

## Michael McGirr: Go Home said the Fish : A study of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*

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It's hard to imagine writing a novel in a bookshop. It's a bit like filming in a cinema or getting married in a crematorium. You're starting something where it's meant to finish up. But there is a bookshop in Paris that lends itself as much to wannabe authors as to tourists. Shakespeare & Co. has been patronized by no end of famous writers. The proprietor, George Whitman, claims to be a direct descendent of Walt Whitman, the American poet who is most famous in Australia for having his name misspelt as Whitlam in a prestigious but apparently insular local guide to literature. George offers anyone and everyone the hospitality of his upstairs library. If you're down on your luck, there are three or four bunks there as well. Paris isn't a cheap city. It can be worth the discomfort of bed bugs just to save a night's tariff.

But Shakespeare & Co. doesn't much appeal to Tim Winton because for all its bohemian atmosphere and in spite of its unsanitary accommodation, it offers a sanitized experience of literature with a capital 'L'. People flock to it now because it was a refuge for writers in the 1920s. There is a well-known picture of James Joyce wearing an eyepatch that was taken there. That picture now appears on the cover of a paperback edition of *Ulysses*, quantities of which are for sale on the very spot where the photographer must once have stood.

Tim Winton is an avid reader with a strong sense of the literary culture to which he now belongs. He is familiar with the work of his peers, supportive of some and dismissive of anything that smacks of preciousness. He still has a tendency, developed in his teenage years, of idolizing certain writers. His criterion for assessing work is simple and exacting: if he can't sleep, he will find himself in the middle of the night with a book in his hand. He will want it to have a life of its own; he will need to feel its pulse. The problem with Shakespeare & Co. is that it is a monument to a once-vibrant culture. Now, for all its charm, it is just an expensive bookshop. Winton knows where he can buy stuff cheaper, even in Paris.

Winton's *Cloudstreet* has some features in common with Joyce's *Ulysses*, the publication of which, in 1922, was one of the century's great achievements. Both books were written within walking distance of Shakespeare & Co. This is a coincidence, but a teasing one. Both books are elaborate reconstructions of a world from which the author is absent and to which he feels unable to return. *Ulysses* details a single day in the life of Dublin. By the time it was published, Joyce had not been in Dublin for seventeen years. He sent back for a tram timetable, but otherwise the book is a prodigious feat of memory. There is a comparable tale behind at least one other Australian book. George Johnston had been away from Melbourne, mostly on the Greek island of Hydra, for seventeen years when he completed *My Brother Jack*—a novel that evocatively details Melbourne on the cusp of its urban boom. It, too, is at pains to get the facts straight about when and where the trams ran and how they sounded. Ironically, part of *Cloudstreet* was also written on Hydra; another part was written in Ireland.

By the time he got down to writing the main section of *Cloudstreet* in a cafe on the bridge that leads from Shakespeare & Co. to Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, Winton had been away from Australia for nowhere near as long as Joyce or Johnston had been away from their homes. But he was a young man with a young family. The flat provided by the Australia Council was too small to allow much thinking space. He was forced out of doors. There were days writing that book when he had to pull a coat up to his ears to keep out the cold. He discovered the knack of sitting on a cup of coffee until shortly before it was too cold to drink. Like all his books, *Cloudstreet* was drafted longhand. Some days writing, like a game of cricket, had to be abandoned because of the weather.

It is not surprising then that *Cloudstreet* is a nostalgic book. Winton has said of the French that 'their crowning achievement is to make outsiders feel like a turd', and that when he saw Australian tourists during his time in Greece he'd follow them and 'drink up the sounds of their voices'.<sup>1</sup> Nostalgia, as a concept, has been sadly trivialized by a nostalgia industry that puts an absurd price on yellowing movie posters, restored radios and replicas of old lunch-boxes. These things have little real value. They are worth what people are prepared to pay for a sense of the past real enough to touch but small enough to giftwrap.

There are aspects of *Cloudstreet* that share a remote kinship with this kind of nostalgia. The book is riddled with the names of products that are either no longer available or no longer used in everyday life. Bairds department store, where Rose Pickles works on the switchboard, is one of those venerable institutions, like Buckley & Nunn in Melbourne or Mark Foys in Sydney, that has long since given way to the big department store chains. Velvet Soap is no longer a ubiquitous commodity; 'frigidaire' is scarcely used generically for refrigerator. Nightingale Seamless Stockings and Helena Rubinstein's Estrogenic Hormone Cream are no longer on the market. The *Daily News*, for which Toby Raven works, has gone out of business and Perth has become a one-paper town. Far from being the high-water mark of West Australian dining, the Palace Hotel no longer exists. Nor does the ladies' lounge of the Savoy. It's lucky there are no longer any widgies because there is no Snakepit for them to gather in. Cole of California sundresses are a thing of the past; Jantzens are still in business, but not with woollen swimming costumes. Oriel's beloved Randolph Scott is remembered only by movie buffs. Porphyry Pearl, a sickly sweet sparkling wine has, thank God, lost out to cheap champagne.

Lester's appearance as a vaudeville performer is laced with the paraphernalia of another time:

*Most Saturday nights she'd hear him from the club kitchen where she kept the urns boiling for tea and buttered pumpkin scones and set fresh Anzacs out on the club china. She could hear Lester on the Jew's harp, comb and paper and nowadays the ventriloquist's dummy he'd bought in a pawn shop for a mysterious sum. (144)*

Similarly, there are portraits of office workers from another era:

*In the cramped carriages, men smelled of serge and peppermints; their hair was all at the top of their heads and their ears stood out like taxi doors. The women smelled of cologne and stale sweat ... the older women's feet seemed gnarled and disturbed by shoes whose platform soles looked better suited to knocking in nails than walking on. (180)*

Some of the slang that comes naturally to Lambs and the Pickles would send contemporary readers to their dictionaries: staggerjuice, zacs, deaners, having the painters in and so on. The wonderful word drongo is now falling into disuse in favour of the ubiquitous fuckwit and asshole. Even Parisians, notorious for their disdain for English, will happily employ those words. Yet there are neither fuckwits nor arseholes in *Cloudstreet*, only plenty of drongos.

If Joyce is nostalgic for a *place* to which he can't return, Winton is nostalgic for a *time*. The period in which the book is set is just beyond the fingertips of his own experience, its nostalgia an articulate lament for a period of greater moral security, greater cultural diversity, a larger lexicon of words. The novel ends about the time at which Winton, born in 1960, dates his first memories. It draws on the experience of previous generations: his grandmother, a shop-keeper, *did* actually sell a birthday cake off the party table. She *did* live in a tent in the backyard. Her husband *was* an amateur performer. His mother and father met at the old Embassy Ballroom, the venue to which Toby Raven refuses to take Rose, preferring instead little-known Italian eateries. Toby's discovery of such venues anticipates their patronage by the cultural pseudo-elite he embodies. Raven's brand of sophistication means that nothing is ever allowed to be strange, one thing is as much his as another. More profoundly, the end of an age of relative innocence is signalled by the inexplicable banality of the Nedlands Monster, who overshadows the final quarter of the novel and turns out to be a mousy family man. This kind of motiveless evil is counterpoised to the heroics of war, and the celebration of VE Day at one end of the book is balanced by the capture of the lone monster at the other by 'the whole defeated city'. (372)

The house Rose and Quick dream of, in a 'silent, antiseptic' street in a new suburb, made of 'scrubbed bricks' with a 'dinky letterbox' (404), is reminiscent of the area in which Winton himself grew up.

*This was in the raw suburbs of the 1960s when they basically went out and made a suburb with a bulldozer. They got the string and tape out and decided this was a street, that was a street. The state would build houses for people who couldn't build them, on raw upturned bush. It was by a swamp which is now a lake. At the time it was most assuredly a swamp.<sup>2</sup>*

These state houses figure prominently in early Winton stories such as 'Scission', and attempts to domesticate the bush are satirized in 'Wilderness'. 'Getting Ahead', in his first collection of stories, *Scission*, is almost an essay for the character of Oriel Lamb and is set mainly in a two-bedroom state house. When Oriel finally makes her peace with the house that has spent twenty years 'trying to itch us out', she compares it with the new suburbs:

*I don't know where I'd go anymore. Out there, she flung a hand in no direction at all, they're bulldozing streets and old places, fillin in the river, like they don't wanna leave any traces behind. (411)*

The etymology of the word 'nostalgia' points to other dimensions of meaning. It is Greek in origin and means a longing for home. This is the longing that undergirds *Cloudstreet* and contributes to its most beguiling complexities.

The character whose longing for home is most exquisitely painful is Fish Lamb. As a child, Fish is the most vibrant and lovable member of his family, a notorious practical joker. Then one day, on a family picnic, he gets caught in a net and nearly drowns. Only the determination of his mother, Oriel, beating on his chest and issuing demands in the form of prayers, brings him back to life. To the outside observer, he is permanently brain-damaged. After many years, when his brother Quick at last marries the girl next door, Rose Pickles, Fish insists on joining them on their honeymoon. As they head inland they pass through one silo town after another, 'out to where they are homeless, out to where they have never belonged' (415). Fish keeps wanting to see water. Finally, in a pique of helplessness, he shits himself. Quick and Rose love Fish but regard him as being as much a child as their baby, Wax Harry.

Fish's own perspective is different. He is no child. He is, in fact, the only character with a stronger will than Oriel. Because much of *Cloudstreet* is written in the third person it is easy to overlook the fact that there is a storyteller or narrator within the text itself. The opening sentences of the book are: 'Will you look at us by the river! The whole restless mob of us ... in the midst of our living' (1). This only makes sense if somebody is speaking to somebody else, otherwise there is no *us* and no *our*. There is a clue at the end of the scene in which Fish is seemingly brought back to life—not all of him comes back. In other words, there are two Fish Lambs in the story, the one who escapes and whose voice becomes one with that of the river, and the one who remains and becomes imprisoned in the vacant room at the heart of the house. *Cloudstreet* is an account given by one of these Fishes to the other. It is told by the one who got away to the one who longs continually to be reunited with his other half. This is the home he longs for; homemaking and wholeness are one and the same.

In spite of its epic quality, its guise as a saga spanning Australia's post-war coming of age, the whole novel takes place in a moment. The novel begins and ends in a single bittersweet scene that happens to be interrupted by four hundred pages. This is the scene in which Fish Lamb, losing control of his tongue and letting his shirt work its way out of his pants, breaks from the company of his extended family and re-enters the water. At both the beginning and the end, 'the sound of it has been in his ears all his life' (2). The long-awaited reunion of both Fish Lambs is a moment of healing. In that moment he knows the truth of the entire complex story that fills the novel. Not long before, when cleaning up Fish's mess, Quick had discovered that Fish's was 'not a body he recognise[d]' (417). Now Fish attains a momentary completeness. This is his homecoming.

*I feel my manhood, I recognise myself whole and human, know my story for just that long, long enough to see how we've come, how we've all battled in the same corridor that time*

*makes for us, and I'm Fish Lamb for those seconds it takes to die, as long as it takes to drink the river, as long as it took to tell you all this. (424)*

*Cloudstreet* is a story of extraordinary verbal dexterity, which only Fish Lamb, its least articulate character, is able to tell. His homecoming takes place, and the story is told, in the dawn moment at which Australia's first serial killer, the Nedlands Monster, is hanged. That moment is stretched indefinitely. It surfaces in phrases of interior monologue:

*I'm waiting in your long monastic breath, I travel back to these moments to wonder at what you're feeling and come away with nothing but the knowledge of how it will be in the end. You're coming to me, Fish, and all you might have been, all you could have hoped for is turning for you like the great river, gathering debris and nutrient and colour from every twist and trough of your story without you even knowing. (403)*

The novel provides occasional reminders, such as this, of where it is actually poised. Quick asks him why he feels sad. 'When I want the water' is his answer. When Quick tries to make his own escape, Fish relates to his story. 'They go in the water. To the big country' (192). He doesn't relate to Oriel because Oriel, by the sheer force of her will, held the two halves of him apart:

*It's like Fish is stuck somewhere. Not the way all the living are stuck in time and space; he's in another stuckness altogether. Like he's half in and half out. You can only imagine and still fail to grab at how it must be. Even the dead fail to know and that's what hurts the most. You have to make it up and have faith for that imagining. (69)*

Other characters experience the same kind of nostalgia as Fish's. The earliest memory of his father, Lester Lamb, is of being carried safely across a river by his own father in the middle of a storm. It is a memory of finding security in the middle of terror, a memory of homecoming that preoccupies Lester so much that he repeats it on three separate occasions in the novel. Lester was born in 1894; the incident must have taken place before the turn of the century, in the long prehistory to which the novel often alludes.

Part of that prehistory includes the fact that Oriel Lamb's mother died when she was young and her father remarried, making Oriel a kind of leftover and a rival for her stepmother. Both resented and at the same time expected to bring up the new family, Oriel watched her beloved step-brother, Bluey, head off to the First World War. Bluey was killed in Palestine in an incident identical to one described in the story 'The Woman at the Well' (in *Scission*), an incident with roots in Winton family lore. In fact, Oriel fell in love with Lester because he was a substitute for Bluey—the two men made her laugh in the same way. But she also develops a hard shell to protect her. She doesn't say the words 'I'm sorry' between 1911 and 1951. The first apology in forty years is occasioned when she defeats G. M. Clay, ex-AIF, in business and realizes the human cost of this to Mrs Clay. Her pyrrhic victory leads to one of Oriel's rare moments of stillness. The family goes for a picnic by the river:

*Her life always came back to the river. A long time ago she'd been baptised in a river. She'd kissed Lester Lamb by the river the first time long before that ... that's what had brought them here to this life with one son gone and one missing and a feeling in your chest that you didn't know yourself anymore. (176)*

Oriel longs for all the broken pieces of her life to flow back together.

*She notes again the ugliness of her feet all distorted with corns and bunions. She still remembers her own bare running feet on the dirt of the home paddock when the world was a place given by God for the pleasures of children, when all that was good was unbroken. (251)*

The call home is also experienced powerfully by Rose, Dolly and Quick, in turn. For Rose, it is the voice of Fish that calls her beyond Toby Raven's posturing. For Quick, the caller is an Aboriginal man who turns up from time to time in various unlikely guises, and who is ultimately revealed to be a secret witness of the entire tale. Dolly finally makes her peace with her daughter Rose when Rose sees something of Fish in her mother's grief: 'The old woman lay flat on the bed, bawling silently ... she'd seen that ugliness before, the huge wordless grief of babies, in Quick's brother.' (357)

Their reconciliation, which is made possible by Dolly's acknowledgement of her parentage, is instrumental in the final homecoming of all the survivors in *Cloudstreet*. In every case, the call home is a call to completion.

Tim Winton has often commented on the significance of place, and specifically landscape, in his work:

*In my upbringing, landscape took enormous precedence over architecture. Even though I spent most of my childhood in the suburbs of Perth, I lived such an outdoor life that by the time I was in my twenties, all the signals I had picked up from the world and the world beyond came mediated through landscape rather than through human endeavours.*

*Cloudstreet*, he says, is the closest he has ever come to producing an indoor book:

*Cloudstreet is essentially about two families trying to inhabit the same house. But it wouldn't make sense without all that surrounding nature. Flannery O'Connor talks about the American south where the figure of Jesus flits from tree to tree out of the corner of everybody's eye. Landscape exists at the edge of consciousness, as an aspect of the divine. It's certainly like that in Australia. You can never free yourself from the landscape: the minute you turn away, it starts reaching for your imagination again.*<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, the house the Pickles inherit at No. 1 Cloud Street has a key role to play in the novel. It is more than just a stage on which the Lambs and Pickles play out their saga. Like the river, the house has a personality and ecology of its own, which reaches after the imagination of those who settle there. *Cloudstreet* is a restless book. It spans twenty years and creates a universe within a single house; its walls may be permanent but its horizons are continually receding. Part of the novel's energy derives from the carbon chains of verbs it strings out, often with playful internal rhymes. When, for example, Oriel Lamb sets out to force G. M. Clay out of business with the superiority of Cloudstreet's home-made ice-cream they 'turned the churns, skimmed, sluiced, measured and poured' (170). The violent death of Quick Lamb's schoolmate, Wogga McBride, leads Quick to discover 'how quiet he was inside': Wogga would have been 'dragged and ricked and torn and wedged and burst and broken' (93). Lester doesn't just get busy, he 'whipped and dipped'. In the first of two miraculous draughts of fish in the novel, the catch comes 'arching, beating, sliding, bucking, hammering' (216). Vitality spreads even to inanimate objects, even to words.

At the moment of Dolly and Rose's reconciliation, there is one of many blurrings of the distinction between architecture and emotion: 'The sound her mother made taking breath was like a window being torn from its hinges' (357). Conversely, the house reacts in an almost human manner to emotional events: 'The house twisted its joists, hugging inwards, sucking in air, and the two women wept together on the sagging bed' (357). At other times, the house breaths, sighs, itches, moans, bruises and laughs. It is sometimes hard to tell if it is the house or the people in it that are quiet or boisterous: 'There'd been a silence in the place for the last year or two, an aching, tourniqueted silence.'

Like the house, the landscape—and especially the river—is personified in the novel. In fact, one of the most subtle features of *Cloudstreet* is the way in which landscape and architecture overlap. It is because of this overlapping that Fish's final homecoming to the river does not rupture the homecoming of the rest of the clan to the house. The intimate relationship between landscape, language and architecture is further explored in Winton's most recent book, *The Riders*:

*Scully had long thought architecture was what you had instead of landscape, a signal of loss, of imitation. Europe had it in spades because the land was long gone, the wildness no longer even a memory. But this ... this was where architecture became landscape. It took scale and time, something strangely beyond the human. This wasn't in the textbooks.*<sup>4</sup>

There is a prehistory to the house at No. 1 Cloud Street, which had been a refuge for Aboriginal women before the Lambs and the Pickles ever laid eyes on it. They were evicted when one of the women killed herself in the room in which Fish comes to live. After this the house 'held its breath' (36). When the Pickles inherit the place, it is described as 'this great continent of a house'. They are aware that it 'doesn't belong to

them' (41). It is a place that Rose 'explores' (39), a place in which strange fauna are found: a pig that speaks in tongues and a bird that doesn't quite lay golden eggs but, at least shits money.

At the beginning of 1949, Oriel Lamb moves out of the house into a tent, where she remains camped until the dying stages of the novel. This is her frontier. People think that she's had enough of the kids. In fact, the house has been reaching for her imagination. It has been telling her to 'wait'. A practical woman, 'Oriel wasn't the sort to argue with a living breathing house' (134). Oriel has to move beyond her role as a colonizer; this is one function of the military images surrounding her character. She and Lester try to impose on the house—he builds a fence across the backyard and puts up corrugated iron lavatories; she puts a sign out the front. Labelling, or even naming, is a gesture of power and control, and Oriel is the only person who hangs a sign out the front of the building. Indeed, the very establishment of the shop changes the local name of the area. At one level, the house replicates the history of the continent on which it sits. The nostalgia of the book is a longing to call that place home.

## NOTES

1 Interview with Janet Hawley, *Good Weekend*, 23 March 1991, p. 12.

2 Michael McGirr, 'A conversation with Tim Winton', *Image* (Summer, 1995), p. 49.

3 McGirr, 'A conversation', p. 44.

4 Tim Winton, *The Riders* (Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1994), p. 49.

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