

PENGUIN NOTES FOR READING GROUPS

ROBERT DREWE

THE SHARK NET

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AN INTRODUCTION TO *THE SHARK NET*

'Was the shadow really a passing cloud? Or the first and last hint of the white pointer's charge? This, I thought, was obviously the underlying anxiety of my life.' (p. 300)

Robert Drewe's memoir is of a typical life shadowed by unforeseen events and indiscriminate tragedy. The quotation (on p. 1) from a Bing Crosby song sets the mood: 'Where the blue of the night/Meets the gold of the day,/Someone waits for me.' What the young, impressionable Drewe learns growing up in Perth during the 1950s and early 1960s – the period in which the notorious 'Nedlands Monster' stalked the suburbs – is that life has one certainty. And that certainty is that we can each be sure that 'someone' or 'something' is out there waiting to surprise us with the delights of the flesh or the carnage of sudden senseless death and murder. Against the perfectly normal, respectable, 'safe' backdrop of the world's most isolated city, Drewe watches ordinary lives transformed by the terror and tragedy of random acts of grievance and simmering anger.

Though not as monstrous and momentous as the serial killings which are occurring around him and his fellow citizens, the personal dramas of Drewe and his family bite deeper into his young life. The events in his private life are inevitably coloured by the incomprehensible violence being wrecked at this time on the community at large.

More than a merely personal account, *The Shark Net* emerges also as a memoir of Drewe's family and community and Australia at mid century. Drewe begins his personal history with the family's move from Melbourne to Perth in 1949, when he was six. It was the first big memorable event in his life, and the point from which everything seemed to change for him and his family. His father became a 'big fish in a small pond' (p. 77) at work – rising within years of his move to the position of State Manager for Dunlop. Meanwhile among the sand dunes of Perth, young Robert and his brother Bill were discovering a new way of life. A baby sister, Jan, was born some years later. Their mother took longer to acclimatise and accept her life in Western Australia, worrying about the effects of 'boiling brain', depressed in the gloomy 'crumbling "Californian" bungalow' (p. 55), anxious to protect her children from the dreaded polio virus, and generally unhappy in her marriage – 'every marriage in our family was a clash of religions and personality types' (p. 163).

A picture is drawn of a fairly average middle-class family living according to the norms of 1950s Australia. However, on the fringes of Perth's apparently cosy, safe, close-knit city lurks a cold-blooded killer who randomly strikes over the next four years, viciously killing eight people. Bit by bit Drewe, his family and the killer become entwined through a series of connections: one of the victims was John Sturkey, a friend of Drewe's; one of the murder weapons belonged to another of Drewe's friends; Drewe's mother makes a late-night sighting of a Peeping Tom who probably was the serial killer on one of his stalking rounds; both Drewe and his father are fingerprinted; the killer himself turns out to be a former Dunlop employee who had paid monthly visits to the Drewe home in the

course of his duties as a delivery man; and Drewe is assigned to cover the trial as a young journalist on the *West Australian*.

The Shark Net is a meditation on youth and aging, and on the dynamic nature of family and community relationships. As the drama of Perth's serial killer builds, 18-year-old Drewe discovers that Ruth, his 19-year-old girlfriend, is pregnant, and so decides to get married. His actions have more repercussions than he had ever anticipated and 'the world and my place in it had altered forever' (p. 241). His mother is bitterly disappointed and ensures that she is away in Melbourne when her grandson is born. Returning shortly after his birth, she dies within days of a cerebral haemorrhage, aged only 47, leaving her son with a burden of guilt at the horrible possibility that the strain and shame of the teenage pregnancy and her son's rushed, subdued wedding may have contributed to her sudden death and surely was a shadow over her last months.

The series of personal tragedies deepens when another friend, Richie Male, is drowned during an afternoon spent bodysurfing with Drewe and friends; and, then, just before leaving for a new job in Melbourne, Drewe's first 'crush', Roberta, the girl he'd once killed a shark for, is decapitated in a freak light-aircraft accident. Life, *The Shark Net* acknowledges, randomly deals out such horrors. Drewe's memoir metaphorically equates the sharks lurking and suddenly striking in Australian waters with the Eric Cookes of life – the fears that haunt and occasionally violently touch our lives.

'I'm only young but this is how I'll feel forever. Dazed, randy, mentally paralysed and swept along by events ... Weren't death, murder and birth enough? Now I had to deal with guilt as well.' (p. 18) Nearly forty years later, Drewe looks back at his youthful naivete and realises that he didn't then 'imagine that my optimism couldn't always be replenished by a good story, a glimpse of the sea and a particular angle of sunlight' (p. 357). He writes evocatively of the complexity of feelings he still has for his deceased mother and father, as he tries to reconcile his love for them with his lack of understanding of them.

The Shark Net entraps, catches and memorialises the past and its losses and, with bemused affection, records the curiously quaint world of the 1950s and boyhood. The twin events – the loss of Perth's innocence that the serial killings represented, and Drewe's own dawning adulthood occurred just as Australia entered a new era. Drewe revisits the period before the advent of television when boys and girls went to movie matinees and had their high spirits kept in check by the strict cinema owner Mr Palmer. Hours were spent, fairly routinely and with no fear of danger, in parked cars outside pubs, waiting for Dad, who was inside 'doing business' (p. 81). Drewe describes with real affection the naïve obsession with all things American evinced by people like his friend Nick Howell's father, who 'wore bow ties, read American magazines and spoke in an imitation American drawl' (p. 63). Then there were the teenage crazes for rock-'n'-roll music and jazz. Parents' social lives revolved around dinner dances and cocktail parties. Council workers were given carte blanche to spray poisonous toxins around people's homes in the interests of public health and to protect them from pests such as Argentine ants! It was a more gullible community, a more malleable and docile society,

more respectful of the role of statesmen and politicians in determining the course of people's lives. It was a time when *Peyton Place* was considered shocking and 'commos' were thought to be hiding beneath every bed. And, of course, it was a time when back doors were never locked, a trusting habit that was destroyed by the fear of the night-prowling murderer testing their doors.

Drewe's parents were exponents of 1950s conservatism and its obsession with order, family values and proper appearances. 'It was dawning on me that my parents each had two names to suit their two personalities. There was Roy or Royce, and there was Dorothy or Dot.' (p. 79) As he matures, Drewe notices that adults assume 'roles' and he begins to see through his parents: 'my father's behaviour was like a different person's. He was much more the boss.' (p. 77)

Drewe's portrait of his father as the 'Dunlop company man' is marked by ambivalence. There is a nostalgic affection for the naivete of his father's acceptance of 'everything Dunlop' which the author sees as being part of that lost, more innocent world which ended in the early 1960s. 'In a way, Dunlop was like a country ... and my father, as the country's local consul, entertained them at his consulate' (p. 96). The 'Bumper' shoe debacle is another incident in the catalogue of Dunlop indignities and hilarities to which the Drewe children were subjected by their unswervingly loyal parents: 'We were a one-hundred-percent Dunlop family' (p. 89).

Drewe criticises the hypocrisy, narrow-mindedness and the ways in which people were stifled under the weight of community opinion during the 1950s. His loving mother's vitriolic reaction to the news of his girlfriend's pregnancy is a particularly painful instance of how severely breaches of conventional morality were judged and how they were not easily, if at all, forgiven. Having become 'this sudden stranger to me' (p. 244), his mother suddenly dies, unable to reconcile herself to events in her son's life. Her death is all the more poignant as Drewe describes her funeral – attended chiefly by 'Dunlop men' – as the burial of 'Mrs Dunlop'. His mother is lost to him and the process is complete that had begun with a boy's gradual realisation that the parents, who seemed so monumental, were really multifaceted and ultimately frail human beings. 'In the sandy landscape she was a busy little speck' (p. 83), observes the boyish Drewe and we can see how such personal realisations are reflections of a larger loss of faith in authority which Western society has experienced in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The Shark Net is also about the collisions between fact and myth-making in journalism and reporting. We are shown the ordinary side of a 'monster' who became a local legend: 'He looked like a criminal in a B-movie or in *Dick Tracy*. He really was the stereotype of a crook.' (p. 5) The victims in his case were fantastically labelled by the press: 'the "naked divorcee"...the "beautiful socialite-heiress", the "shapely brunette" and the "studious babysitter"' (p. 16). When assigned the task of covering Cooke's trial, Drewe finds it ethically unsettling, for having encountered the murderer before he became the monster and the myth, Drewe cannot easily reconcile a prior knowledge of the man with the subsequent horrific murders.

Drewe describes the journalist's keen need to find an angle on a story: 'I wanted even more than a shark attack on a noted victim. I'd learned my news values. The shark should be of record size and rare species. And I needed a garrulous old-timer as a witness.' (p. 286) He reveals the corruption of the newsmaking industry which can suppress stories, if powerful corporate players dictate it. He also shows the ironic and accidental nature of much of news writing – while he was chasing a story about sharks, his colleague scooped a page-two story about Richie Male's drowning, after Drewe had himself been swimming with Richie. In a rare coincidence, the first news reports of Cooke's trial were supplanted on the front pages by Jack Ruby's slaying of Lee Harvey Oswald, President Kennedy's suspected assassin. The coincidence of these three legends of murder and assassination coming together into news items all on the same day demonstrates the volatile and fickle nature of the news business.

The memoir records the author's rites of passage. He describes the landmarks which determined his later progress towards a career involving words and writing. There were 'monumental' events such as his first encounter with an intellectual, his father's colleague, Bob Blackwood (p. 124) and his burgeoning intellectual curiosity: 'I found older people's enthusiasm quite contagious when they knew what they were talking about' (p. 126). Later, he flirts briefly with cartooning and then begins to 'publish' in the *Chucklers' Weekly*. 'I loved being published and seeing my name in print' (p. 186). He graduates to the *West Australian* as a cadet reporter and is given the tasks of typing up weather news and assembling food prices. When his father returns from Singapore with the gift of an Olivetti *Lettera* typewriter, the young cadet has the equipment with which to write stories for sale 'in his spare time'. His real sense of vocation as a writer is born.

This portrait of Perth in the 1950s and 60s demonstrates how landmark events within a community are just as important in the development of the public psyche as events of national importance. *The Shark Net* documents the historic occasion when Western Australia's last execution took place at Fremantle Gaol on 26 October 1964, and, leading up to that culminating moment, of course, the widespread fear evoked by this serial murderer's stalking of random victims in polite, trusting, comfortable, and formerly uneventful suburbs. *The Shark Net* also records the great 'Sparrow Panic' (p. 107) and other matters of public record which give us an insight into public attitudes and how these have changed over the ensuing decades. It documents the strict division of Perth society: the 'snobs from Nedlands' (p. 117) who swam at Cottesloe Beach and whose snubs Cooke felt so deeply, and the Scarborough Beach 'clubbies' and motorbike gangs who frequented the 'legendary Snake Pit' (p. 118). It records the ironies inherent in the fact that Rottneest Island, which had been a place of imprisonment for over a century, became "'The Isle of Girls", the most fancy-free place in the country' (p. 145) and a mecca for teenage boys looking for 'action'. It describes the time when Perth became famous, first for hosting the Commonwealth Games in 1962, and then for the night when Colonel Glenn in the Mercury capsule, flew overhead, and Perth became briefly incandescent and known thereafter as the 'City of Light' (p. 222).

Drewe's 'portrait of a monster' is troubled, even, at times, sympathetic. Eric Cooke's madness is attributed to a lifetime of feeling disgruntled and outcast. His brief stint in the

army taught him three skills he was later to use as a murderer: 'firearms, motor vehicles and night-vision' (p. 51). When he is captured, he is not so much upset, as smug: 'One of the team at last, and quietly pleased and proud to have his efforts finally recognised' (p. 10). Drewe goes further though in recognising the same insecurities in himself and others. When Cooke winks at him in the courtroom, Drewe can't help but feel pleased. 'And there was another thing, something pretty horrible: part of me had also responded gratefully to recognition from a celebrity ... I felt recognised, in the centre of things ... I liked the feeling' (p. 11).

Memories often are attached to particular landscapes and settings, and Drewe ponders what makes Western Australia different: 'West Australians were accustomed to the Nullarbor Plain and the Indian Ocean keeping unpleasantness at bay' (p. 104). When they were about to move west, his mother read 'that Perth was the world's most isolated city ... Everything I saw was the Great Unknown' (p. 27). Drewe lovingly records its foreign appeal and the fact that it was peopled by 'Sand People' (p. 33) whose weathered faces connect them to the 'Dunes' where they live: 'Around their edges – noses, ear tips, cheeks, shoulders – they were pink and fraying ... From a distance most of the adults seemed stained a smooth reddish-brown – my paintbox burnt sienna' (p. 34). He and his brother Bill welcome the new horizons that Perth and growing up extend to them: 'Where else but the white sand could there be such prospects for pleasure and danger?' (p. 42). Going to school without shoes is one of many western peculiarities to which the Drewe boys learn to adapt. Drewe discovers that 'some boys also ate themselves' (p. 41), that the neighbourhood boys liked digging tunnels in the sandy soil, and 'urinating on moss' (p. 56). His theory being that 'Perhaps growing up in the dry heat among the cardboard-coloured vegetation and pale dunes had given them an aversion to anything lush and green' (p. 57). Drewe describes his gradual seduction by this place, and how, on the brink of leaving, years later, he felt nostalgic for its 'unique charms' even before he'd 'deserted them' (p. 351).

His parents, on the other hand, became obsessed with rules and somewhat irrational fears of the wild, uncontrollable aspects of their new environment. Drewe's father feared sharks, weather, the kelp with its 'sinister kelpish intentions' (p. 40) and the undertow of the surf. His mother was anxious about the dreaded 'boiling brain' (p. 37) and imposed 'the no-crowds rule' (p. 76) to try to protect her boys from polio germs. Her anxiety about "'lurkers" – axe- knife- saw- and scissor-sharpener, window-cleaners, gardeners, odd-job men, Italian fishermen, Yugoslav vegetable and mushroom growers, manure-men...catching her unawares' (p. 101) turns out to be well-founded, as all of Perth would soon discover.

'What happened?' (p. 18) is the question which haunts *The Shark Net*. As the line quoted from Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* surmises, 'You can only predict things after they have happened.' Why was his mother spared by Eric Cooke only to die, too young, at 47? Why did Cooke become a murdering monster? Why did his wife Sally stick by him, even though love had long since fled? Why did Sturkey get killed, when Drewe, who had encountered Cooke many times at close quarters, was passed over? There are no easy

answers to such questions, but they provoke the author and the reader, and insights are to be gained in considering them.

Drewe's memoir is compelled by the need to confront the past in order to gain release from its tyranny. Shark nets are ultimately ineffectual: they 'keep in' as much as they 'keep out'. It's better perhaps to swim right out into the current of memory, and experience both the turbulence and the dead calm to be found in those waters.

ABOUT ROBERT DREWE

Robert Drewe was born in Melbourne in 1943, but grew up in Perth, where he first began writing as a young reporter on the *West Australian*. He is the author of five internationally acclaimed novels, *The Savage Crows* (1976), *A Cry in the Jungle Bar* (1979), *Fortune* (1986), *Our Sunshine* (1991), and *The Drowner* (1996). He has also published two books of short stories: *The Bodysurfers* (1983), which has been adapted for film, television, radio and the theatre, and *The Bay of Contented Men* (1989), and two works of non-fiction, *Walking Ella* (1998) and *The Shark Net* (2000). As anthology editor, he produced *The Picador Book of the Beach* (1993) and *The Penguin Book of the City* (1997). His play *South American Barbecue* was first performed at Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre in 1991.

The Drowner won the Book of the Year Prize and the New South Wales, Victorian, South Australian and West Australian Premiers' prizes for fiction and literature, and the Adelaide Festival national literature prize. His other prizes include a Commonwealth Writers' Prize for *The Bay of Contented Men*, the National Book Council fiction prize for *Fortune*, and he has twice won the national Walkley Award for journalism. In 1997 he was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters by the University of Queensland in recognition of his 'outstanding contribution to Australian literature'.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does 'the shark net' of the title symbolise?
2. This case of serial murder has haunted several Western Australian writers. For example, Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* finds part of its inspiration in Eric Cooke's story. Try to find out more about the case by reading first-hand accounts of the events to discuss in association with the memoir.
3. This book, similar to John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, is a masterful mixture of reportage, memoir, fact and fiction. It's a work of memory by a fiction writer and journalist who recreates his childhood experiences and fictionalises fact. What did you think of this technique? How did it affect your enjoyment of and interest in the narrative?

4. 'To be a participant instead of an observer went totally against my training as a reporter' (p. 11). Does Drewe find it possible to remain simply an observer of Eric Cooke's case? How likely is it that a journalist can maintain impartiality?
5. We speak of murder as an unnatural act. Is it so unnatural? Is it understandable that deep-seated frustrations and aggressions should be expressed in this way?
6. In commenting that 'most murderers looked more like bank tellers or economics teachers or crayfishermen. But he didn't.' (p. 12) is Drewe pointing to biases in the legal system and society? Might Eric have received a more lenient sentence had he looked less like a murderer and been more repentant?
7. 'The government, the police and the suburbs sighed with relief. *Thank God!* Now life could go back to normal.' (p. 13) Drewe is being ironic here. If this memoir shows anything, it shows that no one and nothing is 'normal'. Discuss.
8. Writing a memoir inevitably wounds someone. How does the memoirist reconcile his own search for the 'truth' with other people's constructions of it and their possible desire for privacy?
9. 'They were experts at championing traditional behaviour while actually defying it.' (p. 164) How is this borne out by what you see of the Drewe family?
10. 'We West Australians were starved of celebrities and we revered Americans' (p. 165). Wasn't this equally true of the whole of Australia immediately after World War II? Are we still like this, albeit in a less overt way?
11. 'My mother was the smell of salt water, warm tanned flesh and the satiny femaleness of her bathing costume. She was the faint perished-rubber odour of her bathing cap' (p. 261). Drewe's descriptions appeal to the senses. As an exercise in memory, try to recall a now lost relative or friend and see how the senses are important to vivid recollections.
12. Discuss why Eric Cooke's retarded son Michael might have inspired such strong feelings in his father.
13. Examine the last paragraph of *The Shark Net* for its symbolic resonances and for how it relates to the memoir's themes. Discuss.
14. 'All my work has been a turning away from the outback,' says Drewe (*Time*, 13/3/2000, p. 67). Discuss with reference to *The Shark Net* and his fictions, such as *The Drowner* and *The Bodysurfers*. Is there still a temptation for Australian writers to dwell on the outback as a theme? Or is this part of our literary past?
15. Consider how journalism as a profession is portrayed in *The Shark Net*.

16. 'I'd spent my childhood and adolescence on this sandy moonscape. I was sure I had something to say about it. I just didn't know what.' (p. 295) Drewe took some forty years to 'make sense of events' (p. 295) in his life. What sense does this memoir make of all these tangled events?