



# Winter Journey

Diane Armstrong

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Teachers' Notes written by Dr Pam MacIntyre

This is a strong, compelling novel of large-scale emotions, which positions personal journeys of understanding and identity against a specific incident of shocking, racially and religiously-based atrocity committed during the Second World War. The novel probes important questions about the nature of humanity that we seek answers to all our lives, and that our philosophers and religious thinkers have grappled with over centuries. It is also an intricately plotted book that reads almost like a whodunit as we, with Halina, try to piece together the past and what it means for the present. Halina is a successful odontologist – forensic dentist - born in Poland, now at the top of her profession in Sydney, and currently president of the International Association of Odontologists. When she is invited to be part of a team of forensic anthropologists chosen to investigate a site of a suspected genocide, she casts aside her misgivings and decides to return to the land of her birth. One of her motivations is that her mother has died without revealing anything substantial of Halina's heritage, and at this stage of her life, she wants to locate her origins.

When she and the team begin to unravel the evidence from the past, surprising echoes are found in the present for various people associated with the town of Nowa Kalwarai. Not everyone in the town is happy with raking over the past, and the Mayoral campaign provides a focus for divergent contemporary views that reveal how deep-seated racial and religious enmity can be. There is both personal and social tragedy and triumph in this narrative that explores the twin faces of goodness and evil.

## **Title**

Perhaps an interesting place to start with the book is to talk about the possible meanings of the title. On one level it refers to the season, but of course 'winter' also operates metaphorically for the darkness of the soul. Similarly 'journey' refers to Halina's physical crossing of continents, but also a journey of identity and self-acceptance. Either before or after the book is read, it might be useful to look at Wilhelm Muller's poetry sequence of the same title, *Die Winterreise* set to music by Franz Schubert and referred to in the book on p22 and p404, p433, – towards the beginning and the closing of the narrative.

## **Structure of the narrative**

While *Winter Journey's* content is confronting and asks us to consider some hard questions, it is also a book that is carefully and thoroughly plotted so that it is most useful to look at closely in terms of construction.

Essentially the book has two sections, the first set in Sydney (Chapters 1-9) and the second in Poland (10-42). The book has a prologue set in 1941 in a Polish village and an epilogue set in a plane as Halina flies away from Poland and home to Australia.

## **Prologue**

Definition: an introduction to a literary work

- This book's prologue not only acts to signal the central narrative and ideological event but to paint a historical, cultural picture that underscores the loss of innocence. Consider that twelve-year-old Kasia is the focus.
- It signals to us just how complex the situation was. For example, the Germans who invaded Poland and precipitated World War 2, slaughtering the Polish cavalry who charged their tanks, are now welcomed as heroes.
- This prologue also sets the social context – patriarchal, male, respect for the authority of the mayor, a close community.
- Contrast this with the scene in the café in 21<sup>st</sup> century, 'self-indulgent and carefree' Sydney - the food the atmosphere, the conversations (p35).
- Consider the effect of the prologue in terms of how we are positioned to read the book. How differently would you feel about the book, and the type of reading experience it suggests, if it began with chapter one?

*Winter Journey* is worth reading twice to see how carefully the author has planted clues for the reader and positioned Halina for the shock she receives very late in the story. Or, it asks to be read carefully and alertly initially, so that the reader makes the necessary connections.

For example, most of all the elements that are to be significant in the second part of the book are introduced in the opening chapters:

- The book opens with Halina's dream, signalling its significance (p20)
- Halina wonders about Harold Holt's disappearance: 'Lack of closure was endless torture for the family' (p33)
- Halina's act of unthinking heroism (p42-44)

- mtDNA and the importance of matrilineal connections (p49)
- betrayal – Halina by Rhys, and by her colleague, Clive Bussell. This also becomes a betrayal of justice for the two-year-old dead child, Tiffany Carson, whose case sets up the moral ambiguities and motivations that are going to inform later parts of the novel, and asks us to consider whether contemporary Sydney is much different from Poland in 1941 (p92-94)
- envy – Clive Bussells' motivation for invalidating Halina's evidence (p59)
- through the character Luong, the author refers to various acts of genocide in Cambodia, Rwanda, Kosovo, Bosnia (p82-3) preparing us for later events
- loss of a child (p66-67)
- the letter that caused the rift between Zosia and her sponsors (p62)
- a killer set free (p96)

### **Epilogue:**

**Definition:** a short postscript to any literary work, which often indicates what has happened to the characters. What is the effect of this epilogue? Consider the significance of the poem and that Halina is happy with an imperfect world. Why is it open ended rather than conclusive?

### **Style of telling**

The story is written in the third person, but is largely focalised through Halina, so that events and people are filtered through her particular view of the world and of the people in her life. For example, she says of her mother Zosia (p25): 'Her mother had no sense of history'. When we have read the whole story then we know the author is being ironic here, as she is again on page 34 when Halina looks at the photo taken after their arrival in Australia and says 'no secrets here'. This also acts to alert us that Halina's understandings are limited.

There are very few places in the novel where Halina is not the focaliser, and you might like to consider why the author has shifted the focus at these times in the narrative. For example, we see Father Krzysztof from the inside, not just through Halina's interactions with him (chapter 22, 25, pp299-301). Other examples are the recollections that the author writes as first-hand accounts of the events in 1941, such as Kasia's memories on the fateful day on pages 289-299. Another is J.E.'s letter in the Jewish Historical Institute which documents the long-standing anti-Semitism in Poland that is the back story to the events of 1941 (p258-262).

There are also examples of particular literary devices:

### **Irony**

Halina says on page 432 that she is living proof that life is stranger than fiction, yet she is fictional, a character given life out of the author's imagination. Is the author having a joke here or is there another level of meaning operating?

When Halina looks at the photo of hers and Zosia's arrival in Australia on page34 she says – 'no secrets there' and yet the book shows the photo reveals an important clue to the unravelling of Halina's identity. Irony is used again in relation to Halina. What is

being suggested about her? Perhaps a lack of insight? Where is her scientific curiosity and ability to examine evidence?

### **Symbolism and Metaphysical elements**

- the first chapter opens with Halina's frightening 'dream, and on page 46 her mother's voice and hand save her from drowning. Are these markers that science won't have all the answers for her, or is their function wider than applying only to Halina?
- What do you think is the meaning of the dream about the cat on page 461?
- What about the urn that Halina dreams about? Consider that she is only capable of imagining putting it together in her dream (p423).
- Trees are important symbols used throughout the novel. On page 459 Helena muses that 'trees were a symbol of hope, of life's eternal renewal' so she plants a tree for Piotr, and yet it was an apple tree on which Piotr was hanged.

### **Language**

- there is much use of Polish and Yiddish words throughout the novel, such as mitzvah, shetl, pierogi, prosze pana etc. What is the effect of this?
- On page 37 Claire says 'My face is as furrowed as a Dubbo paddock in a drought'. Why would only an Australian understand this simile?

### **Questions**

- Throughout the story we are invited to ponder the mysterious nature of human behaviour and motivations from various viewpoints. For example, why do you think Halina's mother, Zosia, lived and died in silence about her past and Halina's identity?
- Halina says 'Sometimes I think the most important decisions in life are made for reasons we don't understand' (p53). Does this match with your experience? How is this idea played out in the story, for example in the lives of Halina, Father Krzysztof, Zosia, Kasia?

### **Central Ideas:**

The following statements and questions could form the basis of discussion, debate, and/or written responses to the text:

- '*Winter Journey* is not only about a small historical event, but about the need to acknowledge national culpability for past crimes.'
- 'It is difficult to read *Winter Journey* without the history of Australia's treatment of Indigenous Australians coming to mind.'
- What motivates people to carry out unselfish acts? For example, Halina rushes into the sea to save a child, and Zosia takes on the responsibility of looking after a child who is not hers, for the rest of her life (p441).
- What do you think are Zosia's reasons for saving Halina? From where do you draw your evidence?
- What inspires us for good?
- Do you think Zosia's act is harder to understand than the mob brutality?
- Do we find unselfishness and altruism harder to accept than malevolence?

- One of the central issues in the book is the failure of the objectivity of science (represented by Halina) to understand human emotions and behaviour. Do you agree? For example on page 462 Halina's reflection on the events in Poland was that 'Good was as much of a mystery as evil, and it was beyond the capacity of the human mind to comprehend either.'
- The Students. A strong theme the novel works towards is one of reconciliation, of lies and truth, of personal responsibility, of societal and national responsibility, of religious and ethnic difference. Consider how Roman's class of students and their actions act as representative of the next generation and symbols of hope and reconciliation.
- When Halina addresses the class of students, consider the various attitudes held by the students and how they were formed (p304-5). What influences your opinions about the world and how we behave?
- Consider Antek's arguments – are the objections to acknowledging the past about being ashamed to be Polish? Irena expresses shame at the town's past.
- Antek says it was 'natural' – 'Whites go with whites. Blacks go with blacks, Catholics with Catholics. That's how it should be... People should stick to their own' (p306) How would you answer Antek?
- **Justice** On page 84 Luong says about Cambodia, 'I want justice but my country needs peace more'. Do you understand why she says this? Do you agree with her that peace is more important than justice? Is that what the book confirms, or does it question that position?
- **God** 'If there is no god on earth, then we ourselves are gods.' (p433). What does this mean to you generally, and in terms of the story? You might like to chase the whole poem it comes from (*Die Winterreise*).
- **The Science** of DNA testing is prominent in the book, and the description of how DNA is extracted from teeth pulp for example is precise and detailed (p435). Do we need to know all this? Why do you think the author has been so specific about such processes?
- **Forensic pathology** is now a glamour profession thanks to television programs such as the British 'Silent Witness' and 'McCallum' and now the CSI stable of shows filling our television screens. Why do you think we are so fascinated by extracting information about, and from, the dead? Is it the puzzle solving detective work that intrigues us or are there more ghoulish reasons for our interest?
- How important is it to know who are our biological parents in knowing who we are? Consider Halina's reaction to Zosia when she finds out her true parentage – even though the actual, scientific evidence eludes her.
- Father Kzryzstof has an equally strong reaction when he discovers he was born a Jew, and has lived his life as a Catholic priest. He is killed before he can resolve this dilemma. Predict a future for him had he survived. What would he have done?
- On page 452, Roman, a symbol of reconciliation says 'A wasted opportunity is a loss, but a wasted tragedy is a crime.' He is talking of Nowa Kalwaria but you

might like to make more global and immediate connections. Why do we have War Memorials? Why is there so much current concern about the changes to Gallipoli peninsula?

- Irena, another character who represents reconciliation says on page 454, 'We don't have to feel guilty, we only have to feel sorry'. Do you agree? You might like to consider this in relation to Indigenous Australians and Sorry Day.
- At the end of the narrative, while the young people restore the Jewish graves, there are other locals who still harbour hatred and anti-Semitism so Halina concludes on page 451 'No victory was complete and no war was ever wholly won.' Do you think this is too fatalistic, or does it represent a shift in Halina's character?
- Roman is a symbol of the idea that fundamental change begins with individuals taking a stand.
- Halina and Roman represent the hope of reconciliation, that personal relationships can override past animosities.
- How much are we responsible for our parents' actions? (p 444-446)

### **Opposites**

There are no easy answers in this book to what makes one person good and another evil. For example, Bogdan the sociopath was Zosia, the saviour's, brother and Roman, the peacemaker and truth seeker was the perpetrator's son. How can individuals from the same family be so different?

### **Characters**

**Halina** is a complex character on whom events act in harsh ways during the narrative. On page 31 Halina acknowledges her selfishness. Do you think this is accurate of her? What are you basing this on?

P37 Claire says of her 'I always know what you're thinking, but I hardly ever know what you feel.' Claire's takes on causes, while Halina is ever the scientist saying there are always two-sides to the story of political causes. Does she hold this position given the challenges thrown at by events? Does Halina change?

On page 404 she listens to Die Winterreise and the words 'A stranger I arrived and a stranger I leave' cause her anguish. Does this sum her up at the end of the book?

**Father Krzysztof** is a compassionate intellectual who faces a huge crisis, not only of identity, but of faith. Consider that he had to die because reconciliation of his dilemma was just too hard to imagine.

**Zosia** – 'she took pity on you. It was an impulse...As time went on, she grew into her role' (p442). Is that a fair evaluation of Zosia?

### **Debate**

'We don't need more clever people. We need more good people.' (p55)

'Was evil the manure that allowed goodness to flourish?' (p458)

### **Further Reading/ Watching/ Research**

What do you know about World War 2, the Fascists, Nazis and Bolsheviks? Find out more.

The film 'Hotel Rwanda' (2004) is an inspiring and moving account of Paul Rusesabagina, who saved over 1000 Tutsi's from genocide at the hands of the Hutus in Rwanda in 1994.

The documentary 'Shake Hands with the Devil: The Journey of Romeo Dallaire' (2004) is about the Canadian General who was a UN Peacekeeper in Rwanda.

Clea Koff's *The Bone Woman: A Forensic Anthropologist's Search for Truth in the Mass Graves of Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo* is a very moving and dignified account of a 23-year-old young woman's experiences of identifying victims of genocide.

Rumi's poems: <http://www.indranet.com/potpourri/poetry/rumi/rumi.html>

Sebastiao Salgado's photography:

<http://www.profotos.com/education/referencedesk/masters/masters/sebastiosalgado/sebastiosalgado.shtml>