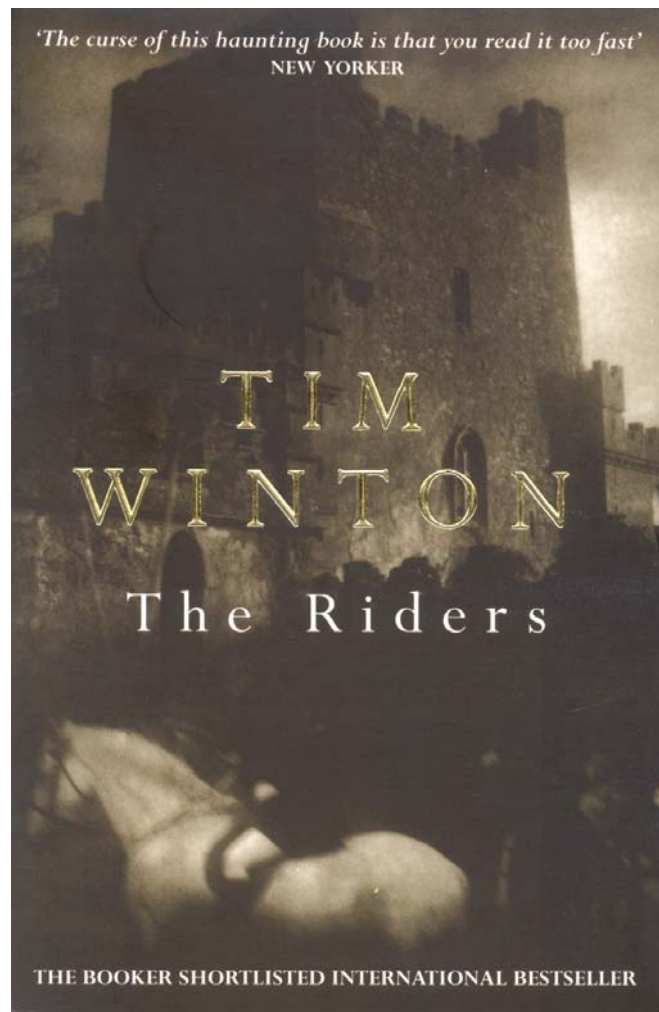


**PICADOR**  
**AUSTRALIA**

**NOTES FOR READING GROUPS**

# **Tim Winton**

## **THE RIDERS**



**Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright**

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## THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

*'She wondered if you could love someone too much. If you could it wasn't fair. People didn't have a chance. Love was all you had in the end. It was like sleep, like clean water.'* (p. 194)

This novel charts one man's personal odyssey. It's about love gone wrong, and love which is terribly right. It traverses the fraught territory of love and betrayal; of how we bear up in times of crisis; of the strength of small children and of the mysteries which are lurking beneath the everyday surface of our lives. The mysterious Riders, who appear to Scully in the night and who return to haunt his dreams are synonymous with the very real danger that we might each and every one of us become haunted figures, too. Under the pressure of an ordinary tragedy, the strongest of human beings needs a sense of connection, in order to survive. For a while Scully almost loses that sense, even with his beloved daughter, Billie, trailing behind him. *The Riders* is a mystery thriller which races at breakneck speed dragging the reader along in breathless haste. It is both a reflection on the frailty of relationships and a eulogy to their strength.

It opens optimistically with the 'uncomplicated' young Australian, Scully, and his wife, Jennifer, having recently bought a cottage in the Irish countryside. Scully is busy restoring the cottage, and eagerly anticipating his wife and daughter's return from Australia, where they are 'settling' the family affairs, after several years abroad. Meanwhile Scully is working day and night to make the cottage habitable. In his renovation, he has been helped by friendly local postie, Peter Keneally. Though Scully is feeling quietly optimistic, there's also a mystery hanging over the book, and an impending doom which creeps up on the reader. Winton conveys this suggestively, via Scully's dream, *'On he ran, never stopping to see what was behind him, blindly going on into darkness.'* (p. 22) Scully is oblivious to the unsettling political environment of Ireland until Pete responds with alarm to Scully's admission that he had worked in London for Mylie Doolan. Pete explains to Scully that Mylie and his gang are IRA, and Scully for the first time feels a vague sense of disquiet. Perhaps people and the world around him are not quite as transparent as he had thought? But when the axe falls it's not quite what he or the reader is expecting. It's not what he's expecting at all.

Scully is the loving optimist, whose unprepossessing appearance both puts people at ease and yet puzzles them. *'What they saw was what they got, but they could never decide what it was they saw - a working class boofhead with a wife who married beneath herself, a hairy bohemian with a beautiful family, the mongrel expat with the homesick twang and ambitious missus, the poor decent-hearted bastard who couldn't see the roof coming down on his head.'* (p. 10) Scully is all of these, and none of them. He's a seemingly simple soul whose complexity is made up of both his own deeply instinctive sense of what life is truly about, and his obsessive love for Jennifer, whose aspirations make it hard for Scully to express his honest opinions. He's given up his beloved Australia, because Jennifer has decided that she'd like to stay in Ireland. If you love someone you'll do anything for them. But when he gets to the airport, he discovers that love is not quite as simple as that.

Love betrayed; love lost; love mislaid. Scully confronts the mystery of Jennifer's disappearance with both disbelief and fear. He has come to believe that she is his linchpin, 'his sheet anchor' (p. 20) and has grown used to her whims dictating the course of his life; he confronts a future which is bereft certainly, but which may also represent a freedom he has forgotten how to exercise. 'Women want monsters, doesn't he know?' (p. 163) Scully is surrounded by people who 'knew' his relationship with Jennifer was destined to fail. 'She was a bomb waiting to go off on him.' (p. 163) He sets off on a hectic tour of the Europe they had visited together, with Billie in tow. For a considerable time he is distraught and rudderless; whilst desperately seeking his Jennifer, he looks as if he will be sucked down into the murky depths below. But, surprisingly, it is his small and emotionally precocious daughter who perseveres. Amidst small crises such as her attack by a possibly rabid dog in Greece, to Scully abandoning her in the red light district in Amsterdam, she remains steadfast. Perhaps protected by instinct and the child's intuition to trust those she knows are 'safe', she literally carries Scully through his period of unravelling. At crucial times, she finds the correct answer when none seems vaguely possible.

The novel plays upon the opposition between the old and the new cultures of Europe and Australia. 'It was a small house, simple as a child's drawing and older than his own nation.' (p. 4) 'this was where architecture became landscape. It took scale and time, something strangely beyond the human.' (p. 49) 'In Australia you looked out and saw the possible, the spaces, the maybes. Here the wildness was pressed into something else, into what had already been.' (p. 51) It's a language which Scully has to learn. On the island of Hydra he finds the familiar expat community, in whose presence 'he felt the complete farmboy, the toolslinger, the deckhand ... To Scully they were like bookish inventions.' (p. 131) The novel proceeds to make this Europe/Australia juxtaposition, playing the two ideas against each other, like keys on a piano, creating a disturbing discordant harmony. Even the opening quotation from US poet Tom Wait's song refers to Waltzing Matilda, suggesting that resonances of other cultures may be found in unpredictable and arresting locations.

The analogy between life and the soil from whence we all come is part of this symbolism. A human life seems singularly unique as we are living it, but is like the composted bog man in Cheshire, about whom Scully reads as he is consigning the rubbish left by the former inhabitant of his newly acquired house to the refuse heap. 'He put one foot on a swampy pile of the Irish Times and saw beside his instep:

#### BOG MAN IN CHESHIRE

*Peat cutters in Cheshire yesterday unearthed the body of a man believed to have been preserved in a bog for centuries...*' (p. 6)

The layers of history in which we are planted is a nourishment made up of often conflicting histories, making us all very complex and connected individuals. Just as Scully feels alienated in a European landscape he also feels an odd sense of connection there. Perhaps in relocating, Scully is also symbolically reclaiming his antecedents and the world they grew up in.

In contrast, 'the riders' are a lost band of men: 'They looked a mercenary lot, fierce and stoic.' (p. 80) 'And how they craned their necks, these riders. It was as though any moment some great and terrible event would explode upon them. as if someone up there could set them in motion.' (p. 81) The novel uses Scully's life as a metaphor for dealing with the out-of-controlness of much of modern experience. It questions existence asking what moral reserves we have to confront the inescapable tragedies of life. It describes the everyday horrors of living in a modern society in which governments are powerless in the face of the ineluctable nature of experience. 'England was still choked with debris and torn trees from the storms and the place seemed mad with cops and soldiers.' (p. 7) Scully confronts two options - to run like the riders or to plant himself firmly in the ground; to confront his demons and to make his own future.

The hunchback of Notre Dame - Old Quasimodo, of Billie's comic book, is a recurring figure, 'His hump weighing him down, bending him over like Jesus under the dragging cross. No one loves him, specially not the beautiful gypsy girl. She just sees his poor face and his hump. No one loves him the way Billie does because she knows there's good in his heart.' (p. 85) The trajectory upon which Scully finds he has embarked, is made up of the same tragic and heroic dimensions. Love for a beautiful woman; a deep well of kindness

which few can recognise in him; a man whose true nature is disguised. The solid dependable Scully is 'marshmallow' underneath. He's deferred to seemingly brighter lights like Jennifer for so long, that he hardly knows his own virtues anymore. Luckily Billie knows them completely, and is willing to risk her own existence on the strength of them.

The talented and the talentless are also juxtaposed. Jennifer's ambition has been to be 'creative'. She's tried writing and art, and failed in both. Alex, her art teacher on Hydra, had talent, *'pissed it all away and had done nothing but cadge and bludge and weasle and whine since men went to the moon.'* (p. 140) When he finally suicides it's because *'the also-rans will inherit the earth, the whelps, the meek and the fucking nice, and that's what he can no longer stand.'* (p. 163) Jennifer has come to believe that perhaps it's Scully who's holding her back. *'as if he was a tree in her window, something she was looking through to a more brilliant world beyond.'* (p. 288) He's been aware of this sensation emanating from her for awhile, but has chosen to see it as a passing phase. The ultimate irony is that Billie has probably more talent than Jennifer or Scully will ever have; Jennifer would envy it; Scully is in awed admiration of it.

*'Billie prayed for an angel, for a whirlwind, a fire, a giant crack in the world that might save them from tomorrow, from the other side of the cloud.'* (p. 253) As always in Winton's work there is a sense of the numinous or the spiritual, beneath the surface of these ordinary successes and failures. *'Tongues of living fire as he went falling, falling into the yielding squelch of people, God bless them.'* (p. 317) Billie is the angel of mercy in Scully's life, determined to save him, despite his efforts to destroy himself. They're perfect partners, though they're not the same. She knows and trusts him, despite the fearful time he puts her through. *'When you fell off the world there was still love because love made the world. That's what she believed. That's how it was.'* (p. 195) She has a single minded conviction that her destiny is to protect Scully, *'Billie didn't care about all that, ... she had a job now.'* (p. 322) She has an implicit belief in his power to retain an essential goodness. *'The dog had no one now and she had Scully. She was the lucky one.'* (p. 190)

Love for Billie has nothing to do with beauty. She has an innate sense of what lies beneath the surface of people. *'pretty people weren't the kind you need. Pretty people saw themselves in the mirror and were either too happy or too sad ... She didn't want to turn into anyone pretty.'* (p. 323) Perhaps Jennifer sensed that Billie could see through her, even if Scully could not? Perhaps that was what made her finally despair of being 'up to the job' of pretending to be a wife and mother? The question of 'goodness' or 'grace' is a central concern, eg: Irma's apparent moral laxity is a sort of camouflage. Billie recognises her essential goodness, despite her less than perfect social behaviour. People can be 'good' without necessarily behaving in the most admirable fashion. Jennifer has always acquitted herself well, but in her heart she's lacking the ability (call it 'kindness') to feel what others are feeling; to empathise or to really wish goodness upon them. Irma, in contrast, is a generous though flawed individual whose childishness does not negate her capacity to care and comfort.

The novel is about reconciliation between man and woman; old and new cultures; adult and child; warring factions; and between positive and negative aspects of each personality. It's about men's needs and feelings. It's about their lack of understanding of women, and their often desperate need for respect and understanding. It's about the value of action. What acts are meaningful? How does one engage with grief, fear, and the loss of love in any really positive way? Are Scully's desperate acts effective or useless? Is he risking his child's life in attempting to save both of them? What does his headlong pursuit of Jennifer really achieve? Does he return home in despair, or does he feel that he's achieved some form of reconciliation? These and other mysteries are never really resolved. This is a complex free ranging journey into the heart of what it means to live as a human being. The words *'Is Anybody there?'* (p. 81) echo the Walter de la Mare poem *The Listeners* in which a traveller smote on a door, whilst a 'host of phantom listeners' refused to let him in. 'Tell them I came, and no one answered, That I kept my word,' he said. (Walter de La Mare, *The Listeners*) Scully, too, is a traveller, desperately trying to gain 'admittance' to the simple place of happiness he had thought he inhabited before; though perhaps the act of having tried, of having kept his promise to love his wife and daughter, of having lived with integrity, is enough.

## WRITING STYLE AND TECHNIQUES

1. Winton is a masterful writer of sentences which echo and create a sustained lyrical expression of intense emotion; he makes one 'hear' his characters' feelings, as he describes them, eg: *'He looked down at the smudging ... to save him.'* (p. 188) Listen to this sentence read aloud, and discuss the effect of the rhythm on the meaning conveyed.
2. The novel is a fast-paced, exciting mystery, whilst also dealing with serious intellectual and emotional concerns. It has been described as a metaphysical thriller; would you agree?
3. Winton uses rhetorical devices to make his point very strongly at certain junctures, eg: *'Things might have turned out worse. He might have married Mary Finnergan in 1969 instead of backing out like a man with spine. He might have a brother like Peter Keneally's instead of no family to speak of. He might be up the hill there with those two mad boogers trying to save the long lost and working like black monkeys.'* (p. 27) What does such reversal say about the man who is expressing his supposed relief that he is not like those others?
4. Winton is fond of using Australian colloquialisms to 'hit the reader hard', eg: *'Long ago he'd confronted the fact that he looked like an axe-murderer, a sniffer of bicycle seats. He stuck out like a dunny in a desert. He frightened the French and caused the English to perspire.'* (p. 8) What effect does such arresting language have?
5. What are the major symbols used to convey the themes in what is ostensibly a story of one man's mysterious encounter with loss and betrayal? eg The Riders and the Hunchback. Discuss the writer's use of symbolism.
6. Throughout the novel there are several lyrical passages which suddenly interrupt the novel, and convey the underlying resonance of the emotions being developed, eg: *'In the zircon glare ... angel of death.'* (p. 253) Discuss the meaning of this and other such passages.

## THE AUTHOR

Tim Winton is one of Australia's most celebrated writers. He was born in Perth in 1960, has travelled to Greece, France and Ireland, and lives in Western Australia with his wife and three children. He's written eighteen books, and began publishing in his teens. His first novel *An Open Swimmer* won the 1981 Australian/Vogel Prize. He's also won the Banjo Prize, the WA Premier's Prize, the Deo Gloria Award(UK), the Marten Bequest and the Wilderness Society Environment Award for previous novels, and *The Riders* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. He has won the Miles Franklin Award three times, for *Shallows* in 1984, for *Cloudstreet* in 1991, and for *Dirt Music* in 2002. *Dirt Music* has also won the 2002 WA Premier's Award - Book of the Year; 2002 WA Premier's Award - Fiction; 2002 Christina Stead Award and the 2001 Good Reading Award Readers Choice Book of the Year.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The Irish question raises its head, as one of many instances of the precarious nature of experience. Is it a minor or major player in the novel?
2. Raglan Road is a song whose verses are scattered through the text. What connection has it to the novel's themes?
3. Brereton describes Scully as '*a man doomed by love, snared by a woman.*' (p. 26) Is this novel about the curse of a beautiful woman's love?
4. '*All these goes at things, all these chances, and it's still old me. Old Scully.*' (p. 10) Accidents or fate? Is life ever predictable? Could Scully have done things differently? Has he used up his fair go at good fortune?
5. Jimmy Brereton is coldly dismissive of Scully's besotted love for Jennifer. (pp. 26-7) Is this the only thing which is upsetting him about Scully's arrival? It is one of many allusions which hint at deeper currents beneath the surface of things, eg: (p. 271) A woman is mentioned; is this Jennifer watching them? Discuss.
6. Scully is frightened of the Riders but Billie is exhilarated by, and yet also scorns them, '*Just silly boys... Peter Pan boys. Show offs.*' (p. 240) Why do they have such different views of them?
7. One of the major themes is expatriatism, and/or European experience versus Australian innocence. eg Dominique and Marianne are portrayed as world weary, and snobbish, despairing of Scully's awkwardness. Is Winton being fair? Is he critical of European culture or suspicious of it? (Also discuss in relation to the experiences of 'famous' Australian writers and artists abroad, eg: Charmian Clift and George Johnston's stay on Hydra in Greece in the nineteen-fifties and early nineteen-sixties.)
8. '*Irma wasn't a real grown up. She was little inside, but her heart was big. One day Scully would see that ... She was just like Scully ... All anyone needed was a good heart.*' (p. 322) Irma's role is enigmatic, like many aspects of the novel. What is her function?
9. '*Doing things, that's what he was good at.*' (p. 12) Does life consist of doing things to avoid confronting the things we can do nothing about? Discuss.
10. Is the '*ancestral pull*' (p. 18) of Scully's Irish heritage the thing which makes him settle on Ireland? Or is it Jennifer, as he believes it is?
11. '*Now that he thought of it, she was probably everything her mother dreamt of being.*' (p. 210) Is there a suggestion here that Jennifer needed to leave Billie, her daughter, as much as she had to leave Scully behind her?
12. One of the great strengths of this book is that it remains enigmatic. There are no resolutions to the 'small' question of Scully's future, or to the big question of what that suggests for mankind's future. Is Winton's open-endedness hopeful or pessimistic?

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**Tim Winton**  
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