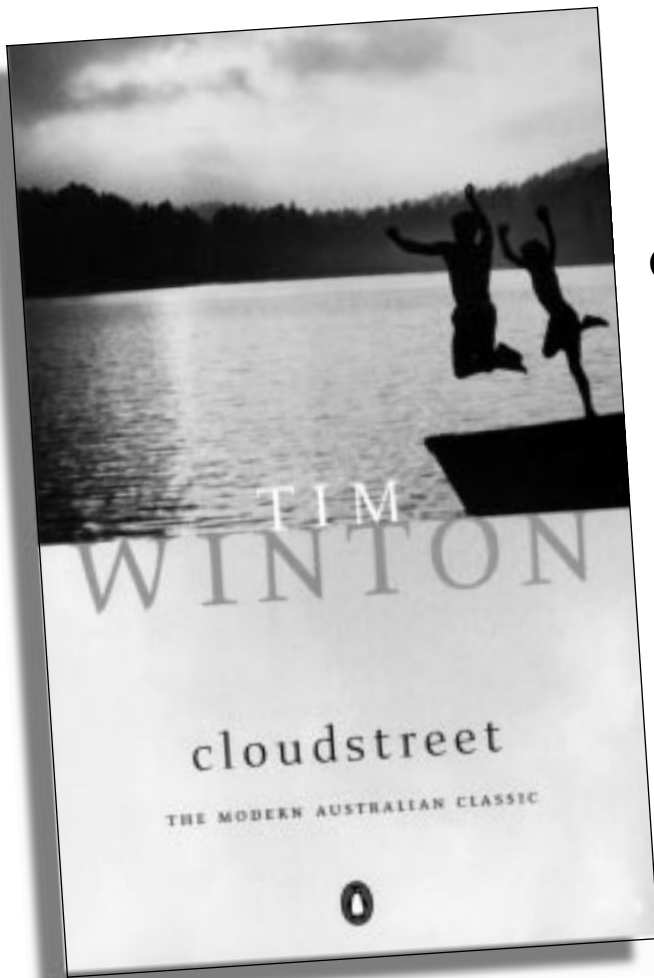


PENGUIN NOTES
for
READING GROUPS



TIM
WINTON

CLOUDSTREET



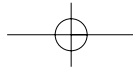


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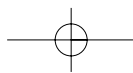


AN INTRODUCTION TO CLOUDSTREET

This is a novel about finding one's place in the world and the search for meaning in life. The search is chronicled via the lives of two working-class families, the Lambs and the Pickles, who are thrown together by misfortune and who come to live in separate sections of the same house at 1 Cloud Street.

The two families are a study in contrasts, *'squared off at one another like opposing platoons'* (p51). The Lambs are righteous, God-fearing, hard working and parsimonious while the Pickles are licentious wastrels. The Lambs find meaning in industry and in God's grace; the Pickles, in luck. The Lambs' God is a maker of miracles; the Pickles' God is the 'Shifty Shadow' of fate. Both families are often betrayed by their faith.

The novel follows the two families from the time they leave their rural homes and move into Cloudstreet, a big, old house in Perth. Both moves are precipitated by disaster. For the Lambs, this misfortune takes the form of the near-drowning of the family favourite, Samson, better known as Fish; for the Pickles, it occurs in the loss of father Sam's fingers in a fishing accident. These mishaps mean that both 'Sams' - like the biblical Samson - lose some of their strengths, but they also gain new opportunities and insights. Sam Pickles's move to the city brings him a home of his own and a job at the mint - a stroke of poetic justice for a man addicted to gambling. Although Fish loses his mental faculties as a result of his accident and is unable to communicate with the outside world, his near-drowning and subsequent bond with water also lead him to a new life as a visionary, and it is this 'other' Fish who is the omniscient narrator of the novel.





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As a novel, **Cloudstreet** is tightly structured, opening and ending with a shared celebratory family picnic - a joyous occasion which, ironically, is also the scene of Fish's long sought-after death by drowning. Through this act, Fish finally returns to 'himself' - to the child who hovered on the brink of drowning and who returned to life, though '*not all of Fish Lamb had come back*' (p32). Fish's time on earth has seen the conjoining of the two families, culminating in the marriage of his brother Quick Lamb and Rose Pickles, and the birth of their son, Wax Harry. The guilt Quick has always felt for witnessing his brother's near-drowning is expunged in his final act of sacrifice: he must watch as Fish throws himself into the water, knowing that it has been his one desire for twenty years. The 400-page saga of the two families which makes up the novel is, in effect, a flashback which occurs in the instant before Fish's death.

Through the tale of two families, **Cloudstreet** offers a range of reflections on how communities form and grow, and what sustenance they thrive on. Neither family has all the answers, and all live multifaceted lives. Oriel Lamb, despite her hard work, is a manipulative woman who chooses to live in a tent rather than with her husband, Lester. Dolly Pickles is an alcoholic who regularly betrays Sam - but she is also the bearer of a secret childhood tragedy which she has carried for decades. Both fathers, Lester and Sam, live for their families, and their respective families thrive on the love which binds them together, despite their various antipathies. One senses that Tim Winton too both loves and despairs of the Pickles and Lambs, often conveying his exasperation with humour. On Oriel's relationship with her daughter-in-law, Pansy, he remarks: '*She and Oriel did not speak, and very loud they were about it.*' (p390)

Cloudstreet, the house in which both families reside, may be seen as a metaphor for community, and there are many times in the novel when the house itself actually seems alive.



Fish hears it crying at night and the walls of Quick's room, wallpapered with tragedies, seethe with life. This house, divided between the two very different families, simmers and boils and sometimes explodes - as, for example, on the night when Dolly is thrown down the stairs, and when Ted dies: *'Look at that, the house's timbers clenching right there in wild daylight.'* (p335) It is a place which is full of life, which embodies love, happiness, suffering, despair, pain and loss, and which is intrinsic to both families' sense of themselves: *'That bloody house won't leave us alone, will it?'* (p307)

Spirituality is also important in **Cloudstreet**, as an exploration of both community and the search for meaning. The novel opens with the lines: *'Shall we gather at the river Where bright angel feet have trod...'* This hymn-like tone continues throughout the prologue, though the religiosity of Winton's celebration is also profoundly secular in its joyousness, and antipathetic to the concept of piety. Nonetheless, the language used deliberately evokes the Bible in its cadence, and biblical stories are noted for their relevance to everyday life: *'Those Bible stories and words weren't the kind you forgot. It was like they'd happened to you all along, that they were your own memories.'* (p151)

Fish, as the novel's narrator, serves as the embodiment of spirituality. *'Being Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Everyplace. Me.'* (p424) His visions of guardian angels and of pigs talking in tongues confirm the need for the other-worldly in life. Water is a symbolic force in Fish's heaven - it is the 'other' world he remembers and is desperate to see again - and the spiritual ramifications of the novel's opening and closing scenes are clear. In water, as in death, there is life.

One might be tempted to see the spiritual, other-worldly elements in **Cloudstreet** as metaphors, but Tim Winton has said that, 'I wanted to include both realms because I feel that



this is true realism: the supernatural and the natural accepted as one thing, as inclusive.' The symbols which people Fish's world are real - not magic - and the novel celebrates the fact that every-day happenings are often stranger than fiction. The message here is that being open to the extraordinary in ordinary life is essential to finding meaning in our lives.

Central to this message is the notion of a return to childhood. In **Cloudstreet**, childhood symbolises innocence and grace, and all the characters seek nostalgically for the certainties they lost upon achieving maturity. Fish's simple nature is a reflection of this. He is the Lamb of God; his baptism by near-drowning, a form of rebirth.

Aboriginal spirituality also figures in the novel. The Black Man who regularly appears to Fish, as well as to Quick and the others, personifies the identification Aboriginal people have with the land. Collective responsibility is also a central message in the book: *'it's not us and them anymore. It's us and us and us...there's no monsters, only people like us.'* (p402) This profoundly moral view of the world encompasses Australia's debt to its original inhabitants, and a community's responsibility to all its members. Though **Cloudstreet** with its focus on the individual lives may be seen to prioritise personal concerns, its themes thus carry wider ramifications for Australian society and nationhood.

Asense of history, too, forms the backdrop to the novel's twenty-year family saga, which runs from 1943 to 1963; and **Cloudstreet** is framed by two key events in world history, World War II and the assassination of US president John F. Kennedy. Under the prime ministership of Robert Menzies, the fifties in Australia were, for the most part, comfortable, conservative years, characterised by backyard barbecues, by wives - who were no longer needed for the war effort - consigned to the home, and by the growth of the Australian dream as exemplified by Rose Pickles's suburban aspirations.



Peace had been purchased at the expense of freedom and excitement. Meanwhile, monumental crises were averted on the world stage, Sputnik was launched and television invented. These years are identified as a unique time of certainty - a watershed soon to be shattered by the Vietnam war and the 'revolutionary' era of the sixties.

World events influence the Lambs and Pickles, but distantly, like an echo that sends ripples across the surface of their lives. The novel focuses on the domestic, and this serves as the filter through which history is measured. History only matters - is only 'real' - when it impacts on a household or community. The carnage of war figures only in terms of how it has affected the working-class heroes of the book. Similarly, the only historical character to make an appearance in **Cloudstreet** is the Nedlands monster, a serial killer who was apprehended in the early sixties; and he features because he threatened ordinary people's lives. Instead, social issues are examined and played out. High amongst these are class differences - such as in Toby and Rose's relationship - and race, where it is noted, for instance, that '*Blacks haven't got the vote.*' (p411)

Cloudstreet belongs to an Australian cultural tradition of family sagas and yarns - as well as to that universal tradition of telling stories in order to find meaning in the chaos of existence. Each of its characters carries with them a small 'history' which, in turn, becomes part of a complicated, rambling series of stories. Seen together, these strands convey the idea that we are all, in our hearts, inextricably linked to each other via the networks we are part of: family, suburb, city, nation. Rose Pickles decides to return to Cloudstreet with Quick because, '*It's like getting another childhood, another go at things...It's like a village.*' (pp418-9) Like every character in the book, Rose's personal narrative is underpinned by a search for love and the certainties of the past. The search for meaning in life can thus be summarised in one word, love - although



Tim Winton might call it 'grace'. This state of love or grace is described in the opening scenes of the novel:

'The whole restless mob of us on spread blankets in the dreamy briny sunshine skylarking and chicking about for one day, one clear, clean, sweet day in a good world in the midst of our living.' (p1)

ABOUT TIM WINTON

Tim Winton was born in 1960 in Scarborough, Western Australia. He went to school in Perth and Albany and studied at the Western Australian Institute of Technology before becoming a full-time writer at age twenty-two. Winton spent some years overseas, first at the Australia Council's Paris studio and then in Ireland and Greece. He now lives in a small fishing village north of Perth with his wife Denise and their three children, Jesse, Harry and Alice.

Tim Winton's works include adult and teenage novels, short story collections, a book of autobiographical reflections and a picture book. A multi-award winning novelist, he was co-recipient of the Australian/Vogel National Literary Award in 1981 for **Open Swimmer** and in 1984 won the Miles Franklin Award for **Shallows**. **Cloudstreet** was awarded both the National Book Council Banjo Award and the Miles Franklin Award in 1992. His novel **The Riders** was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1995.

Writing, as he does, from Western Australia, Tim Winton is geographically remote from Australia's mainstream publishing and literary circles. This isolation provides essential fuel for his inspiration. Winton has expressed his admiration for the writers of the American Deep South and he shares with them a passionate intensity for evoking landscape and place, and for using the vernacular in fiction. In the Australian



context, Tim Winton has always identified himself as a 'coastal' writer, and has often reflected on the impact that a suburban childhood spent at the beach has had on his writing.

Tim Winton began writing **Cloudstreet** in 1986 when he was twenty-six and finished it four years later. He was living overseas at the time, and has said in an interview that his homesickness for Western Australia fueled his descriptions of place and family life. Winton has reflected that, although he had been thinking about **Cloudstreet** for as long as he had been writing novels, he hadn't had the confidence to embark on the book for a long time. Moreover, while the first draft of **Cloudstreet** had featured a conspiratorial, colloquial narrator, Winton hadn't known who that narrator was. On discovering it was Fish, he also found the book's shape.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Tim Winton was twenty-two when his first book was published and thirty when he completed **Cloudstreet**. As a result, he has often been described as one of Australia's most precocious writers. Do you think **Cloudstreet** reflects the preoccupations of youth?
2. Coastal places, water, fishing and boating often provide both sources of action and symbolic power in Tim Winton's work. How central are they to **Cloudstreet**? Would you describe it as a 'coastal' novel?
3. Winton has remarked that Australians have become 'very suburban' and 'don't know anything about the outdoors. Their dads and mums did, and their grandparents did. We are only one generation from the farm, but you'd be surprised at how little people know.' Does **Cloudstreet** celebrate the 'outdoors' or the suburbs or both? Do you think it seeks to remind people of their rural roots?



4. 'Celebration' is a word often used to describe Winton's themes. He praises 'ordinary' people's lives. What particular aspects of human existence does **Cloudstreet** celebrate?

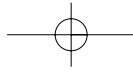
5. Spirituality is explored in **Cloudstreet** in a variety of ways and Winton has admitted to religious faith being a powerful influence on his writing. What do you see as the tenets of his faith as revealed in this novel?

6. 'From me to you, the river. In me and you, the river. Of me, and you, the river.' (p203) This utterance by Fish is reminiscent of the signs of the cross as made in Christian prayer. In your opinion, is Fish praying to the river, to the unseen presence of God, or to something else entirely?

7. Do you think the differences between **Cloudstreet's** two families, the Pickles and the Lambs, are representative of two different strands in the cultural make-up of white Australians?

8. The 'Shifty Shadow' of fate figures as a potent force in **Cloudstreet**. Do you think Winton celebrates or bemoans its power in people's lives? How fatalistic do you think his view of the world is?

9. **Cloudstreet** demonstrates the 'brute force' and originality of Winton's language. If you dissect one paragraph you'll find that he never uses clichéd similes, verbs or adjectives. Take this passage from p25: *'Just near the crest of the hill where the sun is ducking down, the old flatbed Chev gives up the fight and stalls quiet. Out on the tray the kids groan like an opera. All around, the bush has gone the colour of a cold roast ...Birds scuffle out of sight. There's no wind, though the Chev gives out a steamy fart.'* In your view, is language like this descriptive and exciting, or is it at times difficult? Is Winton's use of language something that strikes you about his writing, or is it so integral to his work that you don't notice how different it is?

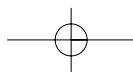


10. Cloudstreet is an imaginative flight of fancy which expects the reader to believe in Fish's 'other world' of water. How convincingly does Winton make the reader believe that such things as talking pigs exist?

11. Cloudstreet is set in Perth in the years following World War II. How much do we learn about the social changes which were developing at this time from reading the novel?

12. In view of the picture **Cloudstreet** paints of life in the fifties, would you describe it as a work of nostalgia? Is it nostalgic in other ways?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING



*Reading Notes are available for the
following titles*

A STRANGER HERE Gillian Bouras

DIGGING Sara Dowse

THE BEHOLDER Julian Davies

DEATH OF A RIVER GUIDE Richard Flanagan

THE ROOMS IN MY MOTHER'S HOUSE Olga Lorenzo

I FOR ISOBEL Amy Witting

IT'S RAINING IN MANGO Thea Astley

WHAT I HAVE WRITTEN John Scott

THE MULTIPLE EFFECTS OF RAINSHADOW Thea Astley

THE ORCHARD THIEVES Elizabeth Jolley

THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY Henry James

LITTLE WHITE SECRETS Catherine Jinks

NONE TO ACCOMPANY ME Nadine Gordimer

THE BEHOLDER Julian Davies

JOHNNO David Malouf

