

BOOK CLUB NOTES

*You spend your whole time on an island looking out to sea.
Perhaps what you are facing is yourself.*



WILD LIGHT

Robyn Mundy

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Blurb

Sixteen-year-old Stephanie West has been dragged from Sydney to remote Maatsuyker Island off the coast of Tasmania by her parents, hoping to recapture a childhood idyll and come to terms with their grief over the death of Steph's twin brother. Cut off from friends and the comforts of home, exiled to a lonely fortress and a lighthouse that bears the brunt of savage storms, the months ahead look to be filled with ghosts of the past.

Steph's saviour is Tom Forrest, a 19-year-old deckhand aboard a crayfishing boat. When the weather allows, Tom visits the island, and he and Steph soon form an attraction. But Tom must conceal at all costs the illegal fishing he takes part in, orchestrated by his tyrannical brother. And he dare not dwell on his fear of the sea or his deep-worn premonition that the ocean will one day take him.

Wildlight is an exquisite, vividly detailed exploration of the wayward journey of adolescence, and how the intense experience of a place can change the course of even the most well-planned life.

The Author

Robyn Mundy's writing speaks to her fascination with wild places and their sway on human lives. In the preliminary stage of writing *Wildlight*, she and her partner spent four months living and working alone on Maatsuyker Island as volunteer caretakers and weather observers. Robyn has summered and over-wintered at Australian Antarctic stations, working as a field assistant on science research projects. She works seasonally as an Assistant Expedition Leader on ship-based tours to the Antarctic, Arctic and other remote locales. At home in Tasmania, Robyn writes and teaches writing.

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Plot Summary

Wildlight opens with a prologue set in 2015, which raises the central question of the book: *Who is Tom Forrest and what became of him?*

Chapter One transports us back to 1999, the year that our protagonist, sixteen-year-old Stephanie West, travels to Maatsuyker Island off the coast of Tasmania with her parents, two years after the sudden death of her twin brother Callam. Steph's relationship with her parents is strained with grief and regret, and this begins to crystallise as resentment when they pull her out of school for a five-month stint reporting weather from the island. Somehow, without access to teachers, classes, a library or the internet, Steph must complete her Higher School Certificate via Distance.

With only her heartbroken and withdrawn parents for company, Steph is isolated and adrift. That is until she meets Tom Forrest, who works as a deckhand on his brother Frank's crayfishing boat. Like Steph, Tom feels adrift in life, searching for a path, struggling to escape his tyrannical brother, and living with a dread of the ocean.

Tom takes any opportunity he can to visit Steph at Maatsuyker Island, and a romance soon blossoms between the two teenagers. But as Steph's time on the island comes to a close, they are thwarted by circumstance and a fateful storm; a misunderstanding that will leave a profound legacy.

Sixteen years later, a coincidence offers a spark of hope. That even if one '*can't relive the past*' – as Steph's father's trusty saying goes – perhaps they can rectify it.



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Themes

GRIEF

The strongest theme woven throughout the narrative is grief. Indeed, it provides both the catalyst for the West family's move to Maatsuyker Island and the climax of the story with Tom's disappearance. It affects each character in a different way; James loses his voice 'as if grief or guilt had silenced him' (p93), Gretchen seeks to retreat from the world and reconnect with her childhood, while Stephanie is followed by the voice of her late twin, teasing and taunting her as only brothers can – '*Drama queen, her brother's voice mocked inside her head.*' (p31)

Common wisdom espouses that 'time heals all wounds'. In *Wildlight*, this idea is reflected upon and ultimately rejected:

'According to Gran this second year should have felt easier than the first. By the second year, Gran said, you could no longer look back the way you had the first, thinking *this time last year we were all together, this time last Christmas, last birthday*. The last of everything, drifting from your reach. You medicated yourself on the distance of time—a sedative that dulled the sharpness then locked you in its murk. It was a kind of worn-out grief you couldn't easily share, not once the time allowed for sadness had lapsed.' (p67)

At the novel's climax, Tom is left with a grief mottled with shame and resentment. Steph's belief that Tom perished at sea is also a burden that she carries through her adult life, 'It's like a weight, a longing deep inside me that's never gone away. It feels monumental.' (p260)

1. Do you believe, like Steph's grandmother, that grief gets easier with time? Or does it simply evolve?
2. 'Callam had been silent for weeks. Steph resisted his hold. Two years of being torn ragged with the hurt of him; she and her parents clinging to grief. Steph had somehow followed the lifeline of bubbles and made it to the surface.' (p177) In the latter half of the novel, it appears that Steph has made real progress in her grieving process. What do you think has been the greatest contribution to this progress?
3. Do you think that Tom's grief is made any easier by the fact that his relationship with Frank was characterised by anger and resentment, rather than warmth and affection?

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ISOLATION

Both physical and emotional isolation feature strongly in *Wildlight*. Steph and her parents are isolated as the sole inhabitants of Maatsuyker Island, and are also secluded from each other as they each process their loss in their own distinct way. Nineteen-year-old Tom is also physically isolated by his job crayfishing on the *Perlita Lee*, and feels immense loneliness resulting from the loss of his father and the fraught relationship with his brother, as well as his lack of social life or personal goals.

‘Tom knew only what he didn’t want, that the prospect of fishing all the days of his life...was a form of living death.’ ‘He had no wheel or sail or course to follow; he had no fucking clue. He wished someone as solid as Bluey MacIntyre would turn to him and say, *See there, son, that track along there? That’s the way you’re meant to go.*’ (p74)

1. How does Tom’s physical isolation – his time spent predominately at sea with his domineering and short-tempered brother – contribute to his emotional seclusion?
2. Is isolation necessarily a negative thing? Stephanie eventually comes to savour the solitude provided by the island and the independence of her role reporting the weather. Discuss.

GROWING UP

In many ways, *Wildlight* is a coming-of-age story. Steph experiences many important milestones throughout the novel that shape her transition from adolescence to young adulthood. When she first arrives at Maatsuyker Island – and although she has suffered an earth-shattering loss in the death of her twin brother and only sibling – Steph comes across as a typical moody and naïve teenager. Over the course of the novel, she falls in love, graduates high school, and heals her relationship with her parents.

Though a few years older, Tom also goes through a number of rites of passage. From his first relationship to finding the strength to rebel against Frank and strike out on his own. The story also references earlier rites of passage, forced upon him by his brother on his eighteenth birthday: ‘*Tom’s big night out*, Frank still referred to it with a knowing wink. You could never own up to any of that. Christ. The thought of it. He and Frank trashed, reeling down a street at who knew what time? *Happy eighteenth, little brother.*’ (p74)

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GROWING UP cont.

1. 'Perhaps that was the definition of adulthood: you just got better at hiding how you felt.' (p4) Do you agree with this statement? Discuss.
2. Which milestones or rites of passage – whether cultural, religious or physical – do you believe are requisite in reaching adulthood? What experiences in your own life do you feel signified the end of your adolescence and the beginning of adulthood?

MAN VS NATURE

'We're not plundering the ocean, Frank said. It doesn't make a shit of difference when it's just a few fish undersized. Once Tom had believed his brother, chucking away Association newsletters, disputing falling numbers; like climate change, scaremongering by the greenies and politicians to make life harder for the working man. A year ago Tom had thought himself too young, powerless to take a stand... [but] for every note of ill-gotten cash he shoved into his wallet or added to his savings in the bank, he felt burdened with unease.' (p102) Tom carries a lot of guilt about the illegal fishing practices that he partakes in under the instruction of his older brother, Frank. He feels a respect, and deep-seated fear, of the environment in which he works. Ultimately, his understanding that one must work WITH the environment rather than simply TAKE from it, further pushes him to abandon the crayfishing business.

For her part, Steph comes to better understand and appreciate the natural world through her time spent on Maatsuyker – 'Steph feels a ruffle of oceanic air, cool and clean. The scent of the bush. This. Her homeland.' (p288) Her mother finds solace and comfort in her re-connection with the island, and her father finds strength and purpose in his caretaking role.

1. 'It was the single part of working on the boat that brought Tom peace – producing something tangible and good, holding its weight and strength within his hands.' (p99) Many of the characters in this story have a unique relationship with the environment that changes over time. Discuss.
2. What commentary on environmental responsibility does *Wildlight* offer? What messages can we apply to our understanding and treatment of the environment in the real world?

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SIBLING LOYALTY AND RIVALRY

'Mum looped her arm around Steph's shoulder. "That, my sweet, is the real Maatsuyker Island." She rested her head on Steph's shoulder, the air between them fummy with wine. Her mother sniffed back tears. "My darling." For a moment Steph thought her mother meant her. "My beautiful boy won't ever be here to see this.'" (p69) Gretchen's frequent references to Callam often leave Steph feeling frustrated and unimportant, resulting in resentment of her brother's memory. As she explains to Tom, "'The whole reason we've come here is to help Mum get over Callam.'" (p78)

Tom and Frank share a suffocating brotherly bond, symbolised by their matching shoulder tattoos. '*Fuckin' blood brothers*, Frank told the artist, sketching a crudely drawn outline of two entwined anchors. Tom sobered with the pain, at least enough to walk outside when it was done and draw in cold air. He guzzled water while the artist worked on Frank. His brother ranting about *Forrest Brothers*: the fleet of boats they'd own one day.' (p76) Soon after they part ways, a disoriented Tom takes a knife to his shoulder to remove the anchor of his brother, leaving a wound that later becomes infected.

1. As Steph explains to Tom, 'The whole reason we've come here is to help Mum get over Callam.' (p78) How do you feel about Gretchen's decision to upheave her daughter's life in order to mourn the loss of her son?
2. Do you believe that Frank truly loved Tom? Or do you believe his motivations in taking charge of his mother and brother's livelihoods were more sinister or self-serving?
3. What is at the core of Tom's struggle with brotherly obligation toward Frank? How do Tom's memories of growing up shape Tom and Frank's relationship?



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Characters

STEPHANIE

Steph is our protagonist. Over a span of just five months, we see her grow from an angry and bitter young girl, suffering with the loss of her brother and her life as she knew it, to an assured and focused young woman. We also see a snapshot of her as an adult – successful and accomplished professionally, but lost and withdrawn personally.

- Stephanie loses both her twin brother and her first love in a short time span. It is interesting to note that it is Tom's apparent death that she describes as 'monumental' (p260) and burdens her most as an adult. Why do you think this is?

TOM

Tom is a quiet and introspective character. At the start of the book, he is placid, accommodating and compliant. With an overbearing older brother calling the shots, it's the only way he knows how to be. By the book's end, he is still introverted but much more independent and self-assured.

- If Stephanie hadn't come along, do you believe Tom would have continued in the crayfishing business? Was she responsible for awakening feelings of hope and independence that would have otherwise laid dormant?

FRANK

Frank is a forceful, aggressive character. He is cunning, manipulative and ambitious; however, he is also incredibly family-oriented and hard-working.

- 'His brother could as easily risk his life to finish you as save you. You were in or out with Frank.' (p35) What has driven Frank to become both tyrant and a protector?
- Do you see Frank as the villain of the story? Can you relate to or sympathise with him at all?

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GRETCHEN

Gretchen is a devoted mother. Losing one of her two children, her only son, knocks her out of orbit and sends her spinning. To re-stabilise herself she does what many of us dream of doing in the face of heartbreak and upheaval – she escapes.

- *'A break from all the memories, her mother had said about coming here. A chance to move on.'* (p14) Do you believe that, in uprooting her family and taking them to her childhood idyll, Gretchen places her own wishes ahead of her daughter's or husband's needs?

JAMES

James was a successful news reader for a radio station before Callam died. Following the death of his son, his voice wavers and cracks – much like a broken radio – leaving him unable to work.

- During his time on the island, James becomes a solitary character, immersed in physical work. What do you make of this?
- “That poor woman,” Mum said.

Dad looked bewildered. “Who?”

“Tom’s mother.”

Dad’s voice was sharp. “I’m sure Tom’s father is just as distressed. About both of his sons.” (p206)

What does James’ irritated remark concerning Tom and Frank’s disappearance here tell us about his own situation? And what does this say about the way fathers are often perceived by society in general?

CALLAM

All of Callam’s actions, comments – indeed his influence on the story – occur either ‘off-screen’ or via flashback. What we know of him, we glean from Stephanie’s memories and the family’s conversations.

- If Callam is glorified in death by his mother – ‘Saint Callam, she sometimes felt like saying when her mother went on’ (p4) – how is he preserved in Steph’s memory?

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Setting

MAATSUYKER

'The platen murmurs, air curls around the lighthouse like a whisper. Place. Memory. Love. Loss.' (p288) The island of Maatsuyker is so alive, and plays such a pivotal role in the story, that it could be considered an additional character. The author, Robyn Mundy, is well placed to describe the island as she has worked there herself. She provides notes on pronunciation and links to online resources to further the reader's understanding of the book's primary location. As her author biography explains, she is fascinated by 'wild places and their sway on human lives.' (pi) Discuss how the author's fascination with and experience of the setting in *Wildlight* complement one another, and ultimately bring the world she creates to life.

Writing Style

STRUCTURE

Wildlight opens with a brief prologue before the main body of the story, set sixteen years earlier, begins. It is the prologue that provides the over-arching question that drives the narrative: *Who is Tom, and what happened to him?* The bulk of the story takes place within a five-month period on Maatsuyker Island during the latter half of 1999. Chapters 27-32 bring us back to the ostensible present in 2015, giving the narrative a sense of 'coming full circle'.

PERSONIFICATION OF ENVIRONMENT

Highly detailed and descriptive language is used in *Wildlight* to portray the characters' rich inner lives as well. Sea-faring, ecological and meteorological language are often used to convey the personality traits and emotional state of the characters, as well as their relationships with one another. As Stephanie's interest develops in glass-making, the narrator also begins referencing glass as a literary device. Listed below are some examples. Discuss these, along with other examples you noticed in the novel, and what they add to the story and your understanding of the characters.

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PERSONIFICATION OF ENVIRONMENT cont.

1. 'Her mother was like an ocean wave, surging forward, building momentum until something—someone—in its path caused all that energy to break.' (pp26-27)
2. 'Tom felt rudderless. He had no wheel or sail or course to follow; he had no fucking clue.' (p51)
3. 'Steph would step inside the lens and put her face against the prisms of glass to look and look and look with the wish that the warped, contorted shapes beyond would sharpen into focus and form a human figure. That there through the glass would stand the world as it once was, that her brother—the boy he used to be—would press his hand to the glass and everything would be mended and whole.' (p121)

FORESHADOWING

'A name shimmies off the page, her chest held tight by the words. *Tom Forrest*. Her first lover. The boy that drowned at nineteen off Maatsuyker Island.' (p2)
These lines at the end of the prologue foreshadow the story that follows. Later in the novel, we learn that Tom has awful premonitions of a watery death – 'Out there in the ocean he wouldn't stand a chance.' (p97) Together, these create a dual sense of foreboding and hope for the reader.

Discuss how Tom's ominous sense of dread foreshadows his fate.

Readership

Wildlight is written as a novel for adults, with a story about two young people. Could *Wildlight* also be seen as a Young Adult novel? What distinguishes the two readerships? What other novels have you read that suit a crossover readership?

