

Not Real but True: Tim Winton and the Spirit of Fiction

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Novelist and short fiction writer Tim Winton, a committed and long-term Christian, is one of Australia's major literary figures and has a significant international reputation. Winton has twice been short-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize (UK) and has won the Commonwealth Writers Prize. A native of Western Australia, Winton was a child prodigy. He published his first novel, *An Open Swimmer* (1982), at age 21, and it went on to win the Vogel Prize, Australia's top award for authors under 35. He has twice won Australia's biggest literary prize, the Miles Franklin Award, the first of these for *Shallows* (1986), a novel concerned with whaling and environmental degradation. In 1991 he won the prize again for his novel *Cloudstreet*, often named in critical and people's choice awards as Australia's greatest novel.

That is perhaps Winton's major strength as a writer: his ability to earn kudos from critics and airport novel sales from readers. And all of this is achieved by a writer with a firm Christian commitment. Noted Australian author Helen Garner said one of Winton's early novels, *That Eye, the Sky* (1986), was Australia's first 'Christian novel'. Set in rural Australia, it dealt with a maverick preacher and a boy, 'Ort', who has a flair for mysticism.

Winton's latest work, *The Turning* (2005), a linked collection of short stories, contains an eponymous story that addresses the life of a battered wife in a caravan park (Australian for 'trailer park'). Reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor's work, the story has one of the most harrowing and disturbing Christian conversions ever written.

Winton's own faith journey began as a child wandering the beach; a little nature mystic not unlike 'Ort', *That Eye, the Sky*'s narrator. In a 1999 interview in *The Melbourne Anglican* newspaper, Winton told Jesuit author Michael McGirr that he was a child alive to mystical possibility because of the 'bare' tradition of his parents' non-conformist church. Winton added, however, that the tradition's appreciation of storytelling was a foundation for his work.

His early take on Christianity was also deeply influenced by his parents' conversion. Winton's father, a policeman, was seriously injured in a motorcycle accident. During his father's convalescence, Winton watched as a Christian stranger began visiting the family home, bathing his father and helping his mother with household tasks. Winton said it was the first time his family had been confronted by the matter of faith, and he later used the experience in the *That Eye, the Sky's* plot.

In a paper delivered at an Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) conference earlier this year, Australian poet and short fiction writer Lisa Jacobson talked about the link between accidents and redemption in Winton's fiction. She pointed out that accidents are a hinge in many of Winton's novels and short fiction collections, including *That Eye, the Sky*, *Cloudstreet* and *Dirt Music* (2001). She reminded us that trauma and transformation, as evidenced in the *Crucifixion*, are central to the Christian faith - and often central to Winton's fiction.

"*Dirt Music* is a study of human grief in the character of Luther Fox," she said of the novel's main character, a man who mourns the car accident deaths of family members. "To erase [Fox's] suffering would be to cancel out his redemption: take away the cross and Christ's apotheosis is impossible."

Jacobson added that Fox begins to experience a peace that transcends his understanding (Philippians 4:7) and finds grace in his wounds; a grace deeper than the one he initially discovers. "Winton's sleight-of-hand lies in the way he continually refers us back to the site of this wound through Fox's memories, at which Christ himself is in attendance."

Numerous other critics have noted Winton's Christian spirituality and the role it plays in his writing. I was fortunate enough recently to receive Winton's own perspective on the link between writing and Christianity:

IN MUCH OF your work the natural world is almost another character. Do you sense that the sacredness of the physical environment sometimes speaks through your work? Yes. I respond viscerally to the stream of Christian thinking (which is an old one) that reveres the natural world, that sees the created world as the prime means by which humans and animals experience the divine. Since the

Enlightenment and the triumph of empirical science, we've tended to see the world and its beings as machines, mechanisms, and something was lost to Christian thinking and post-Christian secular thinking as a result. But nature has always had its friends and listeners and prophets.

For a long time I wrote fiction from this viewpoint without even realizing it - out of instinct. Despite my religious education in fundamentalist and later more radical church groups grappling with a social theology, I realized eventually that it was this natural world that fed my faith, that kept the old flame flickering and it was, once I looked back, the constant in my novels and stories, the stuff that sustained and cowed and renewed my characters. The way they confronted that ache within them, or how it best confronted them.

I guess in my work there is this constant encounter with the landscape which contains past, present and future all at once, something I've learned more about through process thought and quantum theory, and Aboriginal culture. I have a particular interest in Ngarinyin thinking which has curious and delightful things in common with much Christian mystical thought. I suspect the late David Mowaljarlai, the Ngarinyin lawman was one of the great unheralded spiritual thinkers of our time. He has a lot to say that Christians might be grateful for.

The world is such a delicate chain of dependencies, such a fragile and beautiful thing. How do we understand love if we don't recognize this fragility and beauty that sustains us, that is a gift to us, a prime and sacred responsibility for us? If we don't see meaning in the constant making and remaking and refreshing of the very matter we live by, if we don't see something sacramental in it, we're doomed fools with contempt for the source of all life. Take this out of your theology and our human lives are a pretty grim trajectory. If matter is not sacred then all good things must wait for another world and most of what we do and try for is merely aimed at that. This reduces life to a grim and cruel rehearsal, and religion to a form of accountancy.

Is it because both vocations work with words that the Christian novelist is often expected to be a preacher?

Probably. It's a bookish cult, no more so than in its Protestant

forms, where iconography and liturgy and architecture have so little place in religious expression. In the broader society there's a real hunger for the novel to provide some kind of polemical response to every situation. It doesn't matter who you are: it's unfair on the form to have such expectations.

A novel isn't a very good rhetorical tool. It poses better questions than answers. The novels with the most polemic, the most bald-face attempts to persuade, are those the reader turns away from most quickly, so instinctively. You really have to bend a story out of shape to fulfil an ideological mission. The shape becomes inhuman, inauthentic. Art contains argument, but in the end art cannot usually be contained by argument.

Sometimes I think that Christians can feel a little beleaguered. So they seize on the work of co-religionists with a kind of fervour and desperation, like people in a lifeboat pouncing on rations. In such an atmosphere there's bound to be disappointment. The biggest disappointment is often the perceived failure to be orthodox. Every feminist/indigenous/Maoist/eco-novelist has the same problem: the pressure of right thinking.

Art breaks as much as it reinforces. Sometimes you wish you were a weaver of traditional rugs. There's a set pattern, a ritual expression. If you keep to the pattern all will be well. You put all your art into the skill and quality of the repetition. Sadly, it doesn't work like that with fiction, which is jagged, changeable, morphing, like the life it represents. Words are risky, like love. Even words of theology. Half the world is at war right now for just this reason.

Australian poet Kevin Hart wrote that some of the 20th century's most theologically intense writing was penned by people who couldn't avow God, and he named Samuel Beckett. Do you have a similar sense? Or are there writers you turn to because their beliefs coupled with their literary abilities make for indispensable writing?

I think Hart's right, and Beckett is an interesting example. I'd add Camus to that list and several quantum theorists as well. Also some agnostic or atheist Jewish writers responding to the Shoah, Levi, Wiesel. The poet Robinson Jeffers is often seen as

misanthropic, but I find his work very bracing; it sets me back on my epistemological heels.

Sometimes you feel writers are talking your language at a tangent, at a great (and sometimes quite arbitrary) remove. Often the distance, the assumption of difference, is a relief, almost a bit of grace. It's the gap into which the light falls, the lucky and surprising gift.

Tolstoy and Flannery O'Connor, who were believers of radically different sorts, are my indispensables, as you call them. The things I draw from them don't feel so unlikely, so accidental.

The fact that strangers can ring each other's spiritual or existential bells, from century to century and culture to culture, is a miracle we should be celebrating, not something we should insist upon or take for granted.

In your story, 'The Turning', the female character appears to experience her 'turning to Christ' in a similarly brutal manner to the way in which Christ died for humanity's salvation. What do you see as the theological points the story is making and did the subject matter surprise you as the drafting process unfolded?

Well, it's about some people trying to figure out what salvation might mean. The central character is living a miserable life of violence at the hands of her husband. I was interested in the bizarre ways in which hope and faith are transmitted, how they survive.

In this story one couple has their evangelical, 'Bible study' kind of faith as a means of surviving alcoholism. And they have a functional life, a kind of peace after the storm. And 'Raelene' observes them. Despite her scepticism, she picks up scraps of what they're on about. Later she fixes on an icon, a kitschy snow dome-Jesus whose main attraction seems to be his rippling abdomen and the fact that he walks on water.

I guess it's the unlikeliness that interested me so much, the hook of parable and story that catches her initially, the effort she sees her new friends making to put their lives back together, but finally the power of the image, the icon that inspires something in her, which she draws on to defy her

rotten, battering husband. She feels enlarged, empowered by faith. She even uses it as a provocation, as a weapon.

I found it pretty tough and scary, writing that story. I wasn't making a theological argument; I was never quite sure where it was going. I was watching another human trying to figure herself out with the most meagre tools available. To some extent I was writing about a world I knew, the sorts of people I'd known and observed over many years.

When I finished I was a bit afraid of it, to be honest, and nervous about readers' reactions, for a number of reasons. The violence of it, the fact that I was writing it from the woman's point of view, the anticipation of being simultaneously labelled blasphemous and politically incorrect (which is sometimes my lot). One reviewer, mistaking it for a some kind of argument in favour of women stoically enduring violence (with faith as their delusional consolation) said it was 'a nasty piece of work'. But by and large, the story found thoughtful and sensitive readers, and most reviewers were much more open-minded.

In what way do you think reading fiction has the capacity to bring us closer to God and does it matter?

Fiction? Not nearly as much as music and poetry and painting. They're the arts with direct-dial-access in this regard, especially music. No novel will get you as close as Bach or Arvo Pärt will. Krzysztof Kieslowksi, the Polish filmmaker, maybe.

I'm just grateful if a novel will bring me closer to people. Some will illuminate a character's experience of grace, or their encounter with mystery or some sense of wisdom. Gilead is a good example. In differing ways, writers like Bernanos and Graham Greene and John Updike have done that for me. Doris Betts, Ron Hansen, Patrick White. Even The Grapes of Wrath. Remember Tom Joad's speech when he's leaving his family for their sake? You know, 'Wherever there's people hungry, I'll be there . . .' Man, that still gives me chills.

What I get from a novel is often to do with having lived with these characters - the Joads, let's say - entered their lives. So that some little moment of hard-wrought wisdom, some epiphany, might be yours by association.

Stories are fundamental to humans, they're meat and potatoes. They have the capacity to shift our furniture. In the case of novels we know we're reading something that is not real, yet we can finish it with the conviction that it has been true. A good novel leaves the reader with a sense of unfinished business, a lingering provocation.

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