredevils to push themselves ever further.) The author of 13 previous books, Winton is well-known in Australia and should be here. He touches upon important themes, of death, life, breathing and its absence, while looking dispassionately upon the relentless pursuit of thrills, pleasure, sex, status: the mundane obsessions of the ordinary and extraordinary alike.

**Publishers Weekly**

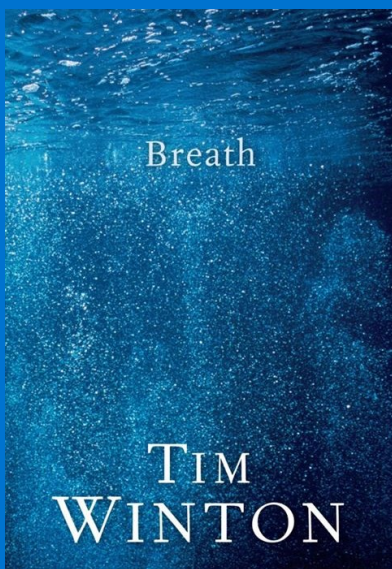
Two boys, two boards, and a roiling surf. It might sound like heaven, but it doesn't work out that way in this engrossing new book from noteworthy Australian author Winton. The narrator, Bruce Pike ("Pikelet"), is an awkward young teenager in the isolated coastal town of Sawyer when he befriends a troublemaker named Loonie. Riding the waves together (often at the expense of school), the two strike up a friendship with a freewheeling older man named Sando who, they eventually discover, was a surfing champion now living off the beaten path with an embittered American wife—herself a leading snowboarder waylaid by serious injury.

The gurulike Sando leads the boys on to ever-riskier surfing venues, and when Bruce finally



# Breath

## Breath Winton



### Reviews (continued)

chickens out, he's left behind to launch a damaging affair with Sando's wife. The ending seems a bit rushed, as Bruce looks back over his derailed life, and why it got so badly derailed is not entirely convincing. But Winton is pitch perfect in capturing (but not exploiting) adolescent angst, and he describes surfing and the sea so thrillingly that even nonswimmers will want to plunge right in. For most collections.

**Library Journal**

This novel transforms the dangers of surfing and thrill-seeking into a powerful metaphor for the transition from childhood to adulthood. Bruce "Pikelet" Pike and his friend Loonie, both 12, are looking for a way of life different from what home and school offer them. Living in a small, working-class town on the west coast of Australia in the 1970s, they turn to surfing as their escape. At first, they manage little beyond paddling offshore on flimsy boards. But everything changes when they meet Sando, an aging hippie-guru with a love of sports and danger. He takes the boys under his wing, first by letting them store their boards at his home and later by encouraging them to chase after increasingly dangerous waves. Ordinary life becomes boring and colorless to the boys when compared to the magic they feel when blasting through the churning water. The surfing sequences are beautifully and excitingly described, giving an easy hook to an otherwise emotionally complicated novel. Jealousy enters the relationship when Sando takes Loonie on a surfing tour through the Pacific Islands, leaving Pikelet behind with Sando's bitter wife. The two bond through their pain at being left behind and question the place of thrill-seeking in their lives. Their friendship takes a sexual turn, making this novel best for more mature teens. Told as a retrospective tale, Winton's story mixes the frenetic excitement and confusion of adolescence with the perspective and wisdom of adulthood, making this book a unique reading experience. —Matthew L. Moffett, *Pohick Regional Library, Burke, VA*

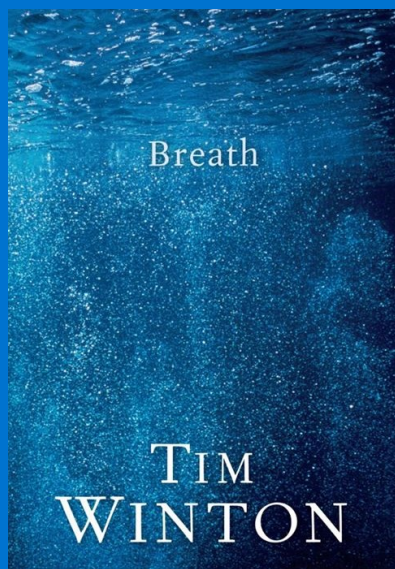
**School Library Journal**

Sun, surf and the '70s Down Under provide the backdrop for the story of a boy's awakening through rough sex. Paramedic Bruce Pike and his partner answer a medical emergency call at a suburban home. In a bedroom crowded with rock-star and hot-chick posters, Bruce finds the body of a 17-year-old boy who appears to have committed suicide. But Bruce, a middle-aged dad, knows better, and the narrative turns back to his adolescence to explain how he knows. Australian author Winton (*The Turning: Stories*, 2005, etc.) offers a tight narrative notable for its empathetic characters and effectively spare use of shock. Growing up in the tiny outback town of Sawyer, Bruce is besotted with swimming. His quiet, orderly parents don't dig his friendship with surf-and-diving whiz Loonie, a daredevil one year older than Bruce. Even less do they cotton to Sando, the hippie surf-stallion who becomes the boys' guru and guide to *All Things Wild*. Discovering that Sando had been a star of sorts at the sport of hanging ten, they worship him even more as he takes them farther out to higher and higher waves. Equally compelling, in a more fearsome way, is Sando's squeeze, blonde, scornful, tight-bodied Eva. She was once famous, too, the boys find out, a Snow Goddess skiing champ. As Loonie and Sando dangerously bond, Bruce falls for aloof Eva. Her tour of the mysteries of love includes introducing him to her dangerous fixation on auto-asphyxiation for maximum erotic kicks. So when paramedic Bruce examines the body of the 17-year-old suspected of killing himself, he blames thrill-gone-wrong sex. Bruce has been there, done that and emerged wiser, world-weary and chastened. Period details like Eva's Captain Beefheart and Ravi Shankar records add verisimilitude, and Winton handles youthful angst like a hipper John Knowles. Lyricism empowers this stoner rite-of-passage saga, which also conveys a timeless pathos.

**Kirkus Reviews**

# Breath

## Tim Winton



### Discussion Questions

1. The story of Pikelet's experiences with Sando and Loonie are framed by scenes from his life as an older man. How would you describe his attitude towards the young man he was back then, and toward the choices he made?
2. Is Sando a good influence on the boys? Does help them in any way? Do you think he has their best interests at heart?
3. Pikelet and Loonie come together as friends over their shared fascination with risk. How do they ultimately experience surfing differently? What is it about them that leads their paths to diverge over the course of the story?
4. What is Eva's attitude toward Sando's relationship with the boys? What feelings does it bring up about her own situation and her own history?
5. What do you think draws Pikelet and Eva together? What does each of them get from their relationship? Do you think Pikelet bears some responsibility for what happens between them?
6. Look the scene where Sando, Loonie and Pikelet go to surf the Nautilus (p. 144-147). Why do you think Pikelet chooses not to surf that day? How does his refusal affect the course of his relationship with Sando and Loonie?
7. Several times in the story characters mention a resistance to being an "ordinary person," and many of the risks they take are motivated by a desire to stand outside ordinary life. Is this a healthy impulse? Have you experienced it, or known people who have? How do people you know handle it?
8. Later in the book we learn that Pikelet spent some time in an institution. What do you think happened in his mind to get him there? How did the surfing and the relationship with Eva affect him later in life?
9. Near the end of the story Pikelet sees footage of an aerial skier falling, howling in agony, and it reminds him of himself, a "slow-motion replay of how my mind had worked for too long"(p. 214). What do you think he recognizes in the skier and himself?
10. Do you think Pikelet and Loonie learn something of value from the risks they take? Are they better off for having endured the fear and surfed with Sando? Is it necessary to take these kinds of risks in order to feel alive?
11. Why do you think it's so important for the narrator to show his daughters that he surfs, that he "also does something completely pointless and beautiful"? What kind of relationship do you think he has with them?
12. How do the two boys' relationships with their parents contribute to their behavior as teenagers? Is surfing and their bond with Sando somehow a reaction against the place they came from?

*(Questions issued by publisher.)*