

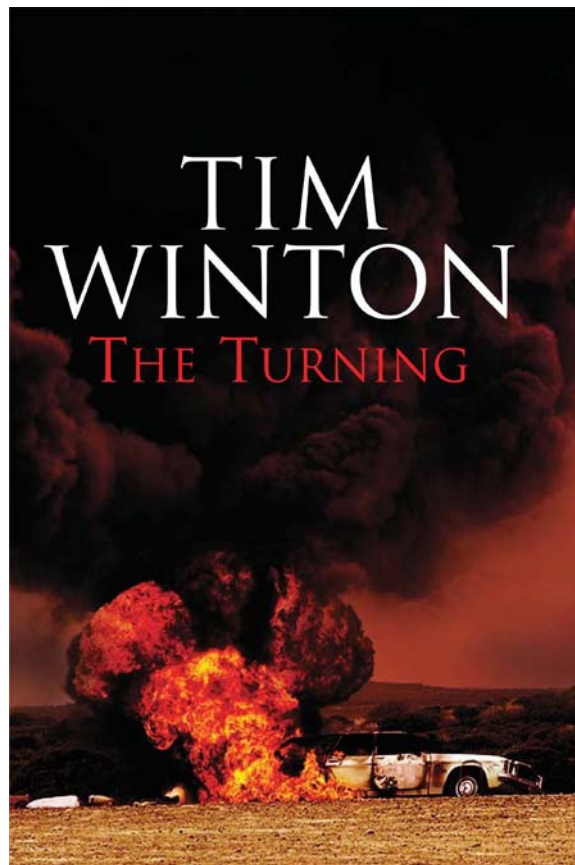
# PICADOR

## AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS

Tim Winton

### THE TURNING



Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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## THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

*'In the hot northern dusk, the world suddenly gets big around us, so big we just give in and watch.'* (p 15)

In these seventeen stories, Tim Winton traverses familiar territory, but views it through the prism of the short story, making the journey even more enticing. He takes you on a selective encounter with a number of people each of whom could have been a central character in any one of his novels. Life is presented as a grand paradox — these small lives denote the immensity and mysterious grandeur of the world they live in. Although the title might suggest a pattern of people being 'turned' by events onto new paths, the truth is that life is not based on the pattern of a linear narrative—problem/ climax/ resolution. Instead it's a cyclical sequence of this pattern which occurs over and over and over again. Winton takes comfort not from the simplistic notion that people can use love or hope to change their lives. He instead recognises that love changes moments of our lives—that goodness often makes a difference which is undone almost immediately by the unforeseen circumstances which 'the world' throws up at us. The opening quotation from T.S. Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday' is suggestive of this theme too (and reminiscent of the same theme in *The Riders*) where it's the journey that matters, not the end result. Set in a fictional place called Angelus and another fishing village called White Point, these are universal stories about ordinary lives lived any place, anywhere. The world turns and we turn with it. We want to see a pattern of hope/redemption and crisis/resolution, but in the end, the world simply turns.

One of the most intriguing and disturbing aspects of this collection is the style of narration in which stories and characters intersect, the time frame moves from past to present and back again, and the same events are seen through different eyes. Linking it all are a number of characters—Vic Lang and his family(who appear most regularly), the brothers Max and Frank(Leaper), and Max's wife Raelene, the tragic Boner McPharlin and his friend Jackie Martin, Peter Dyson and Fay Keenan, and others who are unnamed. How their stories intersect is best discovered on a second reading. For example, read the opening story 'Big World' which mentions the bonfire at Massacre Point (p 12) and then the different interpretations of that event in 'Damaged Goods' (pp 64-5) and in 'Boner McPharlin's Moll' (pp 280-2). How events are viewed differently is patently obvious when you read the latter, and then read about 'the legendary Slack Jackie' (p 61) in an earlier story. Things are never quite what they seem.

Childhood's effect on adult lives is a predominant theme. Each character attempts to escape the past by trying to 'get away' from home. They all dread being stuck in this small town, but of course it's impossible to escape who we are. The narrator in 'Big World' 'dreams of the big world beyond' (p 6) but discovers grandeur in the landscape around him, in a burst of insight (pp 14-5). Vic, Max and Leaper spend their lives trying to forget their childhoods, but are haunted by them wherever they go. Peter Dyson returns home when tragedy strikes his family and re-discovers old wounds. Agnes Larwood seems to rise above her impoverished childhood, but will never really escape it, and nor will Brakey, who is her observer. And Jackie finally realises that *'in the rush to outgrow the small-town girl I was, I'd left more of myself behind than the journey required.'* (p 292)

Many of the central characters are damaged by upbringings in which they've suffered emotional or physical abuse, and there's a lurking suggestion that the 'damagers' have been damaged in turn by their own parents. This cycle of abuse begins with a theme of bullying in childhood which is a constant undercurrent informing the idea of domestic and

institutionalised violence in adult life. For police and state corruption is another looming menace in this work which is seen through the microcosm of how it effects and ruins several lives, and how it is also related to the idea of patterns of abuse being repeated in a vicious circle(cycle). Vic Lang's father Bob, and mother Carol, are damaged beyond repair by the corruption they become part of and Vic spends his life trying to make sense of it; Boner McPharlin is a living tragedy as a victim of the same corrupt cops, and his supposed 'moll' Jackie, discovers too late what has been done to all of them.

Winton's work is also about Australian society, what Australia is making of itself, and how its history is inescapable. He writes with an acid irony that *'everyone's middle class in this country now. Except for the unemployed and the dead. The city has swept past our old outpost. The bush has peeled back like the sea before Moses. Progress has made straight the way until terracotta roofs shimmer as far as the eye can see.'* (p 52) On a micro level this sort of decay begins with the people in power — Tony Macoli, the school bully who becomes a merchant banker; the damaged Agnes Larwood who becomes a surgeon, and the police who protect them who are nearly all 'bent' or forced to say nothing about the crimes they observe. Hence, Vic's teenage attraction to those who were damaged, and his adult mission to save people from themselves as a lawyer devoted to the cause of the underdog. Maybe he can make up for all those souls who were injured in his youth?

Lurking in the underswell of this social commentary is the Indigenous history of this country, for Winton's work is always about the landscape and its power to suggest the history which lies beneath the land — it being a tangible evidence of our spirituality. *'The more I let myself think about it the less new everything seemed.'* (p 49) Indigenous people are referred to in several stories — Vic's memory of his Aboriginal opponents' fear of walking home alone to their hostel after basketball (p 192) or his encounter with the Aboriginal prisoners (pp 199, 312-3); the Jones family of Aboriginals (p 39) who when the narrator returns as an adult are being evicted from their home (p 52); even the location of Boner's bonfire which is a seminal event attended by several characters at 'Massacre Point' has a resonance not to be ignored in such a narrative. *'And beneath the crust, rising and falling with the tide, the soup, the juice of things filters down strong and pure and mobile as time itself finding its own level ... All the dead alive in the land'* (p 50).

Winton's feeling for the spiritual power of the environment is suggested by elegiac passages describing its raw beauty and its restorative power (eg *'The sun flattens itself against the saltpan and disappears. The sky goes all acid blue and there's just this huge silence. It's like the world's stopped'* (p 14)) and by his symbolic use of setting. (eg in 'Small Mercies', the pool's filth vividly denotes Dyson's guilt and self-revulsion (p 71); the fog in the story of that title is descriptive of Vic's dilemma as a 'straight man' in a world of bent cops; in 'Aquifer' the swamp is symbolic of the secrets we all harbour). Healing, renewal or new beginnings are often suggested by fire, too, with the bonfires mentioned throughout these stories, and incidents such as the burning of the Kombi (p 14), the death of Strawberry Alison (pp 64-5), and the Larwoods' fire (pp 129-130). Perhaps most powerfully, water features in Winton's recurring settings and themes, and although it relates directly to his own life living on or around the coast of Western Australia, it is also employed in a metaphorical or symbolic sense.

The fragile nature of friendship is revealed in these stories in all its power and its pathos. Several people's relationships come adrift — Biggie's friend realises that their partnership had been based on his *'feeling somehow senior and secure in himself'* (p 13), Raelene suffers a guilty horror at her misgivings about Sherry and Dan's intentions (pp 144-5), and Jackie realises that her best friend Erin has always prized her superiority and that *'it was all a performance. We weren't friends at all'* (p 257), which is undercut later when she guiltily acknowledges what a bad friend she's been to Boner: *'I hadn't been Boner's friend at all ... A friend didn't keep her eyes shut and walk away.'* (p 292)

Ambiguity fuels the immense spiritual and emotional power at the heart of these open-ended stories. Many end with a death which might lead to a new life; or a new beginning which might be a death. Raelene's terrible epiphany (p 161) and Leaper's tragic rescue (p 187) are events descriptive of both death and resurrection. Dyson's steely refusal to succumb to Fay's demands leaves him on a knife-edge of despair and hope (p 99) but

there's also a suggestion that her addiction may have been partly caused by their relationship. The unnamed character who returns to the scene of a childhood drowning realises that he'll continue to live with the memory for the rest of his life (p 53). Brakey harbours a secret about Agnes Larwood which could destroy her life (pp 131-2). And the way life offers up surprises we could only have dreamed of is clear from the opening story in this collection, in which the narrator recaps (with the benefit of hindsight) on what is going to happen to he and Biggie in coming days, weeks, and years. (pp 14-5)

The numinous and the spiritual inform this theme of the inexplicable mystery of life constantly. Strawberry Alison's strange premonition of her own death in a poem about two girls being consumed by fire (p 62); Carol Lang's death which *'was incandescent. Rage, love, forgiveness'* (p 63); or Vic's unlikely epiphany when he has finally overcome his fear of his inner violence (p 317) are all stories which are littered like biblical parables with notions of religious sacraments. They're about forgiveness, salvation, penance, redemption, healing, confession, succouring, communion, resurrection, baptism and saviour.

This collection offers the same cohesive impression that a novel does in that all the stories lock together to tell a tale of lives both large and small. Each adds up to a whole. Each ends with the 'epiphany' for which Winton is famous — moments of insight which are inspired by either the revelations of nature's grandeur or by the cruelty or love which human nature is capable of. All the stories' endings are open, for life is like this:

*'When a wave breaks, the water is not moving. The swell has travelled great distances but only the energy is moving, not the water. Perhaps time moves through us and not us through it ... the past is in us, and not behind us. Things are never over.'* (p 53)

The wheel spins, the gyre is in constant motion, as the world turns, and turns again.

## WRITING STYLE AND TECHNIQUES

1. Each of the seventeen short stories in this collection is an excellent example of the form. A good short story is *'a piece of fiction aiming at unity of characterization theme and effect ... which often details a decisive moment of life to produce a single narrative effect with the greatest economy of means and utmost emphasis.'* (Available at [http://www.bnv-bamberg.de/home/ulrich.koch/flg/gk\\_english/short\\_story/short\\_story](http://www.bnv-bamberg.de/home/ulrich.koch/flg/gk_english/short_story/short_story) [Accessed 20/10/2004]) Each should consist of what Joyce called an 'epiphany'—a moment of intense emotional insight. Compare these stories to Winton's other collections *Scission* (1985) and *Minimum of Two* (1987). Listen to a reading of another short story 'Gravity' by Winton on ABC Radio National's 'Short Story' segment. (Available at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/sstory/stories/s1197841.htm> [Accessed 20/10/04]) Shaun Charles posited in a recent review that *'At times I got the sneaking suspicion that Winton may have been working on a novel with Vic as the central character only to abandon it and turn the whole thing into a collection of short stories. Nonetheless it works.'* ('Twist in Time', The Courier Mail BAM, Saturday 16 October 2004, p 8) Instead, it is clear that this collection of short stories derives its power from the supposedly disconnected way it offers a range of tangents not possible in a novel. While a novel might have focused on either the Langs or the brothers Max and Leaper, or on other characters who feature less frequently, the short story collection has the wonderful power of making all of them central to their own stories; all of them 'main characters'. On a recent festival panel, Marion Halligan challenged those who unfavourably compare the short story to the novel by saying that *'there is a feeling that a short story is a Clayton's novel'*. Instead, she has immense respect for the economy of the form and how *'there is a sense in which the short story starts before you read it and goes on after you have finished reading it.'* (Available at <http://www.mwf.au/arc92short.html> [Accessed 20/10/04]) Discuss.
2. The use of voice in terms of narrative person and tense are complex here. First, second and third person are used to narrate these tales in past, present and future tense. For example, one of the predominant characters, Vic Lang, is seen through an omniscient third person narrator in 'Abbreviation'; through his wife Gail's eyes in first person in 'Damaged Goods'; his own voice in first person in 'On Her Knees'; an unknown narrative voice in second person in 'Long, Clear View'; Gail in first person again in 'Reunion'; Vic in first person in 'Commission'; third person by an unknown narrator in 'Immunity'; and third person again in 'Defender'. Max and Leaper's story is told in third person via Raelene's problems in 'The Turning', then their childhood in 'Sand', and then via their swim together as adults in 'Family'. The narrators in 'Big World', 'Aquifer' and 'Immunity' have no 'names' but are strong narrative 'voices' nevertheless. How did such use of voice affect the reading?
3. Characters are described with razor-sharp veracity. eg *'Biggie truly is a funny bugger ... wrote that for him.'* (p 9) Discuss a particularly vivid passage about a character.
4. Tim Winton's ear for Australian colloquial language and dialogue is always powerfully inventive. *'One eye's looking at you and the other eye's looking for you. He's kind of pear-shaped, but you'd be a brave bugger calling him a barge-arse.'* (p 4) He also comments on the Australian tendency to give often cruel nicknames to people like Strawberry Alison, Biggie, Bruno the Yugo, Slack Jackie and Boner. And his use of humour is always precise. On the 1967 Kombi: *'Our getaway vehicle is a garden shed on wheels'* (p 3). Do you find the Australian vernacular descriptive?
5. Religious references and symbols are prevalent in Winton's work, a fact which partly stems from an upbringing in which reading the bible was encouraged. For example, the snow dome which *'snowed birds as the van rocked, birds like stars.'* (p 161) or Gail's frustrated cry: *'Vic, you are the fucking Book of Lamentations.'* (p 313) Read Winton's interview with Rachel Kohn on the ABC program 'The Spirit of Things' (Available at <http://www.abc.net.au/r/relig/spirit/stories/s1198547.htm>

[Accessed 17/10/2004]). Place names are also often symbolic in Winton's work—Angelus is the prayer of thanksgiving associated with the annunciation of the forthcoming birth of Christ which suggests hope. White Point is suggestive of the symbolic associations of the word 'white' but also of the threat of the white pointer which looms in WA literature (such as Robert Drewe's *The Shark Net*) and which features horrifyingly in the story 'Family'. Titles of stories are also suggestive of religion (eg 'On Her Knees', 'Small Mercies', 'Reunion') and there are frequent references to concepts such as salvation, sacrifice and hope. What references to the bible or to other religious beliefs (such as Buddhism) did you discover?

6. Structure in such a seemingly disconnected and yet intimately connected narrative is achieved by the narrative devices mentioned above and by a deliberate subversion of chronological order. The timeline in this collection can be traced by identifying years or events, attitudes of the times, and key political events which are used to signpost the action (eg The hippy teachers who admire Jackie's flirtation with Boner (p 262); the 1996 Port Arthur massacre (p 314); the 2002 WA Royal Commission (p 227); the movies and clothes worn in the mid-1970s (p 254)). It covers the years from the 1960s to the present day, with all the stories appearing to be 'recalled' in 2002-4. The collection opens with a story narrated by a nameless character who doesn't reappear, although Vic Lang ('the copper's kid' (p 2)) and Boner's bonfire is mentioned in passing. This year (1975) is a pivotal point in the collection, since it marks the end of high school for these characters as well as Vic, Jackie and others. This establishes the idea of lives lived in close proximity but also in almost total ignorance of each other. Imagine if this had opened with 'Long, Clear View' which gives an idea of Vic's childhood. How would this have focused the collection? If you read carefully you'll discover the connections between a number of characters.

## THE AUTHOR

Tim Winton is one of Australia's most celebrated writers. He was born in Perth in 1960, and has published nineteen books for adults and children, which have been acclaimed both in Australia and abroad. He has traveled in various countries and lives in Western Australia with his wife and three children. His first novel *An Open Swimmer* won the 1981 Australian/Vogel Prize. He has won the Miles Franklin Award three times, for *Shallows* in 1984 and for *Cloudstreet* in 1991 and for *Dirt Music* in 2002. *The Riders* and *Dirt Music* were shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1995 and 2002. He's also won the Banjo Prize, the WA Premier's Prize, the Deo Gloria Award (UK), the Marten Bequest and the Wilderness Society Environment Award. His work has been translated into sixteen languages and adapted for stage, radio and film. His recent interview with Andrew Denton on ABC program 'Enough Rope' revealed some of the inspiration behind this work. (Available at <http://www.abc.net.au/enoughrope/stories/s1227915.htm> [Accessed 28 October 2004])

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *'Life moves on, people say, but I doubt that. Moves in, more like it.'* (p 37) The weight of the past on the present is one of the central themes. Discuss.
2. Childhood's indelible effects on adult lives is always an undercurrent in Winton's work. *'It's a survival thing, making yourself a small target ... I'm stuck in something I can't figure my way out of.'* (p 10) People become locked into patterns of behaviour in their youth which remain inescapable. The legacy of troubled childhoods is evoked by Vic, Max and Leaper, but perhaps more horrifying is the suggestion of what life will offer the children in these stories — Dyson's son Max (whose hero is ironically the unhappy footballer Leaper), Fay's abandoned daughter Sky, and Max and Raelene's poor neglected girls. How might they recall their childhoods? Is there much hope for them? *'Aquifer'* is a magnificent portrait of growing up, and the transition from 'innocence to experience'—overcoming fears, disobeying parents, meeting the 'dare' to visit the swamp, and realising that 'time wasn't straight' (p 43). Is maturation about discovering that parents are fallible? Vic and Gail 'liberated each other' (p 63) from over-vigilant parents. Are many adults' problems caused not by neglect, but by unnecessary restrictions or over-protection?
3. Winton once said that *'The teenager is a fascist and a fool as well as a seer. Adolescents are incredibly sensitive and inflexible. They are at a stage of real vulnerability which renders them open to fine and hideous things. The same vulnerability can make them visionaries and idealists as easily as bullies and automatons ... Real absolutists. Advertisers love them for it. Military recruiters, too.'* (Glyn Parry Interviews Tim Winton, *Magpies* Vol 2, No 1(May 1990): 17) *'A Long Clear View'* is an incisive portrait of teenage fears and obsession in Vic's reaction to the town's threats. *'You can hold out for as long as it takes to have everyone home safe, returned to themselves and how things used to be. You cock your weapon.'* (p 204) Vic compares himself to the image of Martin Bryant 'gun-happy and afraid'. (p 314) Are all teenagers capable of violence? Discuss.
4. *'For them sex was not so much pleasure or even adventure but currency.'* (p 264) Jackie in *'Boner McPharlin's Moll'* reveals her teenage angst when *'everything excited and disgusted us in equal measure ... Everything we did was imitation and play-acting.'* (p 252) *... were caught in a nasty dance in which we lured them only to send them packing'* (p 253) Fay Keenan's destructive relationship with Dyson is also part of this cycle of female prostitution of self which reaches its apotheosis in Raelene's terrible abuse by Max. (pp 136-7) How can such a cycle be broken? Discuss.
5. *'Family', said Vic. It's not a word, it's a sentence.'* (p 215) This work is about what constitutes a family and what family members do to each other. Many characters suffer from absent parents, particularly fathers. How does Winton view the father's role?
6. *'You can't compensate for everyone all your life. In the end you have to demand something of people.'* (p 307) Are tragedies caused by people who look after their loved ones too carefully?
7. Discuss the meaning of natural symbols such as elements of landscape, water or fire in these stories.
8. *'To be honest he's not really my sort of bloke at all, but somehow he's my best mate.'* (p 4) Friendship is tested and tried, sometimes proving strong and sometimes fracturing. Compare the demise of relationships in several stories. What makes a friendship? Can friendships survive the changes in our lives? Why and how do some last a lifetime, and others, fall apart?



9. These characters are suffering a 'midlife crisis'. Is living through our middle years more harrowing than youth? *Dirt Music* featured a woman suffering such a crisis, and had a strong message of redemption and spiritual salvation. Do you see the same theme in this collection?
10. *Dirt Music* was also set in White Point, and Angelus was the location used in the Lockie Leonard books (published for young people) and in *Shallows* and *Minimum of Two*. Compare and discuss the way these two locations are used in these various books. Often spoken of as a 'regional' writer because of his preoccupation with the landscape and culture of WA where he lives, Winton says that Flannery O'Connor of the US's 'deep south' was a hero of his, and that her work as a regional writer inspired him. [See Kohn 2004 above.] Read their works and compare them.
11. Religion features in many stories—Gail's fundamentalist father forbidding raffles in 'Damaged Goods' (p 56); the Catholic Keenans in 'Small Mercies'; the converted union worker in 'Cockleshell'; the 'born-again' Christians in 'The Turning' (p 149). Is spirituality a central theme in this collection?
12. There are so many stories told here, but so many not told, or suggested. Which untold story intrigued you the most? Sherry and Dan's? Sophie's? Which of them would you have liked to have read more about? Discuss.
13. One of the saddest aspects of growing up is that the infatuations of our youth are reduced either to fading memory or to cruel moments of recognition which make the memory seem inexplicable. In 'Big World' when the narrator sees Briony Nevis again (p 14) or when Peter Dyson sees Fay again (p 83) we're made aware of the changes life brings to all of us. How many youthful infatuations live up to their promise?
14. Drug abuse looms in these narratives as a potent force which is inextricably linked not simply to human frailty but to corruption at the highest levels of society. Discuss.
15. Truth and justice are key issues in Winton's work. Bob Lang's night with a young journalist is a seminal moment when he realises how little integrity matters in the scheme of things. '*She'd have her victim, her ordeal, her stoic hero. It'd be a great story, a triumph, and none of it would be true.*' (p 249) Is our society antithetical to honesty?
16. Winton regrets that the concept of 'Community' (which he vividly celebrated in *Cloudstreet*) is breaking down, and in this collection, the gaps in the fabric of society are painfully obvious. All these characters are linked in some way, but their ignorance of each other, and the hatred and fury with which several relatives treat each other, suggests that Winton has serious qualms about how we can live lives which cherish relationships in this increasingly global society. Discuss.
17. '*Our homes were new; no one had ever lived in them before. They were as fresh as we imagined the country itself to be.*' (p 38) 'Aquifer' is not only a rich portrait of the growth of Australian suburbs (pp 38-9) and the concomitant destruction of bushland, but also offers commentary on the construction of a nation, the ethnic and religious divides formed in childhood, and the recognition of Indigenous people in this nationhood. The decline of a family of Aborigines who lived in this suburb is a tragic sub-plot. Discuss.
18. '*They'd turned me. They played with me, set me against him to isolate him completely. Boner was their creature...Whatever it was he was their creature and they broke him.*' (p 292) The word 'turning' is defined here as an act of corruption or control, but in other stories the word is used to suggest the variety of 'turnings' we encounter in life — being converted; accidents; marriage and divorce; removal; spiritual enlightenment; or the changes we make to alter the lives we've chosen for ourselves. Discuss.

19. *'It was the beach at Ithaca, it was Gatsby's place, Golding's Island.* (p 281-282)  
This bonfire has symbolic resonance for several characters. eg *'I had a power and a promise I'd never sensed before* (p 12) What did this event symbolize? Discuss.
20. *'Well the sea is so big and my boat is so small.'* (Kohn 2004) What thematic elements of this collection does this Winton quote identify?

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Pan Macmillan Australia  
Level 18, St Martin's Tower  
31 Market Street,  
Sydney NSW 2000

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