**Being in the World: an interview with Tim Winton**

**Abstract**

Tim Winton has published over twenty books for adults and children, and has been translated and published around the world. He has won the *Australian*/Vogel Award (for *Open Swimmer* (1982) in 1981), the Miles Franklin Award four times (*Shallows* (1984) in 1984; *Cloudstreet* (1991) in 1992; *Dirt Music* (2001) in 2002; *Breath* (2008) in 2009) and twice been shortlisted for the Booker Prize (*The Riders* (1995) in 1995; *Dirt Music* (2001) in 2002). He is an activist in the environmental movement and the patron of the Australian Marine Conservation Society. In this interview Winton discusses his approach to theme, motif, religion and mysticism, his writing practice and ideas of creativity, and discusses being a public writer as well as ideas of class, fame and gender, with reference to his many books, as well as his *Guardian* article on ‘toxic misogyny’ (Winton 2018b) and his most recent novel *The Shepherd’s Hut* (2018a).

**Keywords**

Australia, ecology, faith, fiction, grace, loss, love, masculinity, screenplay, violence.

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I was fortunate to see Tim Winton read from his most recent book *The Shepherd's Hut* (2018a), and discuss it with the writer Wyl Menmuir, at The Acorn in Penzance, Cornwall, in the summer of 2018 – an event which I wrote about as part of my book review for *International Times* (Loydell, 2018) – and to then briefly meet him and discuss an email interview, which this is the product of, Winton discusses his approach to theme, motif, religion and mysticism, his writing practice and ideas of creativity, and discusses being a public writer as well as ideas of class, fame and gender, with reference to his many books, as well as his *Guardian* article on ‘toxic misogyny’ (Winton 2018b).

Although he was gently irritable with my many questions about *Cloudstreet* (Winton, 1991), this is the book that introduced his work to the UK and made him famous in Australia. Described on the back cover as ‘[a] fragmented, hilarious, crude, mystical soap opera’ it places two very different families – one religious, one irreligious; one poor, one living on inherited wealth; one ordered and careful, one devil-may-care and obsessed with luck – together in a house that seems to have a life of its own, as does the nearby river. Later books continue to describe and document clashes of culture, gender, place and upbringing: In *Dirt Music* (2001) Georgia Jutland starts an alliance and emotional journey with the local poacher, leaving her fisherman partner and stepchildren behind; in *Breath* (2008) Pikelet’s growing up and surfing obsession sits alongside explorations of sex, drugs and dodgy friends. All lead to a recognition of responsibility in the world, for nature, others and self, but the book is written in a gritty and believable, not moralistic, style. Other Winton titles such as *The Turning* (2004), 300 pages of short inter- and dis-connected fictions, are bleaker, tougher versions of the world. They are exhilaratingly raw and viscous, as is *The Shepherd’s Hut* (2018a), another story of growing up, departure, survival and despair, narrted by its protagonist Jaxie Claxton as he heads into the desert to find a new life.

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**Rupert Loydell (RL)**: Your new book, *The Shepherd’s Hut* (2018a), seems to me your darkest novel to date. Its protagonist, Jaxie, is already in trouble and on the run when we meet him, and he continues on a downward slide toward the end of the book, pausing only for an interlude of friendship with what we assume is a criminal in hiding. You’ve stated the work is about ‘toxic masculinity’. (2018b) Can you comment on that?

**Tim Winton (TW)**: I’m not sure about this term, “darkest”. Do you mean this as opposed to “sunniest”, “happiest”, “chirpiest”? Or are we talking about a tragic outlook as opposed to a comic one? Don’t worry, I use the term myself now and then, though afterwards I wonder what I meant when I said it. I guess it’s an entertainment word we’ve all come to deploy. The thing is, I’ve written about violence and hardship a lot over the decades. Somebody once said some of the stories from *The Turning* (2004)*,* like “Boner MacPharlin’s Moll” and “Aquifer” and “Tender Mercies”, were pretty grim, that they were the darkest things I’d done. And I reminded them that in the 1980s I wrote a little novel called *In the Winter Dark* (1988)that wasn’t all that chirpy. My sense is that people forget, that they often see my work through a lens of their own, often coloured by their affectionate memories of *Cloudstreet* (1991)*.* And yet when you go back and look at even that book there’s a lot of tough material. And, yeah, there’s a lot of humour in it, but the arc is mostly tragic. It is, after all, a story told by a suicide in the moments he dies, jumping from a jetty into a river. People cling to the comic elements of that book and shed the tragic elements from memory. I’ve had more than 25 years’ experience of that forgetful reader phenomenon now; it’s a curious thing. And I guess I understand the impulse. Even if something feels a tad Nick Cave, the tendency is to recall it as more Cliff Richard. What’re you gunna do, eh?

As to toxic masculinity, no I don’t think that’s what the book’s about. But it certainly comes into focus during the course of the book and I’ve tried to address that in public discussions, given the fraught moment the book was published into. If the book’s ‘about’ anything it’s love and friendship, I’d have thought, and the enormous challenges of change in humans.

**RL**: Is it masculinity or society as a whole? Can’t women be as toxic as men? Don’t all genders find themselves manipulated, stereotyped and at times pushed to their limits in 21st century society? Is this what Jaxie falls prey to, or is there an inherent male violence and anger at work?

**TW**: No, I don’t see this discussion of toxicity being exclusive to blokes. Neither do I accept the idea that violence and anger are unique to men. But to suggest that male violence is purely the result of stereotyping, or that the worst patterns of male behaviour can be explained by their being pushed to their limits is to avert our gaze from patterns of thinking that are received, inherited, valorized and protected by the patriarchy. Jaxie is born and raised in the world of the hard man. Misogyny is his culture, his birthright. He acts from what he knows, and yet he yearns to be bigger and better than that. Even though he’s a profane, thuggish little bit of work, he talks about peace and decency; he wants to exceed the world he’s from – he just doesn’t know how. And to my mind he does exceed himself and his native culture, but how that happens is disorienting and traumatic, and in many ways, brutal.

**RL**: I came to your writing, as many in England did, through *Cloudstreet*, which explores issues of class, work (and work ethic), and family, but also has elements of comedy and tragedy, along with religious mysticism and transcendence. To me the element of grace, or redemption, is missing in *The Shepherd’s Hut* – is a moment of friendship, perhaps even love, for a friend enough for you? After all, the realisation of that love provokes and results in even more violence.

**TW**: I’m rather surprised you think so, but I guess a lot depends on the personal palate, doesn’t it? And in the matter of grace, perhaps your philosophical or even theological disposition. Many reviewers, especially Australians such as Geordie Williamson in *The Australian*, Michael McGirr in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Richard King in *The Monthly*, Richard Wiersma in *The Toronto Star,* as well asStuart Kelly in *The Scotsman* have made a lot of noise about the spiritual or religious elements of the book. Australians are traditionally squeamish about this sort of stuff, so that strikes me as significant. The words “redemption” and “grace” seem to appear quite often in the critical commentary. To my mind *The Shepherd’s Hut* is of a piece with the rest of the body of work. For what it’s worth, I see both Fintan and Jaxie as agents of grace. Each releases the other from bondage by devotion, by mercy, by hard-won acts of trust (or faith in the other’s decency, perhaps). And each is subject to the divine as expressed in the natural world. Nature being the first and often most overlooked form of divine revelation. Whatever understanding Fintan goes to his death with is incomplete and inconclusive, and whatever Jaxie goes forth with (at speed, and, yes, armed) is also partial and contingent, but doesn’t that apply to everyone? St. Francis, Martin Luther, and Julian of Norwich all went out in various stages of incompletion, regardless of what the hagiographers say. Revelation is profound *and* incomplete, wouldn’t you think? As to the comedy of this novel, I think it has its moments, but again these are clearly a matter of taste. Some people didn’t find *Eyrie* (2013) all that funny or loaded with grace, either. To which I can only shrug. On the matter of redemptive elements in fiction I’m not much of an enthusiast. In my view, much of the felt need for redemption is barely more than a brief uplifting moment that’s almost always more sentimental than substantial. The novelist’s job is not to redeem her or his characters or to cheer up the reader. I don’t think Flannery O’Connor or Tolstoy did it.

**RL**: *The Turning* (2004) seems to inhabit a similarly poor and violent society, yet its interlinked stories contain many more moments of grace – the book even ends as Vic “realized that darkness had fallen around him and he was happy” (p317). Would it be fair to say that this isn’t Happiness with a capital H but simply a self-affirmative moment of grace, contentment, a self-acceptance of being in the world? A momentary attainment of balance?

**TW**: I think it’s easy to undervalue what you refer to as an acceptance of being in the world. Given many people’s profound and debilitating sense of alienation, moments like these are enormously valuable. Despair is ever-present and quite often a perfectly reasonable reaction to the realities many humans contend with. To my mind grace exists in those moments of peace, of hope, of release and relief. Happiness with a capital H, and Grace with a capital G, these are ideas, by and large, and sometimes we cling to them at the expense of our own experience. These lived moments of mercy are usually what actually sustain us. Maybe this is largely a Christian problem, this reliance upon abstraction, the hewing to the correctness of an idea (orthodoxy, I guess) and a dismissal of lived experience and agency. I guess this is the right moment to confess that I am in some sort of qualified agreement with Fintan MacGillis when he says that faith is expressed in what you do not what you believe. The codification of Christian ethics (the thoughts and actions of a Nazarene anarchist, after all) have so often resulted in little more than choreography.

**RL**: Since Fish in *Cloudstreet* there haven’t been many visions and signs of the religious variety in your books. Have you lost interest in the mystical? Does some kind of faith still underpin your work?

**TW**: No, it’s expressed differently, that’s all. The trouble with visions and signs is that they produce an appetite for more of the same, which becomes a distraction, even an obsession. I think that’s a theme that goes back to the shore at Galilee, no? Some go looking for signs and wonders while children starve and widows are left destitute. I think if I used that “magical” stuff more often, it would turn into a schtick and lose its potency. Sadly, I can think of several famous contemporary writers to whom that applies. Besides, each book is its own world with its own ecology, its own terms of trade, its own problems.

Yes, I’m still a believer. But it seems to bother people, some Christians as much as atheists of the more strident variety. You know, apparently I’m too much of this and not enough of that. I don’t mean to cause folks discomfort of the categorical kind. I guess I sympathise with them to a point, but I can’t seem to find it within myself to apologise. There’s Pride for you. But I’m really not interested in the kind of theological categorising I wasted so much time over as a young man. Many years ago somebody publicly concluded that I was a Christian existentialist and I laughed like a drain at the time, but nowadays I’d simply scratch my chin evasively and wonder if there wasn’t something in that. And not actually care too much either way.

**RL**: I was impressed by how the TV version of *Cloudstreet* (Saville, 2011) caught the liveliness, sensuality, sexuality, relationships, aspirations and love that happens within the familial complexities documented in the book, as well as the mystical side of events. Did you feel the same, or prefer readers to conjure up the story for themselves?

**TW**: Well, I wrote the screenplay, so I hoped we’d capture some of the spirit of the book. Yeah, I think Matt Saville did a good job directing it.

**RL**: And how about the new film of *Breath*? (Baker, 2018) It’s being sold as a coming-of-age story: does it capture the surf life, the balance of romantic and sporting recklessness with learned and earned responsibility in the way you envisioned?

**TW**: Yes, I think it works very well. Again, I have to declare an interest as one of the co-writers of the screenplay. Some commentators have remarked that it’s not as ‘dark’ as the novel, and that’s true. The novel deals with the lifelong damage that comes with the kinds of behaviours and experiences that Pikelet has as a 15 year old. Those consequences are only lightly touched upon in Simon Baker’s film. Interestingly, some people saw that Jaxie is a very similar character to the reckless and unmothered kid Loonie in *Breath* (2008)*.* I was conscious of that when I visited the set. When I saw the young Ben Spence playing Loonie, I saw he was like a waterborne Jaxie. It’s a shame he’s too old now to play Jaxie in Simon Baker’s adaptation of *The Shepherd’s Hut* which is in development. (And by the way, Gregor Jordan’s adaptation of *Dirt Music* started shooting in October 2018 with Kelly McDonald et al.)

**RL**: Water, particularly the ocean, has featured in many of your novels, and you’ve also campaigned for the Australian Marine Conservation Agency and the Save Moreton Bay organisation. Is this simply ecological concern, or do you also, like Fish, see something symbolic or mystical in water? Some critics have asserted that it’s Biblical and religious.

**TW**: Well, I’m not able to separate ecological concerns from religious concerns. I’ve worked as an activist for 20 years or so, and I’ve done it reluctantly out of a sense of responsibility. I guess it’s a sacred responsibility. To the creation, to organic life, human and non-human. Organic life is the central (and largely unacknowledged) miracle. So many of us live as if it’s inconsequential, this complex series of unlikelihoods to which we owe our existence. Part of its sacredness is its fragility. We have the great gift and burden of consciousness. And we clearly have the means and the habits to destroy all this, all life as we’ve known it. There are urgent, practical reasons to work for life and against self-destruction, but they are moral and spiritual obligations, too.

As to water, well, it’s fundamental, isn’t it? The human body is 70% water. (And 30% bullshit, sometimes). 70% of the Earth’s surface is water. And all humans are waterborne creatures for 9 months – the real trouble begins when we hit dry land! Water is our first home; it’s where we came from as a species, not just as individuals. No surprises why water imagery is central to all religious traditions. “Streams of living water”, a phrase like that is very potent if you grow up on a waterless island continent. It’s also sobering to consider the perverse role the Earth’s waters are beginning to play in human history. As a consequence of our genius as a species, but also as a result of our folly and stubbornness, that 70% is likely to haunt and torment our grandchildren and their children in ways we’ve never known. Streams of acidified water. It looks as if the desert may come for us in oceanic form. But, as AD Hope has it, “from deserts prophets come”. (1975) Let’s hope so.

**RL**: You’ve chosen to stay outside of Australia’s literary culture or scene, despite winning many awards and prizes, and mostly lived outside of the main urban centres. (I am aware you have at times also lived abroad in various countries.) Is this simply a matter of taste or privacy, or is this where you regard “real” Australia as existing? Are there matters of class and society you choose to align yourself with? Your general image seems to be of a nice bloke who keeps himself to himself apart from launching new books and campaigning about ecological (and now gender) issues. Would you care to comment?

**TW**: No, it’s all “the real Australia”. I live where I do because it suits my tastes and temperament. I need to be somewhere where the natural world is vividly present. How do I see myself? As an arts worker, a tradesman, a self-employed person who has to pull stuff out of the ether in order to make a living. All of that is absurd, of course, but I’m resigned to the nuttiness of it. I’m a son of the working class who became bourgeois from making literature. I mean, go figure!

But, yeah, I treasure my privacy and the privacy of my family. I treat the public stuff as a necessary bit of unpleasantness that I can leave behind at the airport. It’s not meant to mean anything, it’s not a stance or anything; it just suits me.

As to the campaigning and advocacy, I do a bit outside the ecological space, mostly in the social justice sphere. Whether it’s stuff for debt relief, refugees, mentorships in schools, it’s out of the same impulses and imperatives. Nice bloke? Well, hopefully nice enough. Though a few tycoons and politicians would disagree.

**RL**: How does writing about these issues, or speaking up about them outside of your fiction, square with what you have previously stated, namely that you “think art is in the business of useless beauty”? (Wild, 2014)

**TW**: I do all this activism as a citizen, not as an artist. The money and celebrity that make it possible, they’re largely industrial by-products (industrial surplus, you might say) that I get to redeploy for good. They only have a distant relation to the work itself. And when I write as an activist, I’m not pretending the result is art – it’s not. Hopefully it’s good prose, but it’s instrumental. I’m allergic to the notion of art being instrumental. I hate that art and literature are now taught and discussed as instrumental, that the novel or the painting is mostly the beast of burden that carries ideological freight. It’s producing readers who are good at scanning works for ideological deviation, but hopeless at confronting mystery, aesthetics, wonder etc.

**RL**: You’ve spoken about the importance of place to your work, as both inspiration and setting, but also collective memory, stating in one interview that “[t]he past is in everything we do. […] Everything that happens in the past stays. Nothing goes away, it’s all present – in DNA, in memory, in collective unconscious, you know, it’s in our biology.” (Brown & Bisley, 2005) How does the way place changes square with this notion of everything staying?

**TW**: Well, I think you’re describing the experience of loss, aren’t you? We feel loss keenly because the past remains potent in us. Just as we struggle with trauma and guilt and self-hatred – because nothing’s ever truly over. If you come from Australia and you pay attention to where you are, you’re eventually forced into the long view. This island we live on, it has the oldest, most sterile soils on the planet, and people have been living here almost as long as people have been humans. The DNA of those people is still alive, much of the art and some of the dance and cosmology and language of those folks is alive in postmodernity at the arse-end of capitalism. A week or so ago, I flew from London to Perth in a Dreamliner, non-stop all that way. Two days later I was walking amongst 30,000-year-old petroglyphs – thousands of them – a few hours from where I live. The genius of the people who made that rock art, is still alive, and so is the trauma of their dispossession and subjugation. Moderns had a remarkably shallow view of change. And a blindness to loss that verged on the infantile. The old was contemptible; everything had to be pulled down and made new. Old places, old races, old faces. That view eroded some of our humanity; it made us poorer. What *is* matters, and what has *been* still matters. And while I’m ranting, *matter matters*.

**RL**: Can you tell us about how you write? Do you have a set routine? Wait for inspiration (whatever that means)? Or are you working through a list of planned stories and novels?

**TW**: I don’t honestly know how I write. And it’s not very interesting to me anyway. I just show up of a morning and hope something shows up to make the waiting worthwhile. Oftentimes, I don’t show up at all. If there’s swell I go surfing; if the sea’s flat I put the boat in the water and pester megafauna. Sometimes I just hike up the canyon and listen to the silence (or maybe it’s tinnitus) and watch the eagles do their casual death-dealing upon the smaller creatures in the spinifex. Be glad you’re not a bush mouse.

**RL**: So what’s next for Tim Winton, once the launches and readings for *The Shepherd’s Hut* are over?

**TW**: I suppose I go back to pulling stuff out of the ether.

**RL**: Thank you for your time and interest.

**TW**: No worries, Rupert. All the best.

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