

Alice Vidussi

In conversation with Tim Winton

Tim Winton is one of the most esteemed and prize-winning contemporary Australian authors. The subjects he deals with in his novels and stories concern respect for nature, as well as an immense love for the Australian country and history. The environmental question plays a very important role in his fiction. Tim Winton's writing is not only a sort of 'eco-philosophy', but also a way of making good literature. Maybe the key of his success lies in this double message. I interviewed him for *Le Simplegadi*, as this issue focuses on eco-sustainable narratives. I asked Winton to give his opinion about writing from a 'respect for nature' point of view. I was interested in the way he insists on underlining the fragility of the oceans' ecosystems and the dangers of exploiting the beaches for touristic reasons. Therefore, I tried to understand how his books can help people understand that nature is fundamental for our survival and welfare. Together with the writer I discussed some passages of his most famous novels, where his young characters fight to save the Australian oceans and marine fauna. We found out that these stories can help the readers to understand why it is so important to protect and respect nature. Moreover, Winton revealed his opinion about the future of 'Postcolonial Literatures' and their connection with the Australian writers and poets. Furthermore, I asked him to discuss the Aboriginal Australians' culture. There are many references to its ancient traditions in Winton's books and I was curious about the Aboriginal Australians' worship of nature and the connection with the writer's favourite themes. Finally, he exhaustively satisfied our curiosity about a possible connection between food and an eco-sustainable writing.

Alice Vidussi Do you consider yourself an 'eco-philosophical writer', as Salhia Ben-Messahel defined you in her article "'More Blokes, More Bloody Water' Tim Winton's 'Breath'" (Ben-Messahel 2012: 7)? Why?

Tim Winton I have been writing about people's engagement with nature from the very beginning of my career, from the old colonial alienation from the land to the new ethic of stewardship that has begun to take hold in the last generation or two. But I certainly haven't set out to be a standard-bearer for eco-philosophy through my fiction. I was just writing about what I saw and knew and much of that was either a human struggle *against* nature or humans struggling *within* the constraints of nature.

My own interests in nature were instinctive, not very educated. As you'll have seen from my little memoir, *Land's Edge*, I learnt by action, by being immersed in the natural world. For me it began as a physical, sensual passion that I didn't really have a language for as a boy. Later of course I read the Romantic poets – especially Wordsworth and Blake, Gerard Manley Hopkins – who spoke of the natural world as a *subject* rather than an *object* and this resonated strongly. Somehow this led me to other thinkers about nature from St. Francis to Goethe to Bill McKibben (1). I think the work of the Deep Ecologists has had more of an influence on the fiction than I first realized – and certainly more than most critics have noticed. Mostly because literature has been quarantined from other disciplines for so long. My suspicion is that my more public work as an activist has alerted some critics and scholars to the role of the environment in my fiction, but very few saw this strand of thought in the work itself until very recently. When I worked in the environmental movement in a much less public capacity and few outside the movement knew about it, nobody was drawing parallels.

I wrote *Blueback* before I'd read much eco-philosophy. Certainly before I became a public advocate for the cause. *Dirt Music* came after a long period of engaging with it and by then I'd been a public activist for a few years. And I've become more and more involved since then.

As a novelist I'm not certain I qualify as much of an eco-philosopher. But I think it's reasonable to see the influence of nature thinkers in my work. Nature is a subject, not just an object, a character, a living thing and not simply backdrop.

AV You are not only a writer, but also an environmental activist in Western Australia. The struggle you fought in association with the Australian Marine Conservation Society and other environmental societies, to save Ningaloo Reef in the 2000s is an example. Ningaloo Reef is now one of the world's great eco-tourism destinations, thanks to its 260 km of enchanting shore and the annual appearance of the ocean's biggest fish, the whale shark. Also, you have been patron of the Marine Conservation Society since 2006. Is there a link between your novels and your environmental activism? Ben-Messahel writes: "Tim Winton stands halfway between the activist and the writer of fiction" (Ben-Messahel 2006: 21).

TW I'm a storyteller first and foremost. I don't think the novel is an instrument of persuasion. Seduction, perhaps. Enchantment, yes. A reader of fiction quickly feels trapped and betrayed by a writer who sets out to persuade. Convincing a reader, though, is different. The artist's job is to get the reader or viewer to let go of their ordinary life, the safe, dull, conventional habits of life and mind and allow themselves to be swept into another reality, an alternative experience. If this experience shakes or moves the readers and lingers with them, then the work itself has done all the convincing it needs to do.

Art requires us to let go a little, to examine ourselves as we contemplate the strange echo the writer or painter has produced. The problems of a novel are not just a game to entertain a reader. They exist to disturb.

In my public life I concede that I am viewed as someone who stands, as Ben-Messahel suggests, between activist and artist. That's simply a public perception and it is sometimes a superficial reading. I engage in activism as a *citizen*, not as a writer. My (paid) work is distinct from my (voluntary) activism. Yes, I use the public reputation I gained as a writer in order to advocate for causes, but this has more to do with the way media and PR (2) work in a democracy than it has to do with writing or literature. Still the writing and the activism do overlap now and then. In *Eyrie* the activism has clearly influenced the fiction. And in *Blueback* the fiction informed or perhaps inspired the later activism. My experiences as an

environmentalist and my observation of comrades in the movement no doubt influenced the writing of the character Keely. But *Eyrie* isn't an eco-novel so much as a story of existential alienation.

AV Do the characters in your books feel the need to protect nature as you do? In *Shallows* (1984), Queenie Cookson joins the Greenies to protect the whales in Angelus (WA). Then, in *Blueback* (1997), you write about "whale bones, thousands and thousands of them all along the bay" (Winton 1997: 125-26). In your childhood you saw the massacre of the whales in Australia's whaling days during the 60s. You write about it in the article "Girt by sea" (2011), too. Are the characters of Queenie Cookson, Abel Jackson and Lockie Leonard in *Lockie Leonard, Scumbuster* (1993) examples of young environmental activists the readers could follow? If so, why?

TW Yes, there are characters in my fiction who feel compelled to speak up for nature. But there are many more who are afraid of it or even disgusted by it. For every Queenie in *Shallows* there are a dozen others who see nature as alien from them and something merely to exploit. The business of whaling is mostly historical now. But if you replaced it with the business of fossil fuels the same mentality applies. The conventional views of the time are always dominant. It's only in retrospect that commonsense looks crazy.

So I think it's fairer to say I mostly write about people at war with nature or in retreat from nature. Like the characters in *In the Winter Dark* for instance, who are terrified by what lurks in the bush. And now and then there is a marginal character, an outsider with a heretical view. Like Dora Jackson in *Blueback*.

In terms of what I'm trying to do with these characters, first and foremost I want them to be interesting as people, for their problems to seem real and engaging. Much of literature has relied upon characters swimming against the current of their culture or their family (or both). They are odd, strange, problematic. The physical state of the world is probably the most pressing issue humans face in our own era. In earlier times the ideology of class or of nationalism, of peace between nations or of the chaos caused by sudden technological progress were

the issues of the day. None of those problems are resolved, of course; they are still urgent issues, but the physical health of the planet looms above all of them. So it makes sense to have a few outlying characters swimming against the current of complacency that most nations and communities still settle for.

If a young reader – or an older reader for that matter – takes some sustenance or inspiration or is at the very least moved to contemplate this issue as a result of reading one of my novels then I'm happy about that. But as I've said, I don't write them for that purpose. Novels are very indirect vectors of ideas. There are many more direct and efficient ways to appeal to people.

AV Do you think that your fiction and the themes you deal with, such as the great mystery of life and death, love and the enchanting power of nature, can be an inspiration for younger generations? Can your fiction teach something to young readers? I refer to the respect for nature and the deep roots of the Australian history. Can your books be a connection between the beauty and history of your land and its young people?

TW Yes, I think literature can inspire people. Not politically and not in a propagandist manner. But through time literature has served an indirect purpose (as has music and art) in allowing or encouraging people to examine the ways in which they think and live. It colours our dreams and visions. Sometimes it merely reflects us back at ourselves in a way that's unflattering.

In my lifetime Australian literature has reflected great changes in thinking, in the cultural mainstream of our society. In recent years writers have relinquished the nationalism of previous generations. The old Australian anxiety about 'belonging' is slowly fading from consciousness. If my work expresses anything new it's probably reflecting the change from the settler-ethic to a sense of belonging that's not without its problems but which sees Australia the island, Australia the eco-system more clearly than it once did. When Australians thought of the country in terms of *territory* their conception of it was colonizing and nationalistic; they wanted to subdue it and own it and the boundaries were important. No doubt a necessary

stage to go through in a post-colonial situation. Nowadays young people are just as likely to have strong feelings about Australia the place, the ecosystem, the finite natural web of resources we depend upon for our physical survival and our spiritual sustenance. This is quite a change in thinking. But science has played a big part in this change. Much greater than fiction. Probably even greater than the thinkers of Deep Ecology (3).

Aboriginal Australians have had quite an impact on this change as well, greater than many people realize. Since the first invasion and settlement indigenous Australians have adapted and co-opted new ideas and tools from settlers. And for a long time the exchange was very lopsided. Robbery is always a bit once-sided, let's face it. Over the generations, though, especially in the last 50 years a slowly dawning respect for Aboriginal culture has begun to alter non-indigenous Australia. Of course the most successful Aborigines appropriated the most useful parts of the interloper's thinking and technology – that has never changed. What has changed is the way in which Aboriginal concepts have crossed into mainstream thinking. This has changed the cultural mindset and the political landscape. And some of this has flowed into this new idea of people owing some kind of debt and allegiance to the land itself. Many non-Aboriginal Australians realize that their continent is fragile and finite and that our survival depends on its good health. Many have come closer to the idea that we belong to it, not that it belongs to us.

AV In *Cloudstreet* (1991), the character of Fish Lamb is the most sensitive amongst the two families, the Lambs and the Pickles. He can talk with the pig in the yard and feels when his beloved brother Quick is in danger, even though he is far away from the family. There is a wonderful passage in the book, when the two brothers are on their boat at night on the Swan River. The sky is full of stars and Quick sees "the river full of sky as well. There's stars and swirl and space down there and there's no water anymore" (Winton 1991: 114). Does Fish represent humanity's

deep and forgotten connection with nature? Is he the symbol of your own respect for nature?

TW I haven't thought of Fish in those terms before, but this makes some sense, yes. He is in a liminal space between life and death, between nature and essence. He embodies the yearning of an earlier character, Ort Flack from *That Eye, the Sky* who is, in his inarticulate way, a kind of nature mystic of a sort that St. Francis or a Sufi mystic might instinctively recognize as a seeker. Fish and Ort sense that suffering humanity is not outside nature. All our battles with each other and ourselves happen within the realm of nature. It affects us and we have an impact upon it. So we're talking about a relationship here, a kinship. Whether we like it or not, the natural world is family to us.

AV Do you think that Western Australia's nature and the Australian environment in general are strictly connected to Australian culture? The space and wilderness of your country are not the same as in Europe. In your opinion, how can land affect a culture?

TW Australia is certainly not unique amongst nations and cultures when it comes to this question. Lots of cultures are informed (or even deformed) by landscape and space. Insofar as there is anything we can safely call a set of 'national characteristics' you can see these are a result of environment as much as history. Food, physical culture, patterns of thinking – these are geographical, not just historical.

Australia is an instance where you can see landscape and space competing with settlers' European origins and slowly overcoming them. There's no question in my mind that I would be a total confounding stranger to my first Australian ancestors and their Irish, Scottish and English cousins. Not just because modernity has come between us. But because my view of the place in which we live is radically different as a result of generations of experience and knowledge that I inherited by cultural osmosis. History has changed us, yes. But the land itself

has altered us beyond recognition. My ancestors came from small, lush green islands. And although I am an islander myself, Australia being the world's largest island, my view of the world has been formed by enormous space, vast distances, and a lack of fresh water unthinkable to a European. My sensory palate is different to that of my forebears.

Western Australia happens to be larger, drier and less populated than the rest of Australia, so all those forces are dialed up to the maximum. I'm also conscious that my part of Australia contains some of the last great wilderness areas on the planet. It's no accident that the environmental movement and green politics are strong here and growing in influence.

AV In your novels you sometimes write about angels. Talking about *Cloudstreet* once more, you write about a "black angel" or "blackfella" that Quick Lamb meets when he is alone and lost. Also, Fish Lamb is an angel himself as he saves Quick when he is injured by a kangaroo, by joining him in his dreams and "rowing a box across the top of the wheat" (Winton 1991: 200). In the passage, Fish is described as "silver with flight" (Winton 1991: 200). Moreover, Quick falls ill with a fever which makes his skin become "like mother of pearl" (Winton 1991: 228). These signs seem to be a sort of "presages". Are they conceived in a religious way or do they refer to a mystical connection with nature? On the one hand, Quick is touched by the magic of nature when he is alone in the fields: "the threes shake with music" is his mind (Winton 1991: 218). On the other, Fish is "blessed" by water since he almost drowned in the river. The only thing he cares about in the novel is going back to the water. Does water represent life? How important is water in a country like Australia?

TW I don't have a way of looking at the world that separates the spiritual from the natural, so my sense of those 'otherworldly' or 'angelic' characters is neither one nor the other but both. Religion is impossible without nature. Almost every tradition requires an engagement with the physical world. Those characters are not nature sprites. They are human forces, human resonances. And they resonate in nature.

That is, in humans, who, despite their exclusive sense of themselves, are a part of nature.

Water is life in any country or culture, let's face it. But it's most central to a cultural or religious tradition where it is geographically most precious. To the Jews wandering in antiquity water was so precious it becomes central in the Hebrew scriptures as an image of Yaweh's power and creativity. Hence the references to God making His presence known symbolically and literally in 'streams of living water'. In Australia where there is even less water than in the Middle East, Aborigines made water central to their thinking. For instance, the Ngarinyin people of the Kimberley 'conceived' of their children in rock pools; that is, the *idea* of the child appeared in the water and only then did a woman become pregnant. Similarly, the most ancient painted icons to be part of a living culture are the Wanjina figures of the Kimberley region central to Ngarinyin life. Painted in ochre in rock shelters and caves, these huge faces are an embodiment, a visual echo really, of the monsoonal storms that finally arrive at the end of the year to fill the rock holes and creeks. The rainy season only lasts a few weeks and that water has to last all year. So it's no accident that the force that provides all this water is powerful and sacred.

Australians are affected by both these cultural traditions (as well as many others). Generation after generation, if we've learnt anything collectively it's that water is our most precious commodity. Even in a land as arid as ours, humans are water-beings. Our bodies are 70% water. The planet we live on is 70% aquatic as well. All of us are water creatures before we leave our mother's wombs. No surprise that water is a big deal, then.

AV In your opinion, could respect for nature be a way of helping human beings respect each other? Why?

TW Yes, I think so because it relies on the notion of interdependence. Globalization has taught us that we are mutually vulnerable economically. In military terms, too,

there is less of a sense of issues and nations being discrete. In a strange way this makes us feel less safe, more vulnerable. And yet a certain level of vulnerability is an opportunity as much as a disadvantage. After all, how could any of us fall in love unless we'd embraced the risk of vulnerability? The study of ecology has taught us that the nature world is strung together by a web of relationships: mutual strengths and vulnerabilities. It is not a mechanical system as the thinkers of the Enlightenment liked to think of it; it's organic. Modern physical sciences have shown us that the world is finite, fragile and loaded with contingency. We are all more vulnerable than we realize. Even without the spectre of eating ourselves out of house and home and polluting ourselves into chaos we were *always* vulnerable but we just didn't know it. Acknowledging this and exercising our moral imagination to address it is the most pressing crisis and the greatest opportunity of our age.

AV As Australia is a post-colonial country, how is this particular condition connected to the love for the environment that you and the Australian Marine Conservation Society along with many other Australian associations feel? Do you think that taking care of your own land is a way to assert Australia's independence and dignity? Why?

TW Yes, to an extent this sense of pride and love did have its first form in post-colonial nationalism. But as I've said, this was a limited stage in the development of the culture, in my view. More and more people would now define their patriotism in terms of defending and celebrating the environment that sustains us rather than defending the state that contains us. The state is a confection, a game we play to drop a thin veil of order over something naturally disordered. The environment is not something willed and legislated for and enforced by violence the way the state is; it is not arrived at by ingenuity or effort. It simply *is*. It is a concrete fact of life. I suspect young people can feel a sense of allegiance to something that is real rather than something largely imagined or imposed. When the state continues to act in a manner hostile to the environment – and let's face

it, most government departments are doing that all day every day – you can understand the sense some people get that the state is acting against the best interests of the people. Its first priority should be the survival of its people. Governments that undercut the terms of human survival are not simply ecological vandals; they are anti-human, against life.

AV What is your opinion about 'Postcolonial Literatures'? Australian Literature is very rich in poets and writers. In your opinion, what do they have in common with the other 'Postcolonial authors'?

TW I'm not very widely-read in this area. My sense is that most of us, having lived beyond the older imperial age (only in order to endure a new one) are working out how we think and live and speak in our new circumstances. Some of us are still preoccupied with fighting the old order. For those of us at a great distance from the centers of the new imperial power, there's a struggle between the provincial and the cosmopolitan. The strongest work seems to come from writers owning their own place, their own specifics, their own vernacular. The politics of this isn't always interesting (although I know it fuels many departments in the academy) but to my mind the aesthetic fruits of this are amazing. The greatest poets of our age were not from New York or London but from Ireland, (Heaney) the Caribbean (Walcott) and Australia (Les Murray). You could probably say the same of novelists. They all come from piss-ant places nobody in the new *imperium* gives a damn about. But to be honest the post-colonial label is a little tiresome. The ex-colonies have gone on to new things, including enslaving others and cosyng up to new imperialists. The label has lost its currency.

AV Is your fiction partially trying to give dignity back to the Aboriginal Australians? What is their role in your work? Both in *Shallows* and *Cloudstreet*, you write about the Indigenous cause. In your opinion, are modern Australians learning to respect nature from the Aboriginal Australians? Finally, do you believe in a cultural exchange between the Aboriginal ancient culture and Australian literature?

TW A number of great Aboriginal elders of the 20th century talked about 'two-way living'. In their own terms this meant encouraging their own people to be literate and competent in both traditional and modern ways, which is to say indigenous and non-indigenous ways. This was, in their view, a path to survival as much as an enlarged way of seeing and living. But they also used this term to try to draw non-indigenous Australia into an exchange of wisdom. Often with miserable results. Even so, this impulse is still at work and I've been very interested in it. The life and work of David Mowaljarlai (4) have been influential in this regard. I've spent quite a bit of time in the company of people who knew him and studied in his 'bush university' in the Kimberley. I have travelled and camped with members of his family and clan, though I would not dare to consider myself fluent in this way of thinking or an expert in any kind of indigenous matters, I have enormous respect for this 'two-way' ethic. I think Mowaljarlai was one of our country's greatest sons. I believe this exchange of wisdom, this mutual respect and regard is vital to this country's future. The dispossession of Aborigines since colonization is the great spiritual wound, the worm in the apple of the Australian communal spirit. There will be no maturity, no honest future without this being addressed.

AV How can the Australian Marine Conservation Society's Seafood Guide help Australians and other people all over the world eat well and respect sea life? In your opinion, is food a way of understanding nature? Why?

TW You can tell a lot about people from what they eat and how thoughtfully they consume. We've been working for a decade now to provoke a conversation about the fish we eat, how we source it and where and how we catch it. Really just to get people to be mindful, to buy and eat thoughtfully. And I think we've made some progress. We've alerted consumers to those fisheries that are the most destructive and least sustainable and in some instances we've helped bring attention to better, more sustainable choices. Sometimes people are surprised to realize there are better alternatives close at hand. Changing patterns of consumption is not easy, but it's interesting to say the way a market can be

vulnerable to scrutiny. Community groups can change demand in both local and larger-scale situations.

I think it's a natural progression that people will want to source excellent, safe, clean produce that is sustainable and ethical. Just as the Slow Food movement has shown, people want produce that is authentic, seasonal, high quality and lovingly cooked. Above all we want it to be clean. That doesn't just mean that it's free of chemical poisons, but also that it's clean in other senses. Many people still talk in terms of 'dirty money', currency acquired by foul means. There is a food corollary to this. Clean food is sustainably grown, caught and sourced. Humans are not simply disengaged appetites. We are moral beings too. Which brings me back to the point of relationships. We gain nutrition by a complex web of interdependence. We pretend this isn't so at our own peril.

AV In which way can food affect eco-sustainable narratives?

TW I have to admit I've never thought about that. Food has been central to storytelling, though, hasn't it? What people eat is either a register of their joy or their deprivation. I suppose it's safe to say that most of the feasting in my work takes place in *Cloudstreet* where much of the produce has been grown or caught by those who eat it. There are a few miserable meals, too. And ice-cream is used as a social weapon, now I think of it. I guess food is never simply sustenance; it defines us. Because, of course, we are creatures, not disembodied beings.

I wouldn't call myself a Deep Ecologist. My ideas owe a lot to this movement, as I said in the interview, but I am probably closest to the process thinkers and theologians who follow the lead of A.N. Whitehead: John Cobb, Charles Birch, etc. Other green theologians, biologists and writers like Wendell Berry, Thomas Berry, Bill McKibben and Rupert Sheldrake have been very important to me. There is a misanthropic vein in Deep Ecology that I am careful to distance myself from. I don't think of humans as a malign virus upon the earth – a bit too bleak for my taste. The mystical Christian reverence for nature sees all of life as sacred. Humans are a part of that and their lives and aspirations are expressions of

the same creative impulse, the same sacred yearning.

NOTES

1. Bill McKibben. 2006. *The End of Nature*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks (Winton's note).
2. Public Relations.
3. See the last passage of the interview about Tim Winton and the Deep Ecologist movement.
4. See *Yorro Yorro* by Mowaljarlai and Malnic; or *Storymen* by Hannah Rachel Bell (Winton's note).

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