

Notes on *Questions of Travel*

SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2013 STELLA PRIZE



It's squalid because it's alive. Only the dead are perfect.

Michelle de Kretser, *Questions of Travel*

SYNOPSIS

In this dual narrative, Michelle de Kretser tells the stories of Ravi and Laura, two characters who will meet only fleetingly, but whose lives are pushing them relentlessly towards the same destination.

Laura is given the first portion of the narrative. Laura's mother dies from breast cancer while she is still breastfeeding and Laura grows up in a family where her brothers have the sense that she is to blame. Her father lavishes her with gifts to hide his discomfort around her. She is an unusual child, and not an attractive one. During her early years, the only person who seems to have a genuine affection for Laura is Hester. Hester is Laura's exotic great-aunt, who returns to Sydney to help raise the children and enchants Laura with her tales of travel. After school, Laura enrolls in a fine arts degree. She remains unconvinced that she will ever be an artist, though, and when Hester dies leaving Laura all of her money, Laura decides to travel, hoping to find whatever it is that her life has been so lacking thus far.

Ravi, whose story is told in the alternating chapters, was born in the same decade as Laura. His youth in Sri Lanka is largely uneventful, although from his account we can see that at the periphery hovered the threat of violence from Tamil fighters. Despite losing friends who are forced to move away following the horrific slaughter of family members, Ravi maintains an almost naïve optimism that this violence is apart from him. He dreams of travel and a life beyond his small village, and his main priority is finding a girl. He falls in love with Malini; they marry and their son, Hiran, is born.

As a child, Malini vowed 'not to live my life in vain', and her energies are soon consumed by political activism, fighting the human rights violations in their country. Ravi fears her passion, concerned not only for her safety but about association with a political movement that he sees as dangerous and provocative. He becomes jealous of Malini's co-workers and their relationship begins to suffer.

Meanwhile, Laura has been travelling the world, searching in vain for an experience that feels authentic and meaningful. She has a number of empty relationships and makes promises to herself that she can never quite fulfil, compounding her sense that she is missing something, that she is always slightly on the outskirts of life rather than participating in it – a tourist. She befriends Theo, an eccentric PhD student in London, and becomes part of his circle. Still, though, she hasn't found the sort of true connection that she is looking for. When an opportunity takes her to Naples, Laura starts writing about her travel for magazines. It is a way for her to share her experiences, as well as a step towards the career that she feels she ought to have. But the reality falls short, and Laura is disappointed that the few moments of authenticity she has stumbled across on her travels do not make for welcome material.

Laura's return to Sydney is motivated by her and Theo's increasing homesickness. Ravi's move is also motivated by the death of a loved one, and it is the threat of further violence that eventually forces him away from home. As Malini becomes increasingly involved in political activism, she attracts the

attention of terrorists. One weekend, she and Hiran set off to visit her parents without Ravi. She and Hiran are killed, along with her parents, and her body is delivered back to Ravi, as a warning and a threat. As Ravi is reeling from the shock – by turns despairing at the loss of his wife and hating her for bringing the death of his son – Malini’s colleague Freda tries to help and protect him. She takes Ravi to her home, but he fails to see the threats to his life that are evident to her and he becomes convinced that Freda is merely trying to control him. When Ravi starts to receive written threats, Freda pushes him from hotel to hotel and, finally, finds a way to help him escape to Sydney.

In Sydney, both Ravi and Laura attempt to pick up their lives. They each get a job, find somewhere to live and forge new relationships. But neither feels settled. Ravi has begun the long process of applying for asylum, but his heart is not really in it. A vital part of him remains in Sri Lanka with his dead wife and son. He finds friendship with Hana, but fears leaving his past behind to pursue a future with her. Laura is still searching for an anchor. She takes on a management job at a travel publisher, hoping that a career is the answer. She becomes the mistress of a man from her office, but the true connection she craves continues to elude her.

Ravi comes to work at the same company as Laura. The two have barely had the chance to get to know one another when Ravi decides that, despite having been granted asylum, he wants to return to Sri Lanka. Laura, too, is feeling the need to leave, and decides that Sri Lanka is as good a place as any for her to travel to next. Ravi and Laura arrive in Sri Lanka, separately, at the end of 2004. Laura travels first to visit Ravi’s old friend Nimal, and is with him when the Boxing Day tsunami hits. Both character and reader are left with the sudden shock of the event, as the white wall of water rises up to meet them.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND



MICHELLE DE KRETSER was born in Sri Lanka and emigrated to Australia when she was 14. Educated in Melbourne and Paris, Michelle has worked as a university tutor, an editor and a book reviewer. She is the author of *The Rose Grower*, *The Hamilton Case*, which won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and the UK Encore Prize, and *The Lost Dog*, which won a swag of awards, including the NSW Premier’s Book of the Year Award and the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction, and the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. *Questions of Travel* won the 2013 Miles Franklin Literary Award, ALS Gold Medal, Prime Minister’s Literary Award for Fiction and two WA Premier’s Book Awards.

www.thestellaprize.com.au/2013/04/the-stella-interview-michelle-de-kretser/

THEMES

Place
Travel
Death
Longing
Activism
Fate
Dispossession
Asylum
Love
Human connections
Home
Belonging

LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

This book is rich in themes linked to the general capability of **intercultural understanding**, which aims to ‘stimulate students’ interest in the lives of others’¹ and allows students to reflect on connections between their own experiences and those of others.

¹ <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/GeneralCapabilities/Pdf/Intercultural-understanding>

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ With reference to the book's title, what questions does the author ask about travel?
- ◆ What kinds of travel are discussed in the book?
- ◆ Why do we travel? Why does Laura travel? Why does Ravi?
- ◆ In what ways does Laura's experience of travel fail to live up to her expectations?
- ◆ 'Photographs were produced to prove that travel had occurred' (p.61). Travel is seen as an almost chore-like experience, rather than something life-changing. Do you think this is true? Why? How might our experiences with other cultures be different?
- ◆ What is the difference between being a spectator and being immersed in a culture? How do these terms apply to Laura and Ravi?
- ◆ Despite their differences, Laura and Ravi do have quite a bit in common. What are some of their commonalities?
- ◆ What is the effect of having the two stories interspersed? How does it change:
 - Your reading?
 - Your connection with the characters?
 - Your understanding of events?
- ◆ In what ways are both Ravi and Laura disconnected? How does this make them feel?
- ◆ What events are occurring in the background of the novel? How do these events impact on the characters?
- ◆ How is travel linked to class and modernity?
- ◆ In what ways is this book political?
- ◆ What do you think is the role that art plays in politics?
- ◆ What have you learnt about Sri Lanka from this book?
- ◆ What are the similarities and differences between migration and tourism?
- ◆ How do Ravi's and Laura's notions of home change and develop the more they travel?

- ◆ What opportunities does travel offer?
- ◆ How are Laura's shallow romantic relationships in opposition to what she is searching for? What is it about her friendship with Theo that breaks her heart?
- ◆ Why is Ravi unable to move on with Hana?
- ◆ What is Ravi's experience of coming to Australia? What kind of relationships does he form with other people? Why do you think that he ultimately decides to return to Sri Lanka?
- ◆ At the end of the book, do you think it is Ravi or Laura who has found a greater sense of peace? Have either of them truly found a place where they belong?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Ideas of home and belonging are central to both Ravi's and Laura's travels. In groups, discuss the following:

- ◆ What does home mean to you?
- ◆ What makes you feel 'at home'?
- ◆ What can make you feel 'at home' when you're away from where you live?
- ◆ What might make you feel uncomfortable in your own home?

Turn your discussion into a creative response focusing on what home means to you. (A good comparative text here would be the picture book *My Place* by Nadia Wheatley and Donna Rawlins.)

2. Laura discovers, to her disappointment, that writing about travel is quite different from experiencing a culture.

- ◆ How do you think we are 'sold' a culture by the tourist industry?
- ◆ Does this affect our experience of travel?
- ◆ How does it help or hinder our cultural awareness?

Think of a place you've travelled to (it doesn't need to be overseas, it could be interstate, or even somewhere local). Try to 'sell' it. Write a brief travel guide highlighting the key attractions of the area.

When Ravi suggests Western Sydney as a possible location to write about, he is laughed at. What have you left out of your travel guide? Why? Now focus on one of those elements that you didn't include in your guide and write a creative piece based on it.

3. One of the questions Michelle de Kretser asks is why we travel. You often hear people say, 'I need to get away'. Using this as your starting point, write a response in the form of a short story or an essay about needing to get away. What does it mean to different people?

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