

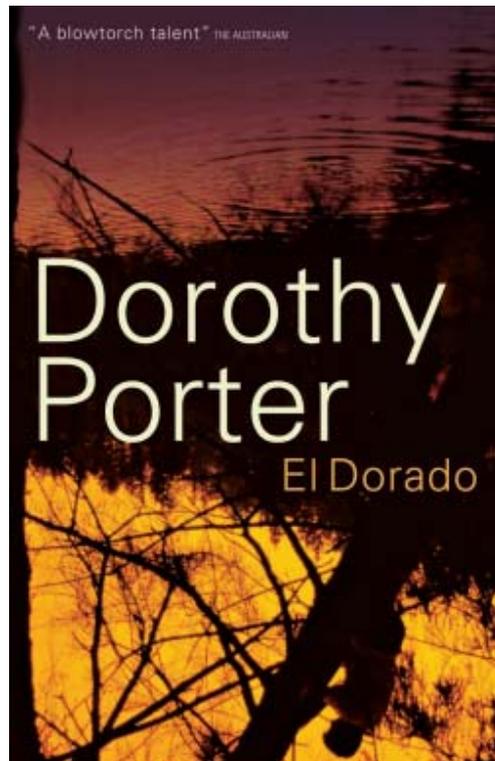
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NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Dorothy Porter

EL DORADO



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THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

It is cold to be forever young.
WALLACE STEVENS, 'VARIATIONS ON A SUMMER DAY'

'How dead dead
the dead are.' (p 136)

El Dorado is a crime story, a romance, and a verse novel - a literary cross-genre work which is a tantalizing patchwork of themes, symbols and virtuoso poetic narrative which cements the reputation of Dorothy Porter as one of the country's most inventive stylists.

The legend of El Dorado is a story told by the Incas, 'a south American myth...of lost kingdoms, gold lust and delusion' (p 5). This theme is central to this chilling narrative about the hunt for a serial killer who calls himself El Dorado and believes that he is sending the murdered children to a kingdom of lost treasures. It's also related to the theme of the lost world of childhood. The two central characters Bill and Cath are (like the killer) still seeking the solace and sanctuary of that far ago time when Cath would take Bill for 'secret adventures in her canoe', and when their friendship was forged:

'Didn't Cath tell him
one hot blue summer holiday
that she knew
where a golden city
was hiding in the mangroves?' (p 28)

But there's a sinister side to the myth too, in the lure of gold which can take the unsuspecting into the 'dangerous cities' (p 348) of the mangroves, into a world from which they can't escape - and into a place where they 'die of their delusions' (p 132).

Detective Inspector Bill Buchanan has seen it all. He's a seasoned cop, albeit with a soft heart, and has to steel himself every day to witness scenes of sometimes indescribable horror, the worst of which involve children. As a single parent to his typically rebellious daughter Caitlin, when he finds the bodies of the murdered children, he feels the pain of the bereaved parents keenly. The story opens with the fourth death of a child named Emma Farmer:

'He would like to tell them
at aggrieved length
how all of us
no matter how brave
or timid
are walking on thin ice

that for no good
nor fair reason
could crack under us
at any time.' (p 10)

Bill has seen so much death that he's become unavoidably cynical although he maintains a sense of hope founded upon his innate goodness and on his love for a select number of people, including his daughter and his oldest friend Cath. His unrequited 'old old love' (p 107) for the latter is described as:

'The besotted fourteen-year-old
locked up in his heart
still howling for her.' (p 34)
She is:
'his sanctuary
his sweetest blessing.' (p 54)

Cath herself has never quite grown up. Her 'hypnotic imagination' (p 29) has scored her work in Hollywood which allows her to live in a fantasy world. As an 'Imaginary Worlds Specialist Director' (p 35),

'her job was to make
the imaginary world
plausible.' (p 43)

She spends her life creating dreams and Bill describes her as having:

'the lateral thinking
of an intelligent child
spliced with
an intuitive adult's experience.' (p 37)

He thinks of her as someone who lives in 'Fantasyland', and wonders if the killer too is just:

'an overexcited greyhaired
kiddie
who'll never get off the swings?' (p 108)

Bill's not surprised to find Cath has a personal blog (p 122) as this is another evidence of her childlike nature. Her affair with Lily is also referred to in terms of this interplay between youth and old age. At first she fears that she's getting too old for the sort of obsessive and highly charged love she discovers when she meets Lily, an 'absurdly young herpetologist' with 'hypnotizing black eyes' (p 75). She worries that she's:

'a stupid deluded
leering embarrassing
old tart.' (p 79)

And she fears that they look like such an odd couple (p 126) - more like mother and daughter. But the strength of her feelings gradually makes the relationship seem more 'real' and she tells Bill that she wants to 'leave Dyke Disneyland' (p 106) and make this one permanent, although she secretly knows that it won't be.

Other characters who either figure in or are referred to in the narrative include: Lily, Cath's twenty-five year old lover who is sexually adventurous, has a past life as a sex worker, and whose forcefulness belies her youth so that rather than playing the child to Cath, she holds the upper hand; Caitlin, Bill's daughter who is 'not gold' but 'feral mercury' (p 21) and 'skittish and unreliable as a spoilt champion filly' (p 23); **the ghost of Bill's beloved grandfather** who appears to offer reminders of his childhood (pp 24-5); **Bill's despised father** to whom he's not spoken in twenty years (p 52) and whom he remembers with bleak bitterness (p 282); **Cath's hated mother** who taunted her for being an 'ugly tomboy' (p 39); **Detective Sergeant Mason** who is an unreconstructed and tactless male whose comments border constantly on the offensive, and with whom Bill has trouble containing his rage; **Constable Jasmine Cook** who is a rookie cop with a tender heart; **Axel Pine**, the trauma counsellor who appears in a number of brief scenes but whose role is not revealed until the end of the novel, and whose need to protect children is described vividly by Bill:

'If Axel Pine had his way
there'd be mandatory detention
for anyone who looks twice
at any child-
under thirty.' (p 15)

Vince O'Leary, Bill's superior who makes a brief appearance in order to chew out his staff (p 137) after the fifth body, that of Brett Miller (p 135), is discovered; and **the killer**, whose identity is revealed only at the end.

Peter Pan and the concept of Neverland where children never grow old is also a persistent thematic thread in the narrative - a theme which has imbued 20th and 21st century culture with Disney's Fantasyland and the controversial Michael Jackson and his

Neverland. (When Emma's friend reads a eulogy at her funeral she imagines that she's gone to Disneyland (p 62).) This escapist desire for fantasy is the source of the obsession in our society with youth and good looks which manifests itself in cosmetic surgery, referred to by Bill when he looks at Cath's unlined face and deduces that she has had work done (pp 49-50). It is an underlying theme throughout the work which not only traces a crime investigation but also the childish obsessions of both Cath and Bill who have (like most people) preserved certain hang-ups from their childhoods, and are unable to entirely leave them behind. Cath's romantic first kiss with Lily is imagined as that of a survivor stepping ashore on a lost island (p 85) and she later calls it magic (p 88) and 'Paradise time' (p 109). The discovery that Emma had met a nice man in 'Neverland' (pp 150-3) is another reference to the theme. And, as Cath explains, every child wants to 'run away' (p 167). Cath's capture by the killer (pp 232-245) is described in a series of metaphors relating to the idea of secret gardens, underground caves or vaults, and she also discovers that she's been drugged with a date rape drug '*Fantasy*' (p 248). Put-Put recalls how he would escape his loneliness by going to 'The Wonderful Place' (pp 344-7).

Stolen Children or 'The Lost Boys' (another reference to *Peter Pan*) is a further theme. The loss of a child is the ultimate bad dream, and is movingly conveyed in the poem 'Bill's Nightmare' (p 103). The novel refers to the famous case of the Beaumont Children who went missing in 1966 in Adelaide - a case which was never solved. Bill fears a similar failure, being fully aware of the many files of missing children which provide stark evidence that this one too could prove unsolvable. But the theme also refers to those who remain in the lost world as adults:

'Shut-out Peter Pans
defiant in fairy-childhood exile
shrinking in dreaded adulthood
to wizened pygmies.' (p 154)

Lost oceanic worlds are a related sub-theme. Cath has always featured water in the plots of her films, and hence has been nicknamed Noah. 'Atlantis' is the title of the second part of the novel in which she falls in love; this growth in emotion is described as if immersed in an ocean, and when the relationship founders she's like a ship at sea (pp 133-4). Fishing motifs such as lures and baits also liberally inhabit the text until,

'Bill's head swims
nauseously
with stinking bait
and herring.' (p 320)

Once again, the lost worlds underwater represent places of tantalising seduction and also danger.

As a crime novel the plot consists of a series of clues:

The children are each gently killed and left with a gold thumbprint on their foreheads.

An ad appears in the *Age* in which a rhyme suggests that the killer wishes to preserve them as children, and identifying himself as El Dorado the place 'where they want to go' (p 5).

Bill notices Caitlin's eye makeup is gold and when quizzed she reveals that it's called El Dorado (pp 31-2).

The 'cicada summer' when 'a weird kid' fell out of Cath's treehouse cubby is mentioned (pp 45-6), an incident which will prove significant later.

In 'Bookish Girls' (pp 99-100) Cath discovers that Emma had a copy of *Peter Pan* in her backpack another piece of evidence deliberately planted by the killer.

Mason discovers in Cath's blog that *Peter Pan* was her favorite book as a child (p 123) suggesting a link with the killer.

Emma's story of meeting a man in 'Neverland' (p 153) is a further lead.

El Dorado sends another rhymed letter to the *Age* (p 161) but a copy cat killing is suggested by the details of El Dorado's planting of a book in the bag, and Bill suspects it (p 161).

El Dorado sends another letter about the Mark Kelso exhibition, accusing the artist of kiddie porn.

The discovery of the Dino Flintstone figure in the hand of a victim (p 175) suggests again that the killer knows Cath.

Jasmine Cook discovers that *Neverland* is a person who exists in a Chat room called 'Wish' (p 206).

Cath remembers the vault (p 250) in which they'd locked an annoying kid when they were kids.

The killer sends her a toy ninja sword via the editor of the *Age* (p 283) which triggers a memory of the boy they've half-remembered a few times, Raymond Putney (p 285).

A collector in Sydney gives them the address in Drysdale of a likely suspect (p 319).

Bill visits and finds Axel Pine (p 328).

The plot also contains the odd 'red herring' (as every crime novel must) such as Cath's suggestion that the killer is a woman (p 68), Bill's vague suspicion of Lily, Cath's lover (p 200), his further suspicion that the sixth murder of Ahmed Khan is a copy cat killing (pp 266-9), and finally Caitlin's disappearance (p 310) is another false lead.

This is also a romance - a story about love between lovers and between friends. Cath's affair with Lily is juxtaposed against the unrequited love which Bill has for his childhood friend, and both are movingly and evocatively conveyed. Despite their differences, Cath decides to pursue her relationship with Lily:

'Now time

come what may

is what

they will lovingly and slavishly

give to each other.' (p 301)

But it's Bill who is her 'True Friend' and real strength:

'I have frozen everyone

I have ever loved

into plastic lumps

grinning on a merry-go-round.

Except my Bill.' (p 358)

Her fervent prayer to see him saved (p 360) is an extremely moving and powerful evocation of the faith we place in the strength of love.

Innocent or Evil? Who's to say? Serial killers and their motivations and actions are explored in this psychological assessment of the roots of El Dorado's mania, which even posits a link between his behavior and the actions of Bill and Cath. Thus the evil of the killer is ultimately called into question by the revelations of his own troubled childhood. The novel examines the dual concepts of the child in all of us, or alternatively the monster in each of us, in the cruelty of Cath and Bill to poor Put-Put. And the idea of 'the sinner or the saint' is also explored in the relationship between Cath and Lily, and in Cath's eventual realization that she needs to seek absolution or forgiveness (p 293) from Lily rather than the reverse.

Ideals of childhood such as its supposed innocence, and the innately happy state of childhood were promoted in the Victorian era and have imbued our society's concept of childhood ever since. The novel refers to 'the remote Golden Age of childhood' (p 96) when children could play alone in any park and feel safe, but contradicts that idea with the story of the Beaumonts who disappeared in the mid-1960s in this supposed era of innocence. The notion is also belied by the 'street smarts' and the sheer bloody-mindedness of Bill's daughter Caitlin who swears and resists his interventions in her life and who proves to have taken some very raunchy photos of her boyfriend Troy on her camera (p 279). It's also countered by the unhappy childhood experienced by Bill and Cath who sought refuge with each other from their hated father and mother respectively. And Bill himself calls it into question in wondering if his love for Cath was '*innocent*' (pp 53-4).

There's a social message bound up with all this too, in that El Dorado's determination to preserve or protect 'his children' can be aligned to the desires of societies which try to protect their children (or their citizens) from the terrors of adulthood. Censors seek to deny people their rights to materials which are deemed likely to harm them, which in turn restricts their ability to explore the exhilaration of being truly alive.

'If only if only

he could refrain

from confusing suffocation

with salvation.' (p 184)

Cath's romance represents the same contrast between individual freedom and society's constraints (p 183), in the moral dilemma she faces with Lily being not only much younger, but also when confronted by the revelation that she's been a prostitute. Axel Pine obsessively blames the decline of society which he deplores, to the liberal views of the 1970s and the Gough Whitlam era (pp 340-3), in views which eerily echo those held by many members of the Australian population today.

The idea of an arrested childhood, or in theorist Neil Postman's words 'the childified adult' (in his *The Disappearance of Childhood*) is symbolized by the icons of childhood such as figures of Dino Flintstone (p 175) and adults' collection of them. The toy shops which sell such collectibles are described as:

'a cornucopia of plastic fossils
for tragic grown-ups.' (p 177)

The impotence of adulthood (p 148) and the inevitability of death are the further and final ideas explored in this novel. Bill and Cath have to leave their childhood behind them in order to confront the needs of their adult lives. The killer has never been able to do that, and at the end he goes to where people are 'young and happy forever' (p 362). Bill decides that he must 'stop living in the past' (p 149) if he is to move on. And Cath knows that she too must escape from,

'stale lives
hoarding nothing
but precious dead toys.' (p 181)

They are both still haunted,
'from the disgusting gunk
still trapped
in their dirty old
school cases.' (p 287)

But it's time to let it go ... It's time to really begin living as an adult ... for tomorrow they die...

WRITING STYLE AND TECHNIQUES

1. This is the fourth verse novel by Dorothy Porter, who broke new ground in Australian literature with her verse novel *The Monkey's Mask* which was an unprecedented bestseller. Read other verse novels such as Les Murray's *Fredy Neptune*, Alan Wearne's *The Lovemakers* or Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*, or works published for the teenage market such as Steven Herrick's *Lonesome Howl* or *By the River*, Tim Sinclair's *Nine Hours North*, Michelle A. Taylor's *The Angel of Barbican High*, Catherine Bateson's *A Dangerous Girl* or Margaret Wild's *Jinx* and discuss the special features of the form.

3. The work is structured by being told in six parts all with deliberately mythical titles: The Stolen Child (pp 1-73); Atlantis (pp 75-128); Neverland (pp 129-210); Lovers' Cave (pp 211-262); El Dorado (pp 263-350); The Fire Snake (pp 351-369). Discuss these titles and their symbolic associations.

4. Porter's use of language is inventive and original. Sometimes it's gutsy and visceral:

'when your own futile life
sets on you
with the slow strokes
of a disemboweling knife.' (p 20)

' 'I wanna be,' she says
'the *slut* of your life
not the fucking *sunshine*.' (p 111)

'just one more
cockroach-mouthed
dawn adieu.' (p 204)

It's also very Australian in imagery and reference, for example, the use of the cricket metaphor in the poem 'Howzat' (pp 31-2) which refers to a breakthrough in the investigation. Porter evinces a love of challenging and unusual words too, and this results in her often surprising deployment of unexpected juxtapositions. For example, Cath's burgeoning love for Lily is described vividly as her heart 'whoops' with 'the golden crackle of Christmas beetles' wings' (p 86). She describes her love as being 'radioactively festive like an X-ray on ecstasy' (p 102) and like 'a tsunami' (p 127). Her love is also described as 'limerence' (p 104). Find and discuss other unusual uses of imagery like these. The language also often includes sexual double entendre: For example, her affair with Lily is constantly symbolized by the mesmerising and hypnotic power of the snake (a literal reference, too, to Lily's occupation), and when she handles Lily's pet snake Candy, she feels it 'as if I want to eat her' (p 84); 'Heavy Petting' (pp 112-3); 'New Skin' (p 118);

'Snake Charm'(p 119); they sleep 'entwined like tree snakes'(p 133); Lily handles her like 'a spooked snake'(p 157); engulfs her like 'a loving hungry anaconda'(p 197); 'serpentine fury'(p 217); the idea of a snake is elided with the idea of a tsunami culminating in their reunion(p 297). **Characters are described in a range of powerful ways;** lists for example are used to describe Bill in 'The Facts of Life' (p 290) and Cath's feelings in 'Reasons to back out now' (p 294). Discuss any of the stylistic devices you found most interesting.

5. **Literary Allusion is another richly employed literary device in this novel.** Peter Pan and El Dorado are major themes (discussed above) and the titles of the parts also refer to mythical or legendary narratives, but the novel also includes a range of texts. It begins with three quotations (p vii); W.B.Yeats (p 1); reference to fairy tales [Jack and the beanstalk (p 37)]; Sherlock Holmes (p 81); myths such as that of Virgil in the story of Dido and Aeneas (p 84); *Little Women*(p 96); *Peter Pan*(p 100); the poetry of John Donne (p 101); 'Out damned sex' (pp 158-9) is a reference to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* ('Out damned spot'); RL Stevenson's poem 'The Land of Play'(p 182); Bloomsbury Group (p 199); '*crabbed age and youth*' (p 222); 'a winter haiku by Tolkien'(p 223); '*no birds sing*' a reference to Keats' poem 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' (p 224); Oscar Wilde (p 263) ; Orpheus' love feast(p 306); Huck Finn(p 332). **Films too are used as reference:** *South Pacific* (p 57); W.C. Fields (p 93); Fred Astaire (p 105); *Doctor No* (pp 112-3); Minoan priestesses in an 'X-rated feminist erotica movie'(p 115); Mickey Mouse (pp 137-140); Bogey and Bergman in *Casablanca*(p 312). Several popular **Songs** are also referred to. You may wish to further explore any one of these texts in relation to the themes of the novel.

6. Several passages describe the natural landscape in vividly poetic and lyrical terms. **For example poems about Eastern rosellas! (p 24) and a blue wren (p 56).**

Animals are used as metaphors in titles too. eg 'Seduction by Speckled band' (p 81); 'Lovebirds' (p 94); 'The Uncommon Iguana'(p 95). What function do these references serve in the narrative?

THE AUTHOR

Dorothy Porter has published twelve books including six collections of poetry, two novels for young adults and four verse novels, two of which, *What a Piece of Work* and *Wild Surmise*, were shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award. In 2004 *Wild Surmise* was awarded the Adelaide Festival John Bray Award for poetry as well as the Premier's Award. Her best-selling crime thriller in verse, *The Monkey's Mask*, has been adapted for the stage and radio, and released internationally as a film in 2001. She has also written two librettis with composer Jonathan Mills, *The Ghost Wife* and *The Eternity Man*. 'Before Time Could Change Us', a collaboration of love songs written by Dorothy Porter for composer Paul Grabowsky, won the Aria for Best Jazz Album of 2005. She was awarded the FAW Christopher Brennan Medal for Poetry in 2002, and was a finalist for the Melbourne Prize for Literature in 2006. She grew up in Sydney, but now lives in Melbourne.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What other titles might this novel have had?
2. 'These days everything's about sex.' (p 90) Discuss.
3. In the novel Cath refers to the increasingly puritan attitudes of Americans, to the 'hysterical times' (p 90) in which we live, and 'The hysterical hounds of Family Values' (p 183). Is our society overly suspicious and riddled with unjustifiable fear in your opinion?
4. 'Why did sex create such chaos?' (p 142) Does sex spoil a good relationship?
5. Cath's reaction to the fact that Lily had been a sex worker (pp 155-7) implies a complex and contradictory mixture of jealousy and repulsion and yet secret arousal ['Peep Show' (p 160) and 'Control'(p 167)]. Discuss whether sexual commerce provokes such mixed responses of disgust and fascination (p 216) amongst members of your group?
6. Discuss this statement:
 ' 'There's no dope
 that works on kids
 like pure unadulterated
 fantasy.' '(p 166)
7. Discuss the descriptions in 'Going Back' (pp 187-191), of Sydney and Melbourne.
8. Discuss this statement:
 'We want the monster
 much more
 than the monster wants us.' (p 226)
9. Is the following an unnecessarily pessimistic view of the world?
 'What is a happy mood
 but a heartless opiate
 that drugs you
 before it slugs you?' (p 305)
10. Do we all secretly desire the thrill of having 'a terrifying good time' (p 252)?
11. Is there anything more tragic than a person who refuses to grow up? Discuss.
12. Is childhood a time most of us would like to return to, or to escape from? Discuss.

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