

Tim Winton: *Breath*. London: Picador 2008, 215 pp., £14.99 (hardcover), isbn 9780330455718. **Reviewed by Adi Wimmer, University of Klagenfurt**

Breath is Tim Winton's ninth novel. The last one (published in 2001) was *Dirt Music*, so there has been quite an interval. He started his publishing career with *An Open Swimmer* (1982), a novel which has much in common with *Breath*: the fascination with water, the thrill of danger, danger which is deliberately courted in an attempt to escape from ordinary, bourgeois existence. The sea has been a constant presence in Winton's novels: *Shallows* (1984, winner of the 1985 Miles Franklin award) connects the W.A. whaling business (which continued well into the post WWII period) with a 19th century crime story; *Blueback* (1997) outlines the life of Abel Jackson, a professional diver who becomes a sea-life biologist, from when he was only 10 years old into his adult life, which is another parallel to *Breath*; and *Cloudstreet* (1991, winner of the 1992 Miles Franklin Award) has a character with the telling name of "Fish" making a 'return to the water' in a half-planned suicide.

The first-person narrative begins when Bruce, a 50something paramedic with an all-Australian first name, is called to a suburban home where a 17-year old has accidentally hanged himself in an autoerotic asphyxiation game. (Kerryn Goldsworthy thinks there is a real case as background; one of Winton's schoolmates very likely met his death that way though at the time the official cause was given as 'suicide', the mother preferring the embarrassment of the latter over the shame of the former, and the same story is told in Winton's novel. This reminds Bruce that breath is the essence of life, that when a new-born baby is forced to take the first painful gulp of air it encounters "the rude shock of respiration" (40). From then on we hardly ever think of our breath again, so he reasons, unless it is somehow knocked out of us or cut off: "It's funny, but you never really think much about breathing." In the course of this novel Winton returns to his title theme time and again, albeit obliquely: the surfer characters are always pummelled by waves and feel their

“lungs near to bursting”, they feel “throttled”, are “gripped by the throat”, or, in less harmful circumstances learn to play the didgeridoo with its skill of circular breathing. The connection between breathing and life is given a comical dimension when one of the teenage boys discovers his father screwing a whore in his bedroom and this wayward *pater* is given away by his heavy breathing.

But back to the plot. The initial episode of seven pages leads you to think that we will be given the life story of a paramedic, a “bloody good one” to boot as he says about himself, while at the same time he sifts through the carnage that he is called out to handle as well as the carnage of his own existence. But no – the introduction (and for me it was the best part of the novel) is only the starter to a different memory genre. Bruce turns the clock back to 1971 when he was a 12-year old and called Pikelet. He lives in a Western Australian backwater town where logging is the main business; Pikelet’s father works in a sawmill. Pikelet makes friends with ‘Loonie’, the publican’s son (whose surname is ‘Loon’.) Their city is located by a river in which the boys try to outdo one another in staying underwater until “[their] heads were full of stars”; it is their initiation into flirting with the danger of drowning. But they yearn for the sea which is two miles away: “I hankered after the sea like I’d never done for anything before” (29). Neither of their parents share an iota of the boys’ enthusiasm. The sea is the realm of reaching out, of doing dangerous and outrageous things, while the citizens of Sawyer prefer ordinary, safe existences. Pikelet’s father dreads the sea as one of his mates drowned in it before his eyes, and as long as he has authority over his son, forbids him to go there. But inevitably that authority wanes, and so Pikelet and Loonie one day find themselves at the coast and there come across a shoal of surfies. Both boys are transfixed by the elegance they encounter: “How strange it was to see men do something beautiful” (23). With money earned from splitting firewood they buy their first cheapo Styrofoam boards. And then they encounter Sando, an ace surfer with a past, who is so taken with their furious dedication he takes them under his wings, loans them a variety of surfboards (he owns about two dozen of them), teaches them the art. For Sando, surfing has an

existential dimension: doing something as extraordinary and dangerous as surfing 20-foot high breakers, dancing before a thousand tons of white water threatening to crash down and to suck the surfer to the bottom of the sea makes the difference between being fully alive, and vegetating:

When you make it, when you're still alive and standing at the end, you get this tingly electric rush. You feel *alive*, completely awake and in your body. Man, it's like you've felt the hand of God. (76)

It's like you come pouring back into yourself said Sando one afternoon. Like you've exploded and all the pieces of you are reassembling themselves. You're new. Shimmering. Alive. (111)

So it all comes down to this: become a member of a surfing elite and you escape ordinariness. As Pikelet muses: "was I just ordinary or could I do something gnarly?" (76) He decided he would not end up like his father, a cipher in a "puny and pointless" community (117). Pikelet is the more intellectual of the two boys, and when Sando gives him books by Melville or Jack London or Hans Hass to read, there emerges a new dimension to their bonding. But ultimately this common interest falls by the wayside, becomes secondary to Sando's and Loonie's brutal determination to defy death in ever more risky surfing exploits. Three years pass, and when Sando and Loonie disappear for a few weeks to explore new surfing opportunities in Indonesia and Malaya, Sando's wife Eva, partly bored partly angry at her husband's selfishness, sexually initiates Pikelet. This turns out to be every bit as dangerous as those monster waves when, already jaded with 'normal' sex after two weeks, Eva introduces her unlikely 15-year old lover to asphyxiation games. (At the end of the novel we briefly learn that she was found dead hanging from a Colorado skiing resort hotel door, having lost control over that obnoxious sex game.)

She is pregnant, but we never learn what happens to her after delivery or what the fate of the child is. Wisely, Pikelet extricates himself from Sando's and Eva's influence, and over just a dozen pages we fast-forward through his subsequent life: the father killed in an industrial accident, university paid for by the pay-off, a safe

lab job, marriage, two daughters, the death of his mother from cancer, finally a divorce, a second career as paramedic and the sort of bourgeois existence that he once loathed. Now ordinariness has become his credo:

I made myself quite safe and ordinary – a lab bloke, a threat to nobody ... I withdrew into a watchful rectitude, anxious to please, risking nothing. I followed the outline of my life, carefully rehearsing form without conviction, like a bishop who can't see that his faith has become an act (204-5).

At the ripe age of 16, Loonie disappears from Sawyer and is only heard of again ten years later, when he is shot dead by a fellow drug dealer somewhere in Mexico, after stops in Indochina, Peru, California and a few more places.

Breath is full of wonderful description of the sea and equally haunting descriptions of the lonesome, endless forests that extend into the hinterland. But his descriptions defy the popular images we have: there is always a storm brewing, and rain pelts the characters wherever they go. Storminess seems to be a Leitmotif of *Breath*. Gone is the warmth of *Cloudstreet* and the resolute solutions of *Riders*. Carolyn See (2009) has argued that Winton's scenarios are firmly tied to his own life. There is a rough and young country, originally populated by indigenous blacks, then "cleared" together with much of the forested land by convicts and their progeny. There is the sea, always the sea, and lonely beaches.

Winton she argues writes about trailer parks and long bus rides, about swimming, about whether travel abroad is worth the trouble. And he writes about human beings' relationships to their parents, lovers, spouses, children and the cosmos. He writes about how these relationships yield up great beauty, but also how we almost always screw them up.

The novel has, so it seems, been a huge success in terms of sales; Nathanael O'Reilly (2008) claims that over 100.000 copies were sold in the first twelve weeks after publication. The surfing community will love this novel; as far as I know there has never been an Australian novel with surfing as its context and cultural matrix. ABR

reviewer James Ley (May 2008) calls it “flawless”, irresistible” and “elemental”. I am not so convinced. For all its stylistic brilliance, *Breath* strikes me as light-weight. It’s not only that at 215 pages it is the shortest of his novels, there is also a lack of complexity. Almost all of the narrative is about three guys and their mutual affection who find life’s meaning in – surfing. Apart from these three blokes and the wife of one of them there are no further characters that grow beyond cardboard status. Maybe dedicated surfies will find this novel “irresistible”, but I doubt many of them are interested in reading. In one passage Pikelet comes close to the core of the problem: the alleged greatness of surfing is hard to communicate to the non-initiated: “You felt shot-full and the sensation burned for hours – *yet you couldn’t make it real for anybody else.*” (111, my emphasis). Yes, quite so.

Apart from this major problem there are nagging questions at certain loose ends: Why are Sando and Eva out there in a no-man’s land? What do they live on year after year without a job, how does Sando finance his trips to all those Asian destinations? Why are their only friends two lonely little boys? How did they get there? Why did Bruce’s marriage break up? Also, there is a banal literality about the novel’s names: “Pikelet” is a little ocean fish trying to become a big fish, his crazy friend’s name is “Loonie”, the puny community where they live is a saw-mill town and so called “Sawyer”, and when Pikelet is sexually initiated it is by a woman named, of course, “Eva.”

What cannot be overlooked is Winton’s stylistic skill. There are great passages – not necessarily those out at sea amid the boring crash and thunder of waves, mind you – but in Bruce’s interior monologues at the start of the narrative and in his winding-up passages that are graceful, intricate and engrossing.

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