

THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

VIEWING NOTES prepared by Rod & Robyn Quin

Subject Areas: English, Literacy, General Interest

Levels: Upper Primary, Secondary, Tertiary

Synopsis

The Edge of the World gives a unique insight into the intriguing work of Tim Winton, perhaps Australia's finest young author. Now 36, the "child prodigy" author won the Vogel Award at 21 for *An Open Swimmer*; the Miles Franklin Award at 24 for *Shallows*; the Deo Gloria Award and the Miles Franklin again at 32 with *Cloudstreet* and *The Riders* was short listed for the Booker Prize in 1995.

Executive Producer: Chris Oliver

Producer: Don Featherstone

Writer/Director: Geoffrey Bennett

Duration: 55 minutes

Year of Production: 1997

A Film Australia National Interest Program. Developed with the assistance of NSW Film and Television Office.

Biographical Notes

Tim Winton was born in 1960 in Perth, Western Australia. The son of a policeman, he spent some of his youth in the southern coastal whaling town of Albany. He started his first novel *An Open Swimmer* while still a creative writing student at the Western Australian Institute of Technology, now Curtin University. In 1981 *An Open Swimmer* won the Vogel Award. He became a full-time writer in 1982. He travelled in Ireland, Greece and France for some years before settling with his family in Perth. He won the Miles Franklin award for *Shallows* in 1984 and again in 1992 for *Cloudstreet*. *The Riders* was shortlisted for the Booker prize in 1995. In 1998 Tim Winton was named as one of five Australian Achievers in the Australia Day awards. Winton has never taken awards very seriously but said of the Australia Day recognition: "It's like an honour certificate from the rest of the class, and if the rest of the class is the rest of the country that's fine." (Quoted by Roger Martin in *The West Australian Monday 26 January 1998 p4*)

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Bibliography

Novels

An Open Swimmer 1982
Shallows 1984
That Eye, The Sky 1986
In the Winter Dark 1988
Cloudstreet 1991
The Riders 1994

Short Story Collections

Scission and Other Stories 1985
Minimum of Two 1987

Books for Young People

Jesse 1988
Lockie Leonard, Human Torpedo 1990
The Bugalugs Bum Thief 1991
Lockie Leonard, Scumbuster 1993
Blueback 1997
Lockie Leonard Legend 1997

Non-fiction

Land's Edge 1993 (with Trish Ainslie and Roger Garwood)
Local Colour: Travels in the Other Australia 1994

The Western Australian Context

Since the establishment of a European outpost at Sydney Cove in 1788 Australian culture has been dominated by a way of thinking which places Australia 'at the edge of the world'. Separated both physically and culturally from the Europe which they thought of as home', white Australians saw themselves as isolated, displaced and on the very margin of the European world. While the eurocentric nature of this vision has been challenged in recent times the challenge is to the version not the substance of the vision. Even a view which sees Australia as part of Asia must still accommodate the geographical reality that Australia is on the edge of Asia.

This feeling of being on the edge is even more intensified in Western Australia. If being Australian means living on the edge of the world then being Western Australian means living on the very edge of Australia. The centre of Australian population and culture is on the eastern seaboard. The vast majority of Western Australians live on the very edge of the south-west of the continent. They are separated by a vast expanse of desert from the rest of Australia and by vast stretches of ocean from the rest of the world.

"The Western Australian situation of literally having the desert at your back and the sea in front of you ... you do feel marginal in the most literal sense of the word."

Tim Winton, *The Edge of the World*

Not surprisingly Western Australians have also tended to see themselves, and be seen by other Australians, as isolated from and marginal to mainstream Australian society and culture. It was only the votes of immigrant Eastern Staters on the goldfields which took Western Australia into the Australian federation in 1900. A trans Australian railway linking West with East was not built until 1917 and in 1933 Western Australians voted to secede from the federation, a decision which was not however implemented.

It is not surprising then to find that a sense of displacement, isolation and marginalisation are dominant themes in the work of Tim Winton. In choosing the Kimberley as the setting for the work in progress discussed in *The Edge of the World*, Winton had chosen the most isolated area of Western Australia itself:

"What happens when all the other stuff's gone, when all the trimmings are left out, when the only conjunctions you have are your relationship to the landscape and the physical environment around you? Just the business of shelter, food. What happens to you then? I wonder, I really wonder."
Tim Winton, *The Edge of the World*

Preoccupations and Concerns in the Work of Tim Winton

DISPLACEMENT

As suggested by the title of *The Edge of the World* Winton's work is characterised by a preoccupation with characters who in various ways find themselves displaced from their familiar surroundings and have to cope with challenges and crises in what is for them unfamiliar and alien surroundings.

In *Cloudstreet* the Lamb and Pickles families come from the country to make a new home in the city. Scully in *The Riders* is an Australian trying to build a new life in Ireland forced to come to terms with his wife's desertion of him and his daughter. In Winton's series of novels for teenagers the central character Lockie Leonard is forced by his father's transfer to a country coastal town into the role of the new kid who must make his way in a strange and difficult environment. Fish Lamb in *Cloudstreet* is perhaps the most displaced character of all, plucked from his watery grave and forced to lead a life on land in which he is no longer able to participate fully. In the work in progress which he discusses in *The Edge of the World* Winton is interested in exploring how a character might cope with a situation where all social interaction is absent and the only relationship is with the harsh Kimberley environment.

An exploration of the meaning and effects of displacement has a long and continuing history within Australian literature. Given Australia's settlement as an outpost of displaced Europeans, which in turn dispossessed and displaced the continent's indigenous inhabitants (a fact of which the mysterious Aborigine in *Cloudstreet* offers a continuing reminder), and the country's history of continuing immigration, this is hardly surprising.

Winton, however, explores and develops the theme of displacement in novel and interesting ways which throw new light on both Australia's history and its present. In 'Neighbours', for example, a short story from the Scission collection Winton explores, and eventually celebrates, the new multicultural Australia. A young couple, presumably of British ancestry, move from the outer suburbs to an inner suburb dominated by migrants recently arrived from southern and eastern Europe. While the couple initially find themselves feeling like "sojourners in a foreign land" time and the birth of a child produce a shared sense of community and an awareness and celebration of common humanity.

The Riders offers perhaps Winton's most interesting treatment of displacement. Scully's position as an Australian attempting to come to grips with the old world' of Europe is a reversal of the usual tradition in literature which presents Australia as the strange new land which a character must struggle to understand. For Scully it is Europe, not Australia, which is strange, hostile and "on the edge of the world". Australia on the other hand represents home and all that is familiar and natural. Scully's awareness of his estrangement from his environment is expressed in his comments on the European landscape and through his responses to the strange ghostly figures of *The Riders*. Winton's treatment of Europe and Australia in *The Riders* thus represents a reversal of the usual representations in a way which echoes, while not deriving from, the work of some American writers such as Henry James, but which is much less common in Australian literature.

MARGINALISATION

The displaced status of many of Winton's characters makes them as a matter of course marginalised: on the periphery of the society in which they find themselves operating. Winton's preoccupation with marginalisation goes further however. Many of his central characters are on the periphery of society not just because of newcomer status. They are marginalised, isolated or simply different in other ways. In *That Eye, The Sky* the Flack family are hippies living on the periphery of the metropolitan area and Ort, the twelve year old son and narrator, is set apart from other boys his age by his religious mysticism. The characters in *In the Winter Dark* are isolated in their farmhouse in a lonely valley in a forest. Fish Lamb in *Cloudstreet* is mentally disabled and the Lamb and Pickles family working class status places them on the margins of their society. Scully in *The Riders* is a big shambling hulk of a man who does not conform to the given stereotypes of masculine attractiveness. His retracing of the journey he and his wife had made through Europe emphasises Scully's working class background and his alienation from the bohemian social world they had inhabited. Billie, Scully's daughter, is a child travelling through a world of adults. Even Lockie Leonard in the teenage novels is conscious of his differentiation from other teenagers because he is the son of the town cop. Mysterious outsiders feature in a number of Winton's novels such as the evangelist Henry in *That Eye, The Sky* and the Aborigine in *Cloudstreet*.

Frequently in Winton's work a character's outsider status is accompanied by an ability to see or understand more clearly and deeply than others. Ort Flack and Fish Lamb have outsider status which gives them particular insights which others lack. Billie, the child in the adult world of *The Riders*, has insights and develops an understanding of her situation more quickly than her father.

SPIRITUALITY AND MYSTICISM

Winton's works are characterised by a deep interest in spirituality and mysticism. In many of them there is a powerful sense of some extrahuman force present, not necessarily intervening in human affairs but there nevertheless as an observer of and counterpoint to human experience. This is especially noticeable in *That Eye, The Sky* where the title draws attention to this aspect of the novel. The ghosts in *The Riders* and the Aborigine in *Cloudstreet* act as pointers to another world, one which involves something beyond literal human comprehension. In *The Edge of the World* he refers to the "shifty shadow of fate" being ever present and to the nearness and abruptness of death. The same idea is expressed in different terms in the underwater sequence of the film when Winton speaks of the danger of forgetting oneself underwater and simply "floating off into the blue".

There is in Winton's work a suggestion that life, as we normally think of it, is itself "on the edge" of something else, something larger and perhaps more rewarding, to which some characters are occasionally given glimpses only. This is especially noticeable in the scene in *Cloudstreet*, enacted in *The Edge of the World*, where Fish Lamb nearly drowns and is drawn to the afterlife and resents being pulled back into worldly existence:

"... he's travelled somewhere in that time and that somewhere has been attractive to him - he's felt something else, the possibility of something else."

Tim Winton, *The Edge of the World*

In *The Edge of the World* Winton expresses his "abiding fascination with the monastic tradition", with seers, hermits and mystics - people who isolate themselves in order to contemplate the nature of existence. This fascination can be read as another explanation for the dominance of displaced, marginalised and isolated characters in Winton's work. But isolation for Winton is not to be confused with being asocial or misanthropic. In *The Edge of the World* he warns of the danger of not bringing back that "what has been revealed to you" as a result of isolation - Winton emphasises the importance of sharing the results of one's experience.

In a number of instances such as Fish Lamb with his brain damage and Ort Flack recovering from meningitis, Winton, draws on another mystic tradition, found in many religions, which sees children and the supposedly mentally deficient as possessors of religious and spiritual insight denied to the adults and the mentally "normal".

The air of spirituality and mysticism in Winton's work can be related to the author's Christianity. Winton is a regular churchgoer. But the religious element of Winton's work contains a much stronger sense of the mysterious and the animistic than traditional doctrinal Christianity often articulates.

ENVIRONMENT AND LANDSCAPE

Spiritual forces in Winton's work are often represented in terms of environment, and especially the sky and the ocean. This is not simply a literary device or an example of clever metaphor. As *The Edge of the World* shows, for Winton the environment has a spiritual life and force of its own, one which places human concerns within a wider perspective.

In *The Edge of the World* Winton states, "Even though we do see ourselves as a desert, outback nation in mythology, for many of us all our important moments happened by the sea or the by the water," a comment which echoes the sentiments of Robert Drewe, another Western Australian. Winton's work challenges a long literary tradition which places an emphasis on the desert as the defining force in Australian experience. For Winton, it is the sea which has had the more powerful effect on Australian experience and in many of his novels the sea plays a central role. In this respect Winton reflects his Western Australian context. Writing of Western Australian literature in general, Bennett and Grono point out that, "It is interesting how the sea works as a motif in much writing from Western Australia: the sea which confines can also open new worlds to the imagination, and the possibility of escape." (Bennet, Bruce and Grono, William, *Wide Domain: Western Australian Themes and Images*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1979).

An interesting contrast to this preoccupation with the power of the natural environment occurs in *Cloudstreet* where the built environment in the form of the house seems to take on a life of its own and possess an almost spiritual dimension.

MASCULINITY

"I still remember seeing my father weep for the first time I was kind of gratified because I realised he was human and I loved him more for it. It was our little secret."
Tim Winton, *The Edge of the World*

One of the most notable and interesting aspects of Winton's work, and one which sets him apart from many writers, is his exploration and interrogation of masculinity. It is the masculinity of ordinary everyday Australians which Winton explores, especially the male figures who are so noticeably absent from a great deal of literature: the working class, the rural or semi-rural poor, the inhabitants of country towns and the young. Winton's males are often emotionally fragile and show weakness, confusion or uncertainty. They frequently seem to be struggling through the traditional constructions of masculinity to reach out to the feelings of others and, at times, to a world of spiritual feeling. In "A Blow, A Kiss" parts of which are dramatised in *The Edge of the World*, young Albie and his father, returning from a fishing trip where they have lost the salmon they buried, witness the death of a young motor cyclist and then the violent grief of the boy's father. In response to Albie's confusion at the violent reaction of the motor cyclist's father, Albie's father reached out and put his knuckles to Albie's cheek, left them there for a long time, as though still waiting for words to come. "Sorry about the salmon," he said. Albie felt those knuckles on his cheek still and knew, full to bursting, that that was how God would touch someone."

At times Winton seems to be celebrating traditional masculine modes of relating and drawing attention to the often ignored or disparaged structures of feeling which underlie these. At other times he shows characters forced to come to grips with the fact that their learnt masculine behaviours are not sufficient to the occasion and needing to develop new ones. In the Lockie Leonard novels Winton offers a portrait of adolescent masculinity which challenges many of the myths about themselves with which young males are presented by the media, their peers and their adult male mentors.

CHILDREN

In *The Edge of the World* Winton speaks of his nostalgia for childhood. Children he sees as innocent, unbound by convention and with an instinctive way of seeing into the truth of things. Billie in *The Riders*, despite the fact she is initially shattered by her mother's desertion and her refusal to explain what happened, develops more quickly than Scully and is able to accommodate the new reality of their existence. In many parts of the novel there is a role reversal where it is Billie who adopts the parental guiding role while Scully is lost in despair, drunkenness, confusion and an inability to cope.

"It's somehow finding that instinctive way of seeing that children don't have to work towards ... The hard work is finding your way back to some real child-like perspective."

Tim Winton, *The Edge of the World*

Many of Winton's works are written in whole or part from the point of view of children: Ort Flack in *That Eye, The Sky*, Fish Lamb in *Cloudstreet*, Albie in "A Blow, A Kiss" and Lockie Leonard in the novels for teenagers.

Questions for Discussion

1. Choose a character from one of Winton's novels or stories and discuss the way in which he or she is presented as displaced or marginalised. To what extent is the character's status presented as a difficulty and to what extent is it an advantage?
2. Discuss the spiritual elements in one of Winton's novels. How do you interpret the nature of the spiritual universe presented or hinted at?
3. Discuss the role of environment and landscape in one of Winton's novels. What is the nature of the relationship between characters and their environment?
4. Discuss the male characters in one of Winton's novels or stories. To what extent do they conform to traditional stereotypes of masculine behaviour and to what extent do they depart from these?
5. Examine the representation of children in one of Winton's novels. Discuss the extent to which they are shown as understanding less than adults or the way in which they are presented as possessing different, even superior, insights into experience from those of adults.
6. In *The Edge of the World* Winton makes an interesting remark about what he perceives as Australians' changing attitudes to the working classes and the way this change is reflected in language. A person, he says, who would have once been described as a "battler" is now labelled a "loser". Winton's characters are frequently of the working class. From your knowledge of his work describe and comment upon his interpretation of working class Australian values.
7. A critic in *The National Times* described Tim Winton's work as follows: "his fiction is full of care, in all three senses - of craftsmanship, of moral concern, and of a sobriety before the facts of life." Discuss this view of Winton's work with reference to two or more of his novels or stories.

The Film

The Edge of the World is a documentary about both a man and a place. The ostensible subject of the film is Tim Winton the author. However the film also documents a place, Western Australia. The two concerns of the film, the man and the place are skilfully melded through a framing narrative which locates Winton in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. The framing narrative is the story, only half told but glimpsed frequently, of Tim Winton's fishing trip to the Kimberley. Images of the Kimberley quite literally frame the film: the production opens and closes with shots of the Kimberley land and sea scapes and returns periodically to depict Winton at various points in the trip - cooking, eating, fishing, chatting, swimming. The choice of the Kimberley location for the framing story has two effects. First, it establishes from the outset a powerful relationship between Winton and his physical environment. Through its selection and repeated use of features of the landscape the film reinforces Winton's own assertions that he has a close, almost mystical relationship with the land and sea.

He says, "It was this place which probably sparked off the mysterious idea I have for the future project which I hope will be a book." Secondly the images of the Kimberley, images of space, emptiness, and openness provide a sharp and critical counter point to the image of the city. The city of Perth is shown briefly in shots of suburban houses and the city office tower skyline. The shots of cramped suburban rooftops are a powerful contrast to the sweeping, wide shots of the Kimberley location. Interestingly both the shots in the Kimberley and the shots of suburban Perth share a similarity in that they are devoid of people. In the case of the former however the isolation is not depicted as alienating. On the other hand the lack of people in the images of the Perth suburbs serves to reinforce Winton's lament over the lack of a sense of community in city life, limited as it is to the "telly and football field". Thus in the opening minutes of the documentary the urban and the natural environment are represented as being in opposition to each other, a conflict in which the viewer is invited to empathise with the natural.

As a portrait of Western Australia the film draws upon some archetypal images - the clear sea, the wide expanse of blue sky, the sun sinking into the ocean and the red of the rocks and desert. There is a marked lack of people, lack in fact of any human activity beyond fishing and swimming. The film avoids appearing like a tourist promotion by its whimsical exploration of Winton's claim that "the sea and desert are not images of emptiness". The audience is treated to a relatively long sequence of underwater shots which reveal an ocean bed teeming with sea life and movement and thus the film supports Winton's statement that the sea and desert are in fact "brimming with life".

The film emphasises, through its selection of detail and the intercutting of Winton's narration with dramatised enactments, his personal experience as the source of his creative imagery and skill. In one memorable scene he recounts the story of him and his father witnessing a motorbike accident. The film cuts to a dramatised scene from "A Blow, A Kiss" in which Albie watches anxiously through the car windscreen. The juxtaposition of Winton speaking of events in his life against the accident scene from the short story suggests that personal experience is the most powerful creative resource of the author. The technique is used with the same effect in another scene on the beach in which images of Winton's own family are intercut, and at times seem to merge with, images of the fictional Lamb family from *Cloudstreet*. The documentary to some extent makes the link between Winton's personal experiences and his creative writing more strongly than he is willing to do. He describes his personal experiences as "like splinters under my skin" which eventually work their way to the surface.

Tim Winton has expressed a love for the vernacular in writing and in language generally, and this is clearly evident in much of his work. The film exemplifies this aspect of Winton most noticeably in the scene where Tim and Ant are fishing in the mangroves.

The Edge of the World is a somewhat unusual documentary in that it uses only a single source of information on the author and that is himself. Traditionally documentaries about a living person like Winton use multiple sources such as comments from critics and fans, academic literary criticism, past teachers and colleagues. In this documentary Winton is allowed to speak for himself and he is the only voice which is permitted to comment on his thoughts, motives, beliefs and experiences. Even his fishing mates, Blue and Ant, make no comment on Winton the man. The effect of this technique of using the single voice of the subject is to make the documentary appear less an examination of the work of the author and more an exploration of the man himself.

While it is not uncommon for a documentary to include dramatised footage it is usually done as a dramatic reconstruction of past events. *The Edge of the World* is unusual in that it includes dramatic enactments of fictional events. The dramatic sequences are short films within a film and pose more complex production issues than their seamless interweaving into the documentary suggest. Winton writes prose fiction, not scripts, therefore the enactments required an adaptation of the written work for the screen. Each of the dramatised sequences is worthy of close examination of the way in which it renders the novel as drama - from the meticulous attention to period detail of the pig sequence to the slightly surrealistic sequence of the drowning of Fish from *Cloudstreet*.

Questions For Discussion

1. Discuss the way in which Winton emerges as a writer from *The Edge of the World*. What aspects of the film construct him in fairly traditional ways as a gifted artist who thinks more deeply than most people and what aspects construct him more like an ordinary bloke'?
2. *The Edge of the World* includes a brief sequence from Tim Winton's promotional tour of Canada. This sequence has a recognisably different atmosphere and tone from the rest of the documentary. What new insights does this sequence give the viewer into Tim Winton's personality and status? Why do you think the filmmaker chose to use the Vancouver footage?
3. The Kimberley sequence features Ant and Blue, fishing mates of Tim Winton. Although the two men are shown engaged in conversation with Winton they never comment directly upon his work or his character. In what ways do these two figures contribute to the characterisation of Tim Winton?
4. Look at a couple of the dramatised sequences in the film and compare them to the appropriate section from the novel. Discuss your reactions to the dramatised sequences:
 - in your view is it a faithful rendition of the novel?
 - what changes in the narrative have been made to accommodate the need to adapt it for film?
 - how does the filmed version deal with a character' thoughts?

5. Discuss the ways in which you could depict on film the opening scenes from two of Winton's novels. Give careful consideration to the setting, the sound effects, and the manner in which you would cope with internal discourse. What aspects of the written work provide the most problems when thinking about how to adapt it for film? Extracts are provided below:

From That Eye, The Sky

Dad has the ute going outside. I am behind Mum. Her dress has got flowers all on it, none of them much to look at. Her bum moves around when she laughs. Dad always says she has a bum like an angry mob which means nothing to me but a lot to him, I reckon. I can hear the rooster corking out the back. He's a mean rooster - goes for our pills when you collect the eggs.

From Cloudstreet

Will you look at us by the river! The whole restless mob of us spread on blankets in the dreamy briny sunshine skylarking and chiacking about for one day, one clear, clean, sweet day in a good world in the midst of our living. Yachts run before an unfelt gust with bagnecked pelicans riding above them, the city their twitching back drop, all blocks and points of mirror light down to the water's edge.

6. In *Shallows* Cleve Cookson finds himself involved in the whaling journals of Nathaniel Coupar who wrote them in the 1830s. Discuss the comment that "*Shallows* can be viewed as Winton's very personal dialogue with history". How does the sequence from the film in which Winton describes his memories and reactions to the Albany Whaling Station influence your reading of *Shallows*?

References & Further Reading

Rossiter, Richard and Jacobs, Lyn (eds), *Reading Tim Winton*, Angus and Robertson, Pymble, 1993.

About the Authors

Rod Quin has taught English, English Literature and Media Studies for twenty two years and is currently Head of English at Balcatta Senior High School in Perth. He is co-author of the teacher handbooks *Teaching Viewing and Visual Texts - Primary* and *Teaching Viewing and Visual Texts - Secondary*, as well as the student texts *Senior English Now Book 1*, *Senior English Now 2*, *Picture This*, *In the Picture* and *The Big Picture*. He has wide experience in writing curriculum and educational support materials and has at various times been employed for this purpose by the Curriculum Corporation, the Education Department of Western Australia, the Secondary Education Authority of Western Australia and the Curriculum Council of Western Australia.

Robyn Quin is Associate Professor of Media Studies and Head of the School of Language, Literature and Media Studies at Edith Cowan University. She is co-author of the teacher handbooks *Teaching Viewing and Visual Texts - Primary* and *Teaching Viewing and Visual Texts - Secondary*, as well as the student texts *Picture This*, *In the Picture*, *The Big Picture*, *Exploring Images*, *Real Images*, *Meet the Media*, *Australian Images* and *Stories and Stereotypes*. She has worked in primary and secondary schools and has produced teacher notes for the Australian Teachers of Media, the English Teachers Association of WA and the Arts Alliance.

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