

Teachers' notes
written by Dr Susan La Marca



Blueback

by Tim Winton

PLOT

Abel Jackson's life is intimately entwined with the environment in which he lives. Throughout his childhood, Abel and his mother Dora have depended on Longboat Bay for all that they need. The waters and land of the Bay both sustain and enrich their lives. Despite this idyllic image they lead a hard, basic life.

Whilst diving for abalone, Abel befriends an enormous fish who lives off the shores of the Bay. Abel names the groper Blueback and the fish becomes a symbol of the Bay for Abel, representative of everything he loves about his home and also a clear measure of the health of the Bay for Abel and the others who depend upon it for their survival.

As he grows Abel must move away from the Bay for school but his heart remains with the Bay and Dora, he is inextricably linked to this place and to Blueback. As time passes, Abel pursues a career in studying the sea and this work takes him away from the Bay but his links to home remain strong.

The message of environmental sustainability is at the forefront of this novel. Eventually it is Dora who sees what is needed to protect the Bay – she lobbies hard for the area to be protected and, in achieving this aim, thwarts those who would develop the area purely for financial gain.

This novel is an account of Abel's life journey, and as Dora's life moves to a close, he returns to establish a life for himself in his true home. He begins to understand what Dora has learnt - that to appreciate and know the Bay he must listen to its needs.

This is a story about love and the importance of and contribution that one life can make. It is also about the journey, the power of place and the importance of connections.

Tim Winton

Tim Winton is one of Australia's most famous authors. He was born in Perth, Western Australia, in 1960 but moved when young to the small country town of Albany. Winton has won many literary awards beginning with *The Australian / Vogel Award* in 1981 for *An Open Swimmer*, the award that launched his literary career at a young age. Winton has also won the Miles Franklin three times and has been shortlisted for the Booker on more than one occasion. He was awarded the Centenary Medal for service to literature and the community.

Not surprisingly, Winton has been named a Living Treasure by the National Trust. He contributes to the community through support of causes close to him. He is the patron of both the Tim Winton Award for Young Writers sponsored by the City of Subiaco in Western Australia and the Australian Marine Conservation Society (AMCS). Notably, he is involved



in AMCS's work to raise awareness about sustainable seafood consumption. Winton is also a prominent supporter of the Save Moreton Bay organisation, the Environment Defender's Office and the Australian Wildlife Conservancy. In 2003, he was awarded the inaugural Australian Society of Authors (ASA) Medal in recognition of his work in the campaign to save the Ningaloo Reef.

Winton's body of work reflects his passions and interests. His writing is characteristically Antipodean with the landscape and, in particular, its coastline, featuring strongly in both his storylines and his imagery.

Tim Winton's publications

For younger readers

Jesse (1988)
Lockie Leonard, Human Torpedo (1990)
The Bugalugs Bum Thief (1991)
Lockie Leonard, Scumbuster (1993)
Lockie Leonard, Legend (1997)
The Deep (picture book) Illustrated by Karen Louise (1998)

For adults

An Open Swimmer (1982)
Shallows (1984)
Scission (1985) (short stories)
That Eye, the Sky (1986)
Minimum of Two (1987) (short stories)
In the Winter Dark (1988)
Cloudstreet (1991)
The Riders (1994)
Dirt Music (2001)
The Turning (2005) (short stories)
Breath (2008)

LANGUAGE

The quotes at the beginning of the novel (unpaged) are reflective of the story. With these pieces Winton encapsulates the story of Blueback and Abel. The first quote reads:

...for today, for a while, his eyes are open harbours

*and the dolphins of his thoughts cannot obscure
(look down) the coral bones of all our ancestors.*

Randolph Stow, *Portrait of Luke*

- How does this quote relate to the novel?

In particular, it has relevance to the lives of both Abel and Dora and their relationship with the land and the sea. Abel's journey through the novel is an awakening to Dora's connection to the land: *'She learnt by staying put, by watching and listening.'* (page 128)

This realisation allows Abel to open his eyes to the importance of 'staying put'. When Dora discovers whale bones on the beach (page 125) she reflects on the passage of time and the life that brought their family to this beach. Abel and Dora's ancestor's lives and attitudes were vastly different to their own.

- Consider the links between this section of the novel and the Stow quote.

The second quote reads:

...As for us:
*We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;
We must unhumanise our views a little,
and become confident
As the rock and ocean that we were made from.*
Robinson Jeffers, *Carmel Point*

Jeffers is making reference to our origin as part of land and sea – inextricably part of the environment. He is urging us to appreciate these beginnings to our own benefit by connecting with nature through being less cerebral, more human, to become more closely aligned with what gives us our core strength.

- Can you see similarities between Jeffers's views and those expressed in *Blueback*?

Explore the different examples available to us in the text; how the characters live their lives and the views that they express both in word and action.

Consider Abel's relationship with Blueback, his strong ties to his home and in particular his interaction with the sea. The lives and views of Dora and Macka are also examples of people that have in some small way embraced Jeffers's views. Compare these positive examples to that of the developers (page 94) and Costello (page 66).

Imagery

Beautiful, evocative descriptions are to be found throughout the novel in the words used to describe the natural environment and, in particular, in the descriptions of *Blueback* (pages 8, 20, 28, 151). You will find many examples of Winton's wonderful use of language.

Discuss the following instances and how, through words, they evoke a feeling or an image:

- 'Sunlight caught the windows of the shack above the beach so that every pane of glass looked like a fire' (page 1-2)
- 'A cloud of bubbles swirled around him, clinging to his skin like pearls.' (page 3)
- 'the shellfish grew round and silver like shiny hubcaps.' (page 4)
- 'He stayed just behind the breakers and was showered with their spray and saw the great, strange land through the wobbly glass of the waves. He saw the sun melting like butter on white dunes.' (page 66)
- 'The sea grew tormented. It buckled and swelled and bunted against the cliffs and headlands, Surf hammered the shore and chewed it away.' (page 124)

Metaphor

On more than one occasion the experience of the sea is likened to flying (e.g. page 3 & page 20) and the sea is likened to the sky.

Blueback

- Construct a writing activity around this approach. Ask students to write a poem or a short paragraph where they describe an activity, or a place, using metaphor.

Story Construction

Blueback is written in very short chapters many of which are made up of a series of short sections often separated by an illustration.

- Discuss with students the effect this style has on the reader.

Compare the decisions made in this book to other texts the students may know that have a vastly different style - the Harry Potter series for example. Discuss why authors may choose to present their story in different ways, how these choices affect the reading experience and the student's preferences.

- Do different styles work best for different types of stories?
- Is one easier or more interesting to read than another?
- Can it depend on our own experience as readers – what we bring to the reading experience?

As well as short chapters and sections the novel's sentence structure is often kept short and sharp. Some descriptive sentences within the novel are long and flowing but others are brief and to the point. Consider the following section describing Stella, Abel's new partner:

'Abel Jackson met a girl who loved the sea. She was sleek as a seal and funny. Her hair was black and shiny. She grew up in a desert and didn't see the ocean until she was twelve years old.' (page 110)

Discuss with the students the effect upon the reader of these short sentences.

- Is the length of the sentence different for different types of writing?
- What is most effective? Most liked?

CHARACTERS

Abel

Abel is an 'everyman' character.

- Discuss what this means with students.
- Can they think of other similar 'everyman' characters from other novels, film or television?

This story is Abel's life journey. It documents each part of his life.

- Why does Abel choose to leave the Bay?
- Is Abel's life in any way cyclical?

Abel is an unusual name. In the Bible, Abel and Cain were brothers, the first two sons of Adam and Eve. In their story, Cain murders Abel and consequently Abel is considered an innocent, the first martyr.

Jim Winton

Blueback

- Can you see any connection between Winton's Abel and the character from the Bible?

Dora

Dora is, in some ways, the most clearly realised human character in the book.

- Why might this be so?

She is described as:

- *'stubborn as a tree and just as strong'* (page 96)
- (a) *'scarred old seal'* (page 4)
- *'quiet and tough and sun streaked'* (page 72)
- *'respected'* (page 36)

She is also drawn as a very important part of Abel's life. It is said that *'Everything he knew on land or under the sea he learned from her'* (page 4). Dora, with Blueback, remains the constant throughout Abel's life and it is Dora that shows Abel that her *'staying put'*, *'watching and listening'* (page 128) is what has led to her underlying knowledge of the Bay and what needs to be done. It also has given her an inner strength that will not be defeated even through the long, drawn out process of letter writing to have the Bay declared a sanctuary (page 127).

Abel contemplates his mother:

"It was true, she wasn't like other people. She certainly wasn't like his schoolmates' mothers. Other mothers bought fashionable clothes and drove flash cars and chirped like birds. Abel's mother was quiet and tough and sun-streaked. She did things differently. Her hands were lined and calloused. She looked like the land and sea had made her." (page 71-2)

- Is Dora like other mothers?

Love is central to an understanding of Dora – her love of the land and the sea supports her. She explains to Abel that when he is away:

'I miss you terribly. But no, I'm not lonely...this land is a kind of friend to me' (page 71)

As he get older Abel understands that it is this love – for her surroundings, her husband's memory, this place - that sustains her, makes her strong (page 97) and he realises it is this strength that sustains him through his time away.

Blueback

When Abel first sees Blueback he thinks the giant fish is a shark and that he is in great danger. Blueback is *'a blue shadow that blocked out the sun.....a huge mouth and an eye the size of a golf ball'* (page 5).

Jim Winton

Blueback

Blueback was:

'the biggest fish he had ever seen. It was gigantic. It had fins like ping pong paddles. Its tail was a blue-green rudder. It looked as big as a horse.' (page 7)

Abel goes on to describe the fish further:

'All its armoured scales rippled in lines of green and black blending into the dizziest blue. The groper moved without the slightest effort. It was magnificent, the most beautiful thing Abel had ever seen.' (page 8)

The descriptions of Blueback are very impressive, colourful and fun to read. As well as those already mentioned, re-read the passage where Abel plays with Blueback (page 28)

- As an exercise in descriptive writing have the students choose an animal to describe using the passages about Blueback as an example.

Blueback is more complex than one would expect a fish to be. Not only is he an important part of Abel's life, he is also described as *'smart'* (page 9) and in possession of different moods (page 35). Blueback is an interesting character; he is much more than a fish.

- What does he represent to Abel?

Despite this, Blueback is still a fish and it is his normal reactions and cravings that almost get him killed when, blinded by appetite, he allows himself to be a target (page 78). It is only the quick thinking of Dora (page 80) that saves him. Her relationship with Blueback is also strong – he means a great deal to her too.

On a couple of occasions Blueback is linked strongly to the ancient environment that he is an integral part of. Abel muses about how much he could tell about what he has seen if only he could talk (page 102). He recognises that the years of Blueback's life are a *'secret mystery'* (page 26) and that, despite what Blueback means to him, his world and knowledge are closed to Abel.

At the very end of the book we are given a last description of Blueback that is reminiscent of Abel's first encounter with the big fish (page 5 – 7). This time though Blueback is playing with Abel's daughter Dora (page 151). Blueback is described as being *'the colour of all our dreams'* (page 151).

- This is an example of the cycle of life that underpins the book. Are there other examples of the cyclical nature of existence in the text?
- What does *'the colour of all our dreams'* (page 151) mean?

THEMES

Family

The sense of family is strong within this novel but it goes beyond the genetic bonds of family relationships. There is a strong sense that the characters of the novel represent a

Blueback

'family' of like-minded people – those who would save and protect the earth. While the central family group is Abel and Dora, their extended group includes a wider network of people, not necessarily mentioned in the text, that have similar views about how we should live and what we should do to care for the environment.

Despite this sense of a larger community Dora and Abel, for much of their life, live a very isolated, basic existence that causes them to rely on each other for almost everything. Not only their physical needs but also their emotional needs must be met by the other. Their relationship is strong and unerring. Stella, Abel's future wife, comments on their ability to communicate without words. Dora says: *'It's the fish in us...We don't always need words'* (page 113). It is as if they are part of the very environment they care for so deeply. In line with this the environment that surrounds them is also part of their extended 'family'. When Abel is away at school Dora is not lonely because the land is like a friend to her (page 71); she feels fulfilled through her relationship with the land. Family, friendship, can mean different things to each of us.

- What does family mean to you?

Abel has extremely strong links to his mother Dora. His father is a distant but pleasant memory. The peppermint tree near their house represents Abel's father to both him and Dora. It is here that he leaves an offering (page 49), something that Dora does constantly (page 30) – the tree and its shrine bring her great solace.

- Discuss the significance of a shrine, a grave, a special place to how we remember loved ones. Consider the importance of the peppermint tree to both Dora and Abel.

Belonging

This book is very much about belonging, in particular, belonging to a place. Abel feels that he will *'wither and die'* away from home (page 49). He feels surrounded and crowded in the town (page 50). When he is away from the Bay *'home throbbed in him like a headache'* (page 51) and Blueback is constantly in his dreams (page 51).

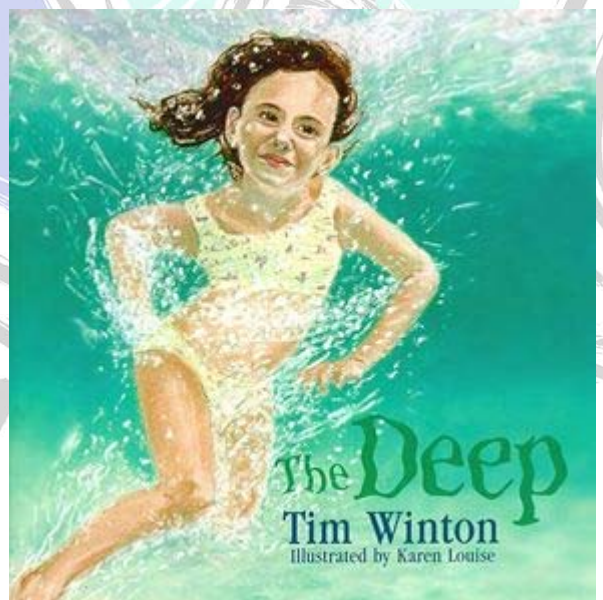
- Why does Abel dream of Blueback?
- Why do you think he has such an intense relationship to the Bay?

The Sea

The Deep by Tim Winton, illustrated by Karen Louise, is an exploration of a young girl's fear of deeper water. Her family live near and play in the sea constantly, it is the centre of much of their life, yet Alice can only play at the edges, never venturing into the deeper water where the rest of her family feel at home.

The picture book is another example of Winton's interest in the sea environment and, in particular, the relationship of people to the sea.

- *The Deep* could be used as an example of both how we interpret the sea, in this case



through illustration and words, and also how man interacts with this environment. Other picture books - *Where the Forest meets the Sea* by Jeannie Baker and books such as *First Light* by Crew and Gouldthorpe could be contrasted with the *Blueback* to explore both how we interpret the sea and man's interaction with it.

The sea has been used as a symbol in fiction for man's struggle against the environment, or his own troubles, over countless centuries and in a variety of cultures. Man has had both a link with and an aversion to the sea that has often influenced the way we live our lives. As a geographical obstacle, the sea has both dominated civilizations, divided people and, in conquering it, different groups have explored and colonised previously unknown lands.

John F. Kennedy (1917 - 1963), said of the sea:

'All of us have in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean, and, therefore, we have salt in our blood, in our sweat, in our tears. We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea -- whether it is to sail or to watch it -- we are going back from whence we came.'

- Consider the sea in fiction, poetry and song - how is it represented?
- What words are used to evoke the feel of the sea in *Blueback*? (e.g. page 28)
- Are there any common elements across different texts?

The sea can be both a friend and a foe. Its sheer size occasionally makes Abel feel insignificant by comparison. He feels like 'a speck' when compared to the ocean and the coastlines 'long lonely stretches ... made him feel small' (page 65). It can also be a dangerous place where even experienced seaman like Mad Macka can meet an untimely end. Macka tempts fate by diving alone, a decision that sees him unable to be helped quickly enough when he has a heart attack (page 38, 40 – 42). Despite the many threats and dangers posed by the sea it is a source of great pleasure and wonder for Abel. In many ways it is as much a part of him as the Bay is a part of Dora. It is observed about him:

'He dived in new places, from new islands and boats and beaches, but he felt the same old sea on his body, through his hair, in his ears'. (page 110)

The Landscape

Look at the internal illustration by Lisa Coutts that is placed between each chapter.

- How well does it evoke the setting of the novel?
- Consider how the simple line conveys place and a sense of the landscape.
- As response to the text students could interpret one of the images from the book – The Bay, *Blueback*, the underwater world, the peppermint tree, in illustration.

Environmental Sustainability

Abel and his mother live an environmentally sustainable life, working hard to leave as little footprint on the Bay as is possible (page 18). This is hard work, they go without the modern conveniences and luxuries that many of us take for granted.

This approach to life on the bay is starkly contrasted to the way Costello approaches his interaction with the bay. Costello *'takes everything he sees'* (page 66). His catch is illegal and undersize (page 75) and eventually he is caught by fisheries patrol (page 85) and then loses his licence (page 86). Abel also finds out how irresponsible he has been with his equipment when he finds a tiger shark hooked on one of Costello's buoys and can do nothing for it. It dies a slow and painful death (page 87).

Abel's experiences of Costello and his practices change him:

'That summer he learnt that there was nothing in nature as cruel and savage as a greedy human being' (page 89).

Abel feels *'older, different'*. The experiences of that summer are precursors to the ongoing fight against others like Costello who would dominate and exploit the bay. The developers (page 94) are constant and invasive and certainly another example of human greed.

Other environmental problems such as oil spills (page 118) and changing weather (page 123) are also mentioned in the book. This is a text with a strong environmental consciousness. Abel spends much of his life struggling with how best to help and protect the bay but it is not until the very end of the novel that he realises that the answer is in letting the *'the sea be itself'* (page 150).

- Students could respond to the strong environmental themes in the text by sharing their own views about environmental sustainability.
- Do any of the students live sustainable lives?
- What does this mean to them and their families? Materialism and consumerism could be discussed in comparison to a sustainable approach to life with reference and comparison to the lives of Abel and Dora at Longboat Bay.

Life's Journey

Blueback is the story of Abel's journey through life. The book documents the major events in his life and the people and places that are instrumental in making him the person that he is. Central to everything is Abel's relationship to Longboat Bay. Whilst he is away from the bay at school it is as if life is almost on hold for him; he is *'holding his breath'* (page 93). The bay is very important to Abel and his mother Dora but it looms much larger than just these two people.

- Consider the length of time the bay has existed and what it has experienced, the events it might have seen.

Dora muses on this herself when she contemplates the lives of their ancestors and their time on the bay (page 128). Abel's ancestors used the bay in a vastly different way to how Abel and his mother live there.

- Write a short imaginative piece, possibly based on historical evidence, about a time in the Bay's past or perhaps even its future.

There are a number of instances in the text where we are shown the continuation of life and the interconnected nature of all existence. Abel being given Macka's boat by his family

is one example (page 59 – 60). We also learn that Abel has grown to look like his dad (page 103) and Abel's daughter is named Dora for her grandmother (page 139) – one generation takes over from, replaces, the last. Abel choosing to stay in the bay (page 136) after travelling the world is another example of the circle of life, in that we all return in some way to where we begin.

Life is seen as an interconnected cycle of continuing growth and regeneration but also progression. When she is dying Dora says 'we come from water' (page 145). Everything is elemental when we pare back the layers to our essential inner core.

As well as the suggestion of the cyclical nature of life there is also the suggestion that no matter what we do or where we go, nothing changes. Perhaps this is also a nod to the idea that we are, in essence, elemental, unchangeable. About Abel we are told:

'In time he became an expert, someone foreign governments invited for lectures and study tours, but inside he felt like a boy with a snorkel staring at the strange world underwater, wishing he knew how it worked. Blueback still swam through his dreams.' (page 117)

In one of its earliest, published forms the novel *Blueback* had a sub title – 'A Contemporary Fable'.

- Why might the book be seen as a fable?

The World Book Dictionary gives four definitions for the word fable. They are:

1. a story or tale made up to teach a lesson. Fables are often about animals who can talk as in *The Hare and the Tortoise*.
2. An untrue story; fabrication; falsehood.
3. Myth; legend: Greek Fable.
4. The plot of a drama or epic poem.

- *Blueback* is definitely a book that contains a message but is its aim to teach a lesson?
- Or perhaps the novel fits into one of the other definitions of a fable. What do you think?

RELATED READING

Picture Books

Baker, Jeanie
Crew, Garry &
Peter Gouldthorpe
Toft, Michelle

When the Forest meets the Sea

First Light

A Sea of Words: An ABC of the Deep Blue Sea

Non Fiction

Nicholson, John

Cedar, Seals and Whaling Ships

Blueback

Fiction

Billingsley, Franny	<i>The Folk Keeper</i>
Bone, Ian	<i>That Dolphin Thing</i>
Cooper, Susan	<i>Green Boy</i>
Dickinson, Peter	<i>The Gift Boat</i>
Gwynne, Phillip	<i>Jetty Rats</i>
Hemingway, Ernest	<i>The Old Man and the Sea</i>
Mahy, Margaret	<i>Katangata Twitch</i>
Orr, Wendy	<i>Nim's Island series</i>
Pluss, Nicole	<i>Hope Bay</i>

Film and Television

The Simpsons	<i>Wife Aquatic</i> (Television episode)
	<i>Free Willy</i> (Movie)
	<i>Finding Nemo</i> (Animated Movie)
	<i>Shark Tale</i> (Animated Movie)
King-Smith, Dick	<i>The Water Horse</i> (Book and Movie)

Other Resources

Blueback has been adapted by Peta Murray for Terrapin Puppet Theatre and Spare Parts Puppet Theatre

The Sea in Poetry

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poems/sea/>

About Tim Winton's work

Ben-Messahel, Salhia (2006) *Mind the Country: Tim Winton's Fiction*, University of Western Australia Press.

McGirr, Michael (1999) *Tim Winton: The Writer and His Work*, Macmillan Education.

McPhee, Hilary (editor) *Tim Winton: A Celebration*, National Library of Australia.

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

Saxby, H. M. (1997) *Books in the Life of a Child: Bridges to Literature and Learning*, Macmillan.

Thomas, Roie *Theistic Existentialism in the Fiction of Tim Winton* (Thesis) Available at:

http://eprints.utas.edu.au/7745/2/Roie_Thomas.pdf

Tim Winton