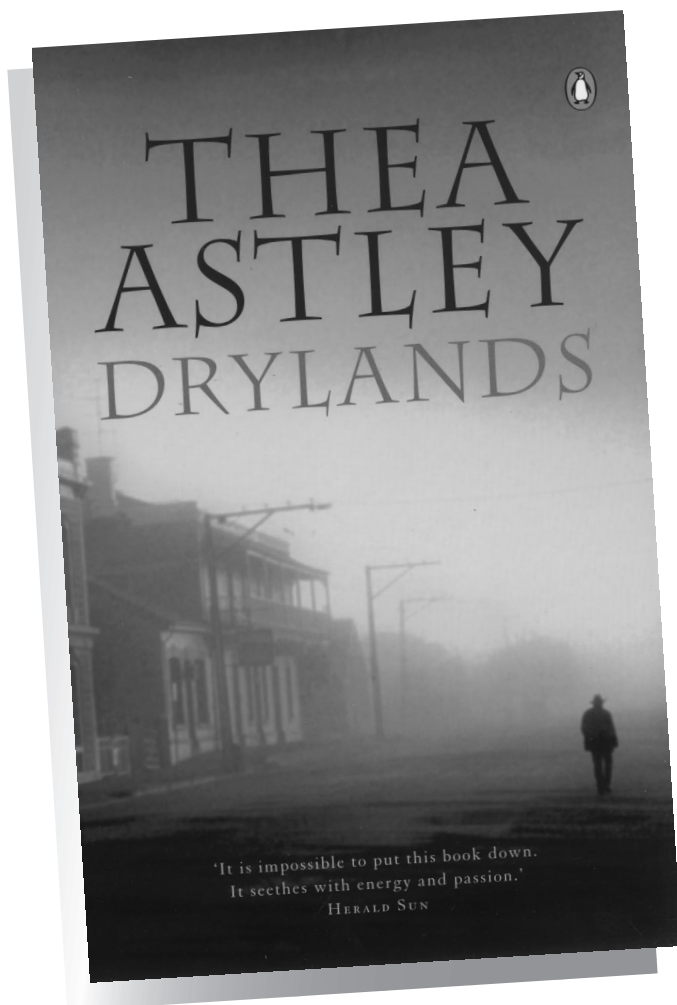


PENGUIN NOTES  
— for —  
READING GROUPS



THEA  
ASTLEY  
—  
DRYLANDS



**CONTENTS**

**AN INTRODUCTION TO  
*DRYLANDS***

**ABOUT THEA ASTLEY**

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**



## AN INTRODUCTION TO *DRYLANDS*

*'This will be a book for the world's last reader ... An easy, accessible script with notions formed from those twenty-six black symbols that induce tears or laughter' (page 6).*

**J**anet Deakin is a lone figure adrift on an inland sea, which the novelist has called Drylands. Her late marriage and widowhood have left her here alone, in this dying Queensland town – she is an incongruously ‘literary’ small-town newsagent whose city bookstore experience has not prepared her for the locals’ lack of interest in anything vaguely bookish. This is a town with no future, and with little interest in its own past, whose people have reached a point of no hope. And here, possibly because of this very lack of hope, Janet decides to write her book.

**H**er memories frame a series of six other stories featuring a cast of people in the last throes of despair and impending ruin. These stories are written in a disconnected sequence, whose authorship is ambiguous, but which nevertheless merges via the potent force of emotional and intellectual drought which has left these characters undernourished, and unprotected from brutality and mindlessness. Her book is a plea for fundamental changes, changes which she believes may come too late, if they come at all.

**F**rom her flat above the shop Janet views a world peopled by tragedies. These stories document lives filled with outrage and despondence, and may or may not be those



of the townspeople she watches. They are all bleak, and uncompromisingly pessimistic, and are all imbued with the characters' desires to find an outlet for the expression of basic human needs, together with a dearth of that capacity.

**I**t is the mark of a great writer that this novel is not ponderous, but intimately engrossing. It is written with Astley's characteristic acerbic wit and dry humour, so that despite the stories' bleakness, they are also immensely engaging. The harshness of the landscape she paints is drawn in language whose sheer beauty and tensile descriptiveness offers the reader a hope that words may in fact survive the onslaught of moral despair and intellectual vacuousness.

**J**anet's raging against the dying of the light of intellectual curiosity is not simply about the present. It documents a history of lives in which a decline of interest in the insights to be gleaned from education and enquiry have left these characters ill-equipped to respond to the challenges of technology and change. Jim Randler's father denies him a secondary education; Janet's husband Ted doesn't learn to read until she teaches him; Lannie's early marriage has left her without the work experience she needs to escape her imprisonment; Toff's childhood has failed to give him a sense of moral direction. Toff is the latest in a line of men whose disrespect for human dignity has bequeathed to him a complete lack of wisdom, insight or empathy for others.

**T**his is a society that values education less than sport; a country 'round the bend over jumping and kicking and running and swimming and smashing into people all in the



name of winning' (page 9); a country which still allows men to behave as if women have little use for brains and no basic human rights in their own households. *Drylands* is a fable for our times, and one which conveys a deep-seated pessimism combined with a passionate belief in the power of language.

**B**enny Shoforth is an Aborigine with a white father, the progeny of a rapist station owner and a twelve-year-old Aboriginal housegirl, from whom he was forcibly removed and whom he did not meet until he was fifteen. His early promise with words is suggested by a poem constructed in the classroom: 'I love a sunburnt country./The land belongs to me./I'd like to see the whites strung up/From every gidgee tree' (page 169). But words are not enough to save Benny from his future. He has worked hard, but at the end of his life is unable to pay the council rates on his broken-down shack and is forced to take up residence in a cave, taking his mother's three-piece genoa lounge suite with him. Even here, though, he is not safe from the maws of the powers that be, and Howie Briceland, town councillor, moves him on from his cave as well. Benny obtains a minor victory in announcing at a public meeting that Howie is his half-brother, but he, like many of the downtrodden, has little hope of raising himself up from the dust.

**T**he Legless Lizard is the town's only pub, and Janet's shop and above-shop residence are right across the street. From there she observes the lives of the American publican Clem, his wife Joss, and their clientele. Joss is unhappy in this godforsaken town, the more so when she is pursued by two of the pub's drinkers in an aggressively



alarming manner. The violence of their pursuits hints at the underlying frustrations and threats veiled in the bar by drunken exuberance, but which are never very far from the surface of the lives of everyone in Drylands.

**J**oss and Clem's yardman Franzi is a mysterious figure, who, we learn, has changed his identity in order to flee from a past he hopes will not catch up with him. His new identity has been extrapolated from a letter he has found in an old house on the outskirts of Drylands, and when he eventually moves on again, his future is as uncertain as the other characters'.

**J**im Randler is an aging man on land that is failing. He attempts to fulfil his dreams by building a boat, only to have them shattered when Toff, a local teenager, deliberately burns down both shed and boat.

**L**annie Cunneen has had six children since she left her job at a radio station. She's made nine thousand, three hundred and twenty-eight lunches before deciding enough is enough, and leaves home in her dressing gown and slippers. She makes a kind of life for herself away from the prison of her home while her husband fends for the children and finds solace in the arms of a council secretary, whom he impregnates and then callously abandons.

**F**our local women from the town's book group attend a visiting writer's workshop, which is interrupted when one of their husbands arrives and forcibly removes his wife. The tutor tries to intervene but is rejected, and is also pursued



by a sex-mad commercial traveller who believes his charms are irresistible. Her view of the town is a despairing one, all the more so because she relies on such tours in order to eke out a living, in a country where the possibilities for writers to make a proper livelihood is gloomy indeed.

Perhaps the grimmest portrait is of Toff, son of Howie Briceland, the local councillor who is 'fat with graft' (page 139), and grandson of the grazier who raped his servant girl and sired Benny Shoforth. Toff's complete moral vacuousness is frighteningly credible, and is indicative of a mind turned bad by a lack of any moral framework. 'In fact he loathed the older generation his parents moved in: buddies from properties farther out, coastal businessmen and their wives who came up for loud drunken weekends and planned development along the seaboard. And he loathed even more the generation beyond that: smells, wrinkles, contused veins, the staggers, jowls, guts, curved frail bones, plastic munchers, word-groppers. Gross!' (Page 140.) His sly taunting of both Janet and old Randler masks a capacity for violence that is destined to erupt. Toff cements the allegory of a society that has willed to its future inheritors very little emotional or moral sustenance.

Drylands is a town in which there are so few people that they all know each other's business. And yet they are suspicious of becoming involved with each other and rarely demonstrate neighbourly acts of human kindness. The men who drink together tolerate both racist and domestic violence; the women are aware of each other's desperation, but sit in passive observance of the cruelties their men work on them



and on each other. Women like Paddy Locke cling desperately to the last vestiges of 'civilisation' by pursuing essentially unsatisfying cultural pursuits which are disparaged by their men and by the society in which they live. Their children are an even more despondent group who play computer games, watch videos, and who have lost touch with the land outside their doors.

**T**his book is an appeal for the printed word; for love; for humaneness; for intelligent discourse; for human intercourse and mutual respect. Despite its dolorous tone, there are glimpses of hope and redemption. Janet's love for Ted and Clem's attachment to Joss show that there is love. This glimpse, though, is perhaps not enough to rescue these characters from the brink of despair, for there is a suggestion that they have all travelled too far down the path to extinction. To counterbalance this, there is the power of the word: 'A word could have a whole fiction buried within. One word, monosyllabic or polysyllabic – take your pick – opened up a worldscape of ideas that could laze in bliss under summer soothings or become a maelstrom of conflict' (page 199).

**D**rylands is filled with end-of-millennium angst and despair. The culprits are developers, racists and chauvinistic men. But looming over all of these familiar targets of Astley's reproach is the computer, the evil machinations of which are set, in the novel's terms, to destroy our one recourse against injustice and power. Perhaps if we can preserve the will to read and to write, we'll be all right, although the sacking of Janet's flat at the end of the novel would seem to indicate that we might not be all right at all.



## ABOUT THEA ASTLEY

**T**hea Astley is one of Australia's most celebrated writers, and is widely loved by her readership and by those who have seen her speak. She is a triple winner of the Miles Franklin Award, for *The Well Dressed Explorer* (1962), *The Slow Natives* (1965), and *The Acolyte* (1972). In 1989 she was awarded the Patrick White Award. Other awards include the 1975 Age Book of the Year Award for *A Kindness Cup*, the 1986 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal for *Beachmasters*, the 1988 Steele Rudd Award for *It's Raining in Mango*, the 1990 NSW Premier's Prize for *Reaching Tin River*, and the 1996 Age Book of the Year Award and the FAW Australian Unity Award for *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*. She was Fellow in Australian Literature at Macquarie University until 1980 and lives in the hills on the south coast of NSW.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. This is a novel about old age and change as much as it is about the end of an era. Discuss.
2. Loose ends are left everywhere in these narratives. Where did Franz Massig go? What happened to the abandoned baby? Who took over the pub? Did the book make you care that you didn't know these answers?
3. The writing is deliberately circuitous. Stories overlap, relate to each other, fail to relate to each other. In this way they echo the 'untidiness' of real experiences. Discuss.



4. Why has Clem become so attached to Drylands? Why has he adopted 'optimism and strange exuberance in exile' (page 258–9), when he, more than anyone, would seem, as an American national, less likely to stay in this failed town?

5. The stories in this book show how little neighbours want to intervene in other people's lives. Is this a true picture of modern society, or do you have more faith in the capacity for acquaintances to care for each other?

6. 'She would write a story, she decided, about a woman in an upstairs room above a main street in a country town, writing a story about a woman writing a story' (page 99). Whose story is this?

7. Wilful violence in small communities is represented by the persecution of Joss by the two drinkers, and by the burning of the boat by Toff. Are these acts perpetrated by evil or boredom?

8. The Bricelands are a family of men who have committed violence but maintained their 'pillar of the community status'. Is the novel suggesting that violence is inherited and, more, that these characters represent a microcosm of Australian attitudes and culture?

9. The titles of the sections in the novel are as suggestive as much of the text – 'Taking Five', 'Almost There, Almost Home.' Discuss their meanings.

10. The flaws in Toff's deeply disturbed personality are those which fester and later break out in random acts of violence (see page 143). Is the author suggesting that the inhibitions or repressed desires of conservatism can make monsters of us all?



**11.** Astley's work evinces a deeply felt sympathy for and yet a critical attitude to rural, conservative Australia. Is it love or hate or despair which drives her criticism of it? Read other works by Astley and discuss the treatment of this theme in them.

**12.** '...being unable to read is being crippled for life' (page 107). This is a story about story-making and its relevance to our lives in the late twentieth century. It's about the potential for writing to either survive or to become extinct in the next millennium. Does the strength and power of Astley's writing make a strong case for its survival, despite the pessimistic message she conveys?

**13.** Kerry Goldsworthy has praised Astley's writing for its 'densely woven grammar, its ingrained humour, its uncompromising politics, its demented metaphors, and its undimmed outrage at human folly, stupidity and greed'. (*Australian Book Review*, September 1999, page 30.) Discuss these and other aspects of Astley's writing that you particularly enjoy.



*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**  
**CLOUDSTREET Tim Winton**  
**TREADING ON DREAMS Kristin Williamson**  
**CLOSED FOR WINTER Georgia Blain**  
**MARIA'S WAR Marion Halligan**  
**CANDELO Georgia Blain**  
**TASTING SALT Stephanie Dowrick**  
**THE HUNTER Julia Leigh**  
**ISOBEL ON THE WAY TO THE CORNER SHOP Amy Witting**  
**NEAP TIDE Dorothy Hewitt**  
**STARTING AGAIN Gillian Bouras**  
**IF THE MOON SMILED Chandani Lokugé**

