

Salvage

'A novel of great imagination and prescience' HANNAH KENT

READING NOTES

JENNIFER
MILLS

ABOUT THE BOOK

They drift in their sleep, waiting for something. The end of the world, or another escape. But the world is still here. There's no escaping it.

Jude's life has been about survival. She works on rebuilding – fixes roofs, trucks supplies, transports refugees. Tries to stay free from attachments and obligations.

But Jude won't talk about her past. Or her sister Celeste, lost in the tragic failure of a space station that was supposed to save her, and the other ultra-rich, from the wreckage of a dying world.

When an escape pod falls from the sky, its passenger near death, Jude knows her anonymous existence can't continue. As the fragile peace of her community is put at risk, Jude must re-examine the terms of her survival – and her exile.

Salvage is a gripping novel of literary speculative fiction that asks: what does it mean to care for each other, after the end of the world?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Mills is the author of the novels *The Airways* (2021) *Dyschronia* (2018), *Gone* (2011) and *The Diamond Anchor* (2009) and a collection of short stories, *The Rest is Weight* (2012). In 2019 *Dyschronia* was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature, and the Aurealis Awards for science fiction.

Mills' fiction, essays and criticism have been widely published, including in Best Australian Stories, Best Australian Essays, *The Guardian*, *Lithub*, *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *The Saturday Paper*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *Sydney Review of Books*, and the *Washington Post*.

PLOT SUMMARY

This novel is set in an unspecified future and follows three different timelines from the two different perspectives of Jude and Celeste.

In the Before chapters we follow **Jude** from a young age as she is ‘saved’ by the Prince family after her parents’ death from an eco-disaster (caused by the Prince family’s mining operations). She lives with her adoptive family in a luxurious compound in Western Australia called Sovereign House, and the only person who pays her any attention is **Celeste Prince**, the beautiful only daughter.

After a tragic helicopter accident, potentially due to eco-terrorism, the Prince family dies except for Jude and Celeste, who stayed behind because Jude is afraid of flying. Now that her brothers are dead, Celeste inherits the Prince mining fortune but struggles to maintain control. When billionaire **Nicholas Fry** offers Celeste a seat on the Endeavour, a ship that will take the richest people off Earth and keep them safe in an induced sleep, called torpor, Celeste sees it as a lifeline and an opportunity – but she won’t go without Jude.

Meanwhile Jude is growing up, and she becomes aware of the immense privilege that comes with being a Prince, and the money and staff and energy it takes to maintain their lifestyle. She sees the impending climate disaster, political divides and global unrest – and when the protesters arrive, she learns the role of the Prince family, symbolically and literally, in the destruction of the world. Jude doesn’t want to go with Celeste on the Endeavour. But her love for her sister, whose grief is all-consuming, makes it hard to say no. Only their driver, **Spence**, is able to give Jude any comfort during these years. As the date for the Endeavour’s launch gets closer, Jude feels her only option is to escape. Her first attempt fails, but on her second she gets out and abandons everything she knows, her Prince family name – and her only family in the world. This decision will haunt her for the rest of her life.

Borders are being redrawn, countries disappearing, and Jude begins a nomadic existence, avoiding relationships and connections, working under the table and following climate disasters as a volunteer. Jude rarely thinks of Celeste, though she watches the sky when the Endeavour is launched. Years later, when she’s working as a cook on luxury cruise ships that the rich are using as an escape, she learns that the Endeavour spaceship has gone dark, with all passengers presumed dead.

The ship stalls, with war raging in the background. One evening she witnesses a sinking refugee boat and tries to save a drowning mother and child. In the confusion, she is mistaken for a refugee and allows herself to shed her life once again, ending up in a displaced persons’ camp on the edge of the Alliance, an emerging global power. There she meets **Ali**, whose kindness offers her a fresh start. Unwilling to leave her fate in others’ hands, Jude aims to travel to the Freelands, an unclaimed territory on the other side of the Alliance. After she finds and repairs a truck – and is mysteriously allowed a travel pass – she and Ali manage to leave the camp and make it to freedom.

In the Station chapters we follow Celeste on Endeavour Station. Every two months the Station wakes two of the passengers from torpor, to keep their brains and bodies active. Each time Celeste wakes, she struggles to remember where she is and what she is doing, but knows she must find Jude – not able to remember, or realise, that Jude is not on the ship with her. The Station seems to be manipulating her sense of what is real. Throughout, Celeste’s perspective moves fluidly through time as she recalls (in pieces) the process of joining the Endeavour, and details of her life with Jude at Sovereign House. As time passes and the novelty of the space station wears off, there is evidence that the Station is not functioning as it should. A few people attempt to leave on escape pods but Celeste refuses to leave without Jude. Finally, Celeste realises the Station is failing, that some people have left and others have already died. Determined to live, she takes the last

escape pod, not knowing what will happen next.

In the August/September/October chapters, we find Jude, now in her thirties, living in the Freelands a few years after her escape with Ali. Jude is still a loner, but she has made a new life in the town of Northport as a driver, trucking refugees or supplies where they are needed. Despite the Freeland ethos of helping where you can, and the sharing of resources and work, this is no utopia. Supplies are limited, old tensions still exist and the standard of living is not high. But Jude feels useful, and she is as settled as she's ever been.

When a pod falls from space with a passenger, Jude happens to be part of the transport to the clinic, and it reminds her of her sister, who she's worked hard to forget. The new doctor, **Nora**, asks Jude to help with the passenger at the clinic since she's already involved, and against her better judgement Jude agrees. The doctors confirm the sleeping passenger is indeed Celeste Prince and begin the difficult process of disconnecting her from the Station machinery that is keeping her alive, but in deep torpor. An attraction develops between Jude and Nora, and Jude struggles between wanting to tell Ali and Nora the truth about her connection to their patient, wanting to help as penance for abandoning Celeste all those years ago, and following her instinct to flee. What would these hardworking honest people think of her Prince heritage, and her lies of omission?

Celeste finally wakes, but is weak and confused. Then more doctors arrive from a bigger town, and without Jude's knowledge they make a deal with the Alliance – trading Celeste, and the neural mesh in her brain that's keeping her alive, in return for medical supplies. Only after this deal is already done does Jude realise her sister may be lost once again, and tell her friends the truth about her background. But it's too late – Celeste is gone.

In November, which follows chronologically from October but is presented out of sequence, we see Jude's journey to find Celeste, accompanied by Nora and Ali, as well as two new friends and recent arrivals to town who want to help, **Solare** and **Tik**. Together, they drive to the Alliance border ready to fight for family, but are unnerved to be welcomed in. They meet with military and officials. Jude finally learns that the Alliance couldn't remove the mesh from Celeste's brain, and have given her to a third party – Nicholas Fry, the billionaire behind the Endeavour project. In return for helping Jude reach Fry and her sister, the Alliance want access to the neural mesh for themselves.

Jude and her friends travel out to Fry's private island, where they are welcomed by Fry's wife **Eleanor** and find Celeste once again in torpor. It turns out Fry put himself into torpor to avoid dying of a heart condition, but has now been stuck in an unhealthy sleep for years. Celeste's survival after the Station's failure, and her ability to wake from it, is attributed to her mental connection to and love for Jude. Eleanor gives Jude a copy of the mesh, and explains she hopes to use Celeste to guide Fry out of torpor. Jude is devastated that there will be no attempt to wake Celeste or take the mesh out of her brain. She's found her sister, but Celeste is still out of reach.

Then Fry's private island is hit by an earthquake and everyone is told to evacuate. Jude tries to save Celeste – but finds Celeste's body already cold. The effort of going into torpor again has been too much. As the island crumbles, Jude and her friends help with the evacuation of Fry's staff, and then escape in a helicopter. In the air, Nora lets the mesh – the last remaining evidence of that much-wanted technology – fall into the ocean.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Family and community

1. 'A version of Jude had been there. Gone with [Celeste]. Had cared for her, in a way. Not let her down.
The false Jude was a better person than she was.' (p.416)
Jude and Celeste's complex relationship is at the centre of this novel. How does it evolve from their childhood into adulthood? Do you feel like Jude and Celeste truly understand and love each other?
2. How is family portrayed in this book? Is a family relationship necessary for providing care? What about found (or chosen) family?
3. What do we learn about humanity through the various communities – often temporary or under-resourced – that Jude finds herself in? Consider the protest camp in her childhood, the cruise ships and the refugee camp.
4. What do you think of the community of Northport? How does it compare to Jude's childhood of plenty? What does Jude find there that she didn't have with the Prince family?
5. 'The Freelands was supposed to welcome anyone in need, no matter where they came from.' (p. 271)
Does the Freelands live up to its motto? What does the novel have to say about the benefits, and the limits, of caring for others?

Nature, climate and conflict

6. Even as a child, Jude has a strong connection to the land and nature and spent a lot of time exploring the flora and fauna around Sovereign House. How does this shape her character and set her apart from her family? Are there other characters in the book who have a strong connection to land?
7. 'After this, there are other disasters. Other towns to walk through, looking for survivors. Houses to clear of mud and silt, furniture to haul out onto the street and examine for damage, organisations to hassle and wait around for and get sick of.' (p. 266)
After leaving Sovereign House, Jude follows natural disasters around Australia as a volunteer. What does this book say about different ways people respond to conflict and uncertainty? Compare Jude's path of everyday, hands-on work with Celeste's dream of the Endeavour.
8. This novel touches on the topic of colonisation almost obliquely: as war breaks out, we see the Australian government give land in the north back to First Nations people through treaties and reparations. How does colonialism in Australia complicate or complement the story of natural disaster and environmental collapse told in this book?
9. Jude's displacement leads to her becoming part of the post-conflict refugee crisis firsthand. How are refugees like Ali, Solare and Tik portrayed in this book? How do they maintain their identities and personhood in the often-dehumanising process of resettling?

Distance and escape

10. 'And there, away to the left, the same size or maybe smaller, hovers another body, swathed in cloud skin, instantly recognisable. It looks just like the pictures. Just like the Earth emoji used to on her phone.' (p. 11)
When Celeste first views the Earth from the Station, she sees it first as an image before she can grasp that it's real. How do the concepts of distance and scale sometimes distort our understanding of reality?
11. Consider the current state of commercial spaceflight, such as Blue Origin, Virgin Galactic and SpaceX, and their intentions of making space travel accessible, to those who can pay. What impact do you think the Earth's climate crisis should (or does) have on humanity's plan for spaceflight? Do you think Fry's scheme is a real possibility in the future?
12. What is the appeal of the Endeavour project for Celeste? How much does it have to do with her grief and isolation, and how much do you think is to do with her privilege as a Prince? Why do you think she wants to take Jude with her?
13. 'The compound, the Station. Islands upon islands. Always mistaking separation for security.' (p. 416)
How does this quote (which comes from Jude thinking about her sister) apply to various characters in the book? In what ways do separation and escape sometimes lead to worse outcomes? On the other hand, would it have been right for Jude to stay with her sister?
14. 'Nora deserved to know who Jude was. What she had done, how she had failed. For a moment, Jude felt she might have the courage to tell her.' (p. 299)
Jude is constantly afraid of people finding out about her past. How has her anonymity allowed her to escape her history? What do you think drives Jude's desire for privacy and secrecy? What did she sacrifice to make her escape?

Privilege and responsibility

15. 'She has never known what anything is worth. How much she owes the Princes, the world. How much she will need to survive, how much she can afford to give away.' (p. 230)
Jude is adopted by the Prince family after an eco-disaster they caused – is this a form of reparations for the Prospect River disaster? What do you think is the answer to how much she owes to the people who 'saved' her?
16. Jude's gradual realisation of class differences is a major part of her growing up. What is Spence's role in this realisation? What do you see as the main reason why Jude is not able to accept a life of wealth?
17. When Jude and her friends go to the Alliance, they find a society much better resourced (and much more organised and hierarchical) than the Freelands. What are the Alliance's priorities? Why do you think they want the neural mesh in Celeste's head, and what would they do with it?
18. 'The abundance they once took for granted, the availability of anything and everything, is shrinking away, bit by bit.' (p. 196)
How do people in this book react to their privileges being lost? How is it different for people who didn't have much privilege to begin with?

19. 'The Station takes care of everything' (p. 50)

Fry promises the Station will take care of the passengers, but the novel shows that this is more narrative than truth. What versions of reality enable various characters to continue living in their privileged bubble? Does anyone ever take responsibility for their actions? Consider the wealth of the Prince family, the technological hubris of Nicholas Fry, even the Alliance leaders Jude meets.

Writing

20. How does the title *Salvage* shape your reading of this book? What themes does it hint at?
21. This novel has a complex structure that crosses timelines and perspectives. Did you have a favourite storyline? How did the story unfold for you while reading? Were there moments where you wanted to know more, or where things weren't clear?
22. The worldbuilding in this book does not focus on specifics of the Alliance, global wars or environmental catastrophes that lead to this dystopian future. How does keeping some of these specifics in the background of the book focus the story more acutely on the human elements of the narrative? Did it make you more curious about the world and setting of this book?
23. Consider the names Mills uses for characters and locations: for example, the Prince family, Sovereign House, the character of Hope, Endeavour Station, Prospect River, and Jude's various bird-related pseudonyms. What potential significance, symbolism or real-life resonance do they have for you as the reader?
24. Do you think this book is ultimately hopeful/optimistic about the future? Why or why not?