

Author Background

Tim Winton

- Birth— Perth, 1960
- Raised in the Perth suburb of Karrinyup and, from the age of 12, in the regional town of Albany, Western Australia.

Named a “Living Treasure” by Australia’s National Trust, Tim Winton is one of Australia’s best known contemporary authors. Winton writes for adults and children and his work has met with both critical and popular acclaim.

Whilst attending Curtin University of Technology, Winton wrote his first novel, *An Open Swimmer*. The novel won The Australian/Vogel Literary Award in 1981, launching his writing career. His second book, *Shallows*, won the Miles Franklin Award in 1984. Winton has been short-listed for the Booker Prize twice - in 1995 for *The Riders* and in 2002 for *Dirt Music*. However, *Cloudstreet* is arguably Winton’s best-known work, regularly appearing in lists of Australia’s best-loved novels. Originally published in 1991, *Cloudstreet* was later adapted for stage and screen.

Winton draws his prime inspiration from landscape and place, mostly coastal Western Australia. In 2008 *The Age* quoted Winton as saying:

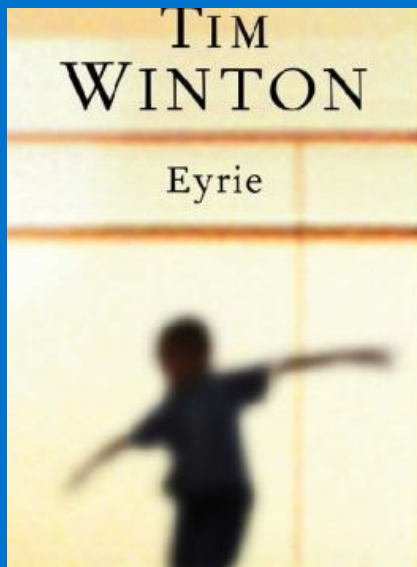
The place comes first. If the place isn't interesting to me then I can't feel it. I can't feel any people in it. I can't feel what the people are on about or likely to get up to.

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. Winton has contributed to the whaling debate and he is a prominent supporter of the Save Moreton Bay organization, the Environmental Defender’s Office, and the 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.

In 2016, it was reported that a newly discovered species of fish has been named after Tim Winton. Scientists discovered several new freshwater species in the Kimberley in Western Australia and named one species after Tim Winton in recognition of his history as a “champion of conservation” and a prominent West Australian. In an interview with the ABC, Winton said:

When I first heard about this little fish, you know, the greenie in me thought, "Well, I wonder what kind of fish it is and I wonder what its habits are and what its habitat is." Then the redneck in me thought, "Well, I wonder what it tastes like?"

(Adapted from *Wikipedia*, ABC News, the *Guardian* and *The Age*.)



Book Summary

Eyrie

Tim Winton, 2013

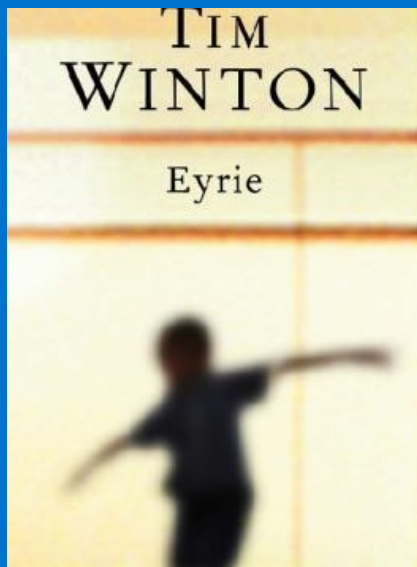
In middle age Tom Keely has hit the trifecta. A reluctant divorce, a missed chance at fatherhood, the loss of his job. With the latter has gone most of his conviction, the reason he's stayed out of the workforce this past year. Now his money is all but gone too, and his health is failing. Self-medicating his brutal headaches gives little relief and lately he's started having odd turns. To all appearances he's sunk as low as possible, and yet he retains a sense of having further to fall, of waiting for a bounce off the very bottom before he can begin to recover. His shabby flat in Fremantle has a spectacular view, but even this is sullied. After fifteen years with an environmental group Keely doesn't just see an ocean vista, but the damage done to the seabed by dredging it. He sees the unequally distributed spoils of the mining boom moving through the port. He sees a society as harsh as his own situation, a natural world under siege.

Keely's late father, Nev, looms as a physical and moral giant who never shrank from the good fight. Nev's virtues have magnified since his death, leaving Keely all too conscious of the 'father-shaped hole in him', something brought into even sharper relief when he meets Kai, a strange, precocious young boy who's never had a proper father at all. Kai's grandmother was a childhood neighbour of Keely's. Now she's again living a few doors from him, in the Mirador, Fremantle's sole highrise. Keely suddenly finds himself a part of Gemma and Kai's little world.

Keely is acutely aware that a year is more than enough time to have pulled his life back into some sort of order. His guilt at causing his mother worry adds to his anguish. He loves and respects Doris even as he avoids her, rattled by her acumen regarding him, shamed by her compassion. A social worker turned benevolent lawyer, Doris has seen plenty but has never lost her resilience. When Kai's father Stewie sends one of his thugs to extort money from Gemma, the Mirador is no longer safe and Doris takes Keely, Gemma and Kai into her house in a leafy part of Perth. But no roof could be large enough for the complexities of the lives now under this one. Gemma, who once idolised Doris, feels condescended to; Doris thinks Gemma's hard life has made her manipulative. Inside this pressure-cooker, where Kai is a constant witness, things inevitably explode.

Eyrie looks unflinchingly into every chamber of the human heart. It's not always a comforting sight and the novel might perhaps seem bleak, even with its exhilarating humour and exquisite appreciation of life, its peerless use of language, if read only for the narrative of Keely's fate – whether he succeeds or fails, lives or dies. But as with all Tim Winton's fiction, beneath this story lie multiple others, with thematic veins running just as deep. It is a measure of Winton's artistry that these aspects defy quick summation or exposition.

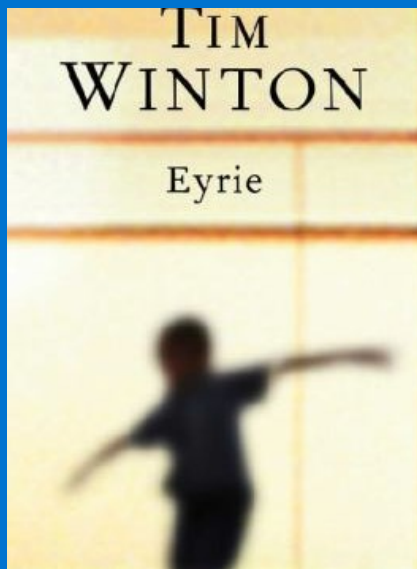
(Excerpts from the publisher's summary: *Penguin Books Australia*)



Discussion Questions

1. What makes Keely tick? Is he too hard on himself? What's behind his refusal to seek medical advice? Why can't he be honest with Doris? What do you think about his relationship with his own father and his father-like relationship with Kai.
2. What do you make of Kai? What do you think about his behaviour, his quirks, his dreams, his language use, his obsession with birds, his social isolation, his relationship with Gemma and his fixation with death?
3. Do you agree with Doris that Gemma's hard life has made her manipulative? Is Gemma's relationship with Keely driven by nostalgia and physical need, or something else? What do you think she's doing when she goes out dressed to the nines?
4. How much of the Australia you live in do you recognize in Keely's assessment of his city and state? What does *Eyrie* show about social class in contemporary Australia?
5. One of the questions *Eyrie* poses is *how best to help – others, yourself, the planet*. Discuss the many ways in which this issue is presented in the novel. Is Doris right not to give Gemma the money demanded by Stewie?
6. Consider *Eyrie*'s multiple uses of the idea of falling. What do you think Keely means at the end of the book when he understands that he's fallen?
7. What does the stain on the carpet signify to you?
8. *Just for fun...* if you were casting a film version of *Eyrie*, who would play the main characters?

(Adapted from questions provided by the publisher: *Penguin Books Australia*)



Reviews

[A] heart-stopping, groundbreaking novel for our times – funny, confronting, exhilarating and haunting – populated by unforgettable characters. It asks how, in an impossibly compromised world, we can ever hope to do the right thing.

Goodreads

Much... has already been made of the bleakness of Winton's new novel, but this strikes me as a limited reading of *Eyrie*. The book contains moments of real fury and desolation, and certainly doesn't offer any easy comfort or sentimentality, but the notion that literary achievement should only be measured by its grittiness doesn't do justice to the other achievements of this novel. One might just as readily point to its page-turning qualities ... or applaud the novel's caustic and frequently laugh-out-loud sense of humour. In Tom Keely, Winton has created a narrator whose misfortune and fury is matched by a merciless and mordant wit, and Winton has rarely been funnier. *Eyrie* is a superb novel: a novel of disillusionment and redemption, loss and beauty, the taking of responsibility and the overcoming of disappointment.

The Guardian (Australia)

Sometimes brooding, always superbly well-written, Winton's story studies family - even a family that is as postmodern and anti-nuclear as our hapless trio - both as anchor to keep the ship from drifting away and anchor to keep whomever it's tied to submerged.

Kirkus Reviews

Eyrie is a dark – and often darkly funny – rewriting of the central preoccupations of Winton's earlier novels: the volatile workings of family, the nature of mercy, the possibility of redemption. This repetition or haunting across Winton's works is evident in *Eyrie*'s relation to *That Eye, the Sky* (1986) – the two novels' titles echo each other – to *Cloudstreet* (1991), and to the many novels which explore the traumas and the hope sought in family. ... In *The Riders* (1994), *Dirt Music* (2001), *The Turning* (2005) and *Breath* (2008), he is preoccupied with a set of recurring questions: What kind of cradle is family? How many ways can families go wrong? In Winton's fiction, we do not find a 'John Howard' version of family, all picket fence and stability. His families are often scouring, even violent.

Sydney Review of Books

Reviews (continued)

In his last novel, *Breath*, Winton contrasted his characters' tumult with beautiful surfing passages and sweeping portraits of coastal landscapes. Set mostly in Fremantle, *Eyrie* offers little such respite. The backdrop to Keely, Gemma and Kai's struggles is the spectre of environmental catastrophe caused by the mining boom. Cutting through the bleakness is the self-deprecating voice of Keely, whose grizzled commentary on everything from dog shit to Gina Rinehart is often hilarious. The writing is elegant and admirably true to where it's from; Winton crafts poetry from the salty Australian vernacular.

Readings

This is Winton's most pointedly political novel and it could hardly arrive at a more welcome moment in Australian history. Winton digs deep to explore the foundations of Keely's character and makes some telling observations of a world with "endless reserves of mining loot".

....

Eyrie is a fine work by any standard. It tackles myths of prosperity and success in a way that is not always comfortable, but that stirs deep thought. It is rich in compassion and affectionate towards the unlovely. It has a strong belief that no journey ends at the halfway mark. *Eyrie* is a novel for which our culture has been in urgent need.

The Sydney Morning Herald

Eyrie thrums with righteous anger at Western Australia's addiction to mining. It decries the greed and complacency that have attended the wealth such exploitation generates. Winton counterweights his attack with a eulogy for Australia's post-war working class, whose virtues - moral seriousness, thrift, hard work, community-mindedness - are surely shaped by the author's admiration for his parents. The novel bears witness to how the sprawling suburban world of this older generation, so often perched on the edge of wilder natural landscapes, has been tidied up, boxed in, the ecology of childhood imagination narrowed to PlayStation and satellite dish. Mostly though, it is a clear-eyed yet compassionate depiction of the underclass that lives off the crumbs of the resource boom.

....

However elaborate your analysis of *Eyrie*, the novel stands, like all of the author's work, on its ability to marry sophistication and simplicity. Page by page it is an engrossing novel; the reader is moved and enraged in equal measure by the plain human story of Keely and his beautiful, battered adoptive family. You long for the good guy to win. You pray and ache for a fresh start for them all. And, as ever, it is couched in the prose of a writer on whom nothing is lost, for whom the tiniest local detail bears an epiphanic charge.

The Australian