

## Marilyn Anthony: Review of *Cloudstreet*

**Author:** Marilyn Anthony

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Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet*, McPhee Gribble, Australia, 1991. 426 pp, \$19.95.

*Cloudstreet* is a powerful exploration of the miraculous and divine in ordinary people's lives. It is about life as a gift and about the goodness of life. It is rich in humour, though it accurately charts grief, loneliness and pain. The characters are exceptionally well drawn. They speak with voices that are real and the story unfolds in settings so familiar to Western Australian readers, and so vividly realised for readers elsewhere, that the vast content of the book holds together with an extraordinary sense of truth. What you remember, after reading *Cloudstreet*, is not only the characters and the little and heroic events in their lives, but the sense of symmetry and wholeness that Winton conveys about their existence. *Cloudstreet* is a novel of great ambition, great beauty and huge conviction. That it connects with readers is demonstrated by extraordinary sales - forty thousand copies in Australia in the first ten months after publication. It has won critical acclaim, with a Banjo Award in this country and a Deo Gloria in Britain.

The storyline is slight. Two wounded families come to a wounded, unhappy house in West Leederville beside the railway, in about 1944, and live side by side in it for twenty years. Shattered by separate tragedies and apparently different in every other way, they rebuild their lives and gradually come to terms with themselves, each other, and the house. One family, the Pickleses, believe in luck. Conventionally shiftless, except for the daughter, Rose, they leave life to take care of itself. The other family, Oriel and Lester Lamb and their six children, are hard-working, God-fearing battlers, whose lives have been torn apart by the drowning of the family favourite and the failed miracle of his partial recovery. The Lambs of God, people call them. They believe in work and family and the nation, and struggle to regain their belief in God.

The Pickleses come from Geraldton. *Cloudstreet* is their house, willed to Sam by his cousin Joel, whose hotel was built with his racetrack winnings. It's a quirky irony that Joel's unexpected death proves lucky for the Pickleses, (giving them a home and also, indirectly, bringing them the Lambs), when their luck had seemed to depend on his generosity while he was alive. Sam is a compulsive gambler who has lost so badly and consistently that the family is dependent on Joel for board. While Sam works on the guano islands off the coast, his wife Dolly works in the bar and spends afternoons with an American Catalina pilot in Room 36 of the Eurythmic Hotel. Dolly drinks more than she should, is good-looking and restless. Her affairs are wretched, matching how Dolly feels about herself, but they do provide a nervous sexual edge to living. Of Sam and Dolly's three children, only Rose is developed as a character. Passionate, attractive and uncompromising, Rose has a fierce strength that propels her out of the fatalistic Pickles ethos and allies her, ultimately, with the person she most resembles, Oriel Lamb. For the Pickleses, the house is an amazing stroke of luck, a godsend, for Sam loses all the fingers of his right hand shortly before Joel's death, and it seems he may never work again.

The Lambs come to Cloud Street as tenants. They remain tenants, to the Pickleses' great good fortune, but they also become successful shopkeepers, (with a delicatessen in their side of the house), and expert makers and sellers of the best ice-cream in Perth.

They are poor, though not so poor, as Quick Lamb points out, that they really needed to patch their pillowcases with old pyjamas. With three sons and three daughters living, the Lambs are steadfast believers who count their blessings until Fish, "the funniest, happiest, stupidest kid", drowns at the age of nine in the estuary at Margaret River.

Lester and his eldest boy, Quick, actually drown Fish, in their frantic attempt to save him. In a haunting account of the disaster, Winton has Oriel, on the beach, see her husband and the two boys apparently walking on the surface of the water, until the awful instant when the lamp goes out and Fish is gone. Finally retrieved, he is brought to his mother, who beats the water out of him and the life back into him. But Oriel cannot bring back Fish's soul, and not all of his mind has come back.

For the remaining twenty years of his earthly existence, Fish, the narrator of the novel, lives as if "stuck somewhere... half in and half out". He has to be tethered whenever he is near water, and all he yearns for is the "Big Country" he saw in the moment of his dying. He does not recognise his mother, cannot seem to see her, and eventually Oriel leaves the house and lives in a tent in the yard.

There is great vibrancy and immediacy in Winton's writing. It is prose that resonates with allusion, and with the flavour and music of nonconformist hymns. It pulses, too, with a sense of the vast inclusiveness of human existence. But the novel's narrative point of view, the language and the tone also work to strengthen its structure, its assertion of symmetry and meaning, and in a real sense, this is how *Cloudstreet* carries its own conviction.

Much of the novel's important action - the scenes where the characters themselves understand something momentous is happening, or some new and deep connection between them is being realised - takes place on the river or its banks. Winton has an extraordinary gift for evocative description and for conveying a sense of doubleness, too. We see this repeatedly in his writing about the river - the Swan at Nedlands foreshore, and between Crawley and Fremantle in particular - and in the wheatbelt episodes of the novel, where the country is imaged as a sea of wheat, over which the injured rooshooter Quick sees Fish, rowing in an orange box. It's on the river that Rose and Quick first really see one another, after years of living in the same house. It's on the river that Quick and Fish make the journey that bonds them forever and it's where important truths are spoken. Oriel and Quick go prawning and speak together as adults for the first time. Lester and Quick go out in their boat, "a whole river of time" before the younger man, and the talk is of life, of what matters, of what it means to love. The layers of meaning, the special significances of words, dreams and actions, are given force by the potent symbolism of the river. The people Winton writes about are mostly unaware, or only dimly aware, of their significance. Like us, they live with only the slightest sense of the greatness of the adventure they are in. But the greatness keeps breaking in. An image from *Four Quartets* - "The river is within us, the sea is all about us" came often to mind, the first time I read *Cloudstreet*, for Winton consistently uses image and allusion to create a sense of the unconscious doubleness and continuous flow of creation: The river, the people in it, the people who are it, the life that infuses both.

There are moments in life - the birth of a child, the experience of love, the experience of near death - when we are intensely aware of life, of connectedness, and the extraordinary force of the universe that moves through us. What we see in *Cloudstreet* is a pushing out of the edges of this sort of realisation. Miracles, signs, intimations of the life beyond abound. Some are beautiful, some grotesquely funny. Ordinary people experience them and the telling is so vivid it commands acceptance. Characters glow like 60 watt light bulbs. Stars fill the river. Quick comes face to face with himself on a bush road. A pig speaks in tongues. People share dreams, or one person's dream becomes another's memory. A fish is caught that yields mint-new coins with the year of Fish's birth on them, and he wears them round his neck when he returns to the water. A black man appears at different, distant points along the same remote, country road, and knows where Quick lives, though they've never met before. A black man flies out of the sun on the day Fish dies and is at the river when Quick's boat sinks beneath its weight of fish. The pig and the black man seem to be guarding Cloudstreet, guarding Oriel, when a murderer prowls outside her tent. The ghosts haunting Cloudstreet are pressed out through the walls by the power of love.

Winton's characters are ordinary people who are heroic in exceptional ways. They believe in believing, even if they don't always understand how or what to believe. They survive the ordeals of fire and water, the death of children, the loss of parents, the loss of faith, love and belief in self. "I want my country back", says Oriel. Winton writes with a dazzling purity of vision about these characters and about the mirroring and symmetry of their experience. But he achieves something else and it confirms his seriousness as a writer interested in more than the lives and relationships of individuals. Great literature challenges us to understand the values of the society we live in and the tensions between these and the values we live by as individuals.

Part of *Cloudstreet*'s greatness lies in the way it confronts the reader with the difficult issues that don't go away, but involve us generation after generation in a search for moral consistency.

This is a great, beautifully written, intricately constructed novel, about the power of love and the deep interconnectedness of all things. It is about life as a gift and about how, through love, we connect with others, with the infinite, and with the infinite in ourselves.

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