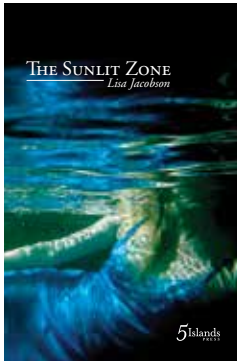


Notes on *The Sunlit Zone*

SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2013 STELLA PRIZE



*...On moonlit nights
she called to me; rotten, putrescent.
I'd run to the beach and scan the sea
till someone came and brought me in.
Often I woke in a great panic, gasping
for air as if still drowning.*

Lisa Jacobson, *The Sunlit Zone*

SYNOPSIS

In a world of perfect clones, Finn and her sister North are the misfits. Their mother, a free-thinker, wanted her daughters whichever way they came. North is healthy, strong and clever. Finn is more delicate, fragile even, with an anxious temperament soothed only by rocking water. Her affinity with the sea is obvious from the start, and her differences only increase from there. She is an unusual child, appearing more sea-nymph than human, which is not helped by her slightly webbed feet or tendency to daydream. When North meets Jack, she becomes fed up with having her younger sister constantly at her heels. One day down at the beach with him, she neglects her sister, only noticing too late when Finn's body is taken by the sea. North tries to save her, but the last thing she remembers of her sister is a pale hand slipping away.

North is the focus of this verse novel set in the near future. Years later, she sets off for university, leaving behind her calm, understanding father, and her artistic mother, who is panicked at the thought of losing another child. At university North experiments, trying to find herself. She meets Waverly, with whom she will later work as a marine scientist.

North and Waverly dive in the ocean, recording fish and noting changes. For North, the sea is perhaps always a bittersweet reminder of what she has lost.

North's other friend, Cello, is her opposite: a clone baby, designed to be beautiful. With a house, a husband, a dog and a child, Cello has everything

that North does not. And yet the two are real friends and Cello is a complex character fuelled by recognisable human emotions.

As the book moves towards its conclusion, North's past catches up with her – in the form of Jack. North is uncertain about seeing him as she still carries so much grief from the last time they saw each other, the day that Finn disappeared, and she has never really forgiven Jack for abandoning her to the grief. Her confused feelings are complicated still further when her father dies and she returns home to help her mother with the funeral.

The book concludes at an exhibition opening for North's mother. North, Jack, Cello and Waverly are all present. And in a way, Finn is there too, in a painting depicting her final moments with North. Here North is able to let go of some of the guilt she has been carrying and open herself up to the people close to her, and to the future.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND



LISA JACOBSON is an award-winning poet and fiction writer based in Melbourne, Victoria. Her verse novel, *The Sunlit Zone* (Five Islands Press), was described

by novelist Adrian Hyland as a 'storm warning for the 21st century'. It won the 2014 Adelaide Festival John Bray Poetry Award, and was shortlisted in four other national awards. Her latest poetry collection is *South in the World* (UWA Publishing). Lisa holds

a PhD in creative writing and has held a variety of day jobs, including dog trainer, therapeutic care worker and bushfire recovery officer. She spent much of her adolescence on horseback and is currently rediscovering the sweet hay-scent of horses.

www.lisajacobson.org

www.thestellaprize.com.au/2013/04/the-stella-interview-lisa-jacobson/

THEMES

Place
Sustainability
Technology
Genetic modification
Ethics
Loss
Friendship
First love
Difference
Acceptance

LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

There are clear links in this book with several of the general capabilities, including **critical thinking** and **ethical understanding**, which can be discussed in relation to cloning and genetic modification. In addition, the cross-curriculum priority of **sustainability** is a key theme of the book, specifically with regard to water conservation, climate change and the future of the Australian coastlines.

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ How does the author signal that this story is set in the future?
- ◆ What has happened to the world in this imagined future?
- ◆ What do you understand by this book's categorisation as a 'verse novel'?
- ◆ How is the ocean used as a metaphor for the loss of North's sister and her experience with grief?
- ◆ What does 'the sunlit zone' refer to?

- ◆ What other imagery is used in the book?
- ◆ How does the character of Cello explore the ethical implications of genetic modification?
- ◆ Jacobson describes the white space on the page as 'things unspoken, yet part of the novel itself'. What do you think she means by this? How does the page itself become a part of the narrative?
- ◆ What effect does the layout of the verses have on the reading of it? (Read parts aloud in class and discuss the way the format of the book dictates your reading and interpretations.)
- ◆ What do you think has happened to Finn?
- ◆ How does North resolve her feelings of guilt over Finn's disappearance?
- ◆ In addition to her webbed feet, how else is Finn described that makes her different from North and her friends?
- ◆ What kinds of friendship are demonstrated in the book?
- ◆ Why is North angry at Finn? How does this contribute to her guilt? How does it affect her relationship with her parents?
- ◆ What does North's work represent to her?
- ◆ How do the verses opening each chapter link to the narrative?
- ◆ Describe the ways that Jack has an impact on North's life, both by his presence and his absence. How does she feel about him? Why is their relationship so complicated?
- ◆ How does North's mother's painting initiate a resolution in their relationship?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Consider what is meant by the term 'verse novel'. As a group, write a list of the characteristics you associate with each of the following:

- ◆ Poetry
- ◆ Novel
- ◆ Verse novel

How is each style different? How is each similar? What opportunities does the verse novel form give

writers that are not found in traditional poetry or novel form? In what ways is it restrictive?

Using this book as a guide, try to write your own short verse novel (there are some links to tips in the references below). This activity could be done in groups, with students brainstorming a narrative, characters, images and metaphors, and then writing the verses separately.

2. Lisa Jacobson describes a future almost forty years from now. She makes this future believable for the reader by taking contemporary issues, such as genetic modification and climate change, and imagining how they might have developed further in forty years.

Choose a current event, scientific development or emerging issue that you think might have a significant impact in five years and do some research of your own. Using the information you can find, write a short piece imagining a time five years from now that shows the impact of your chosen topic.

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