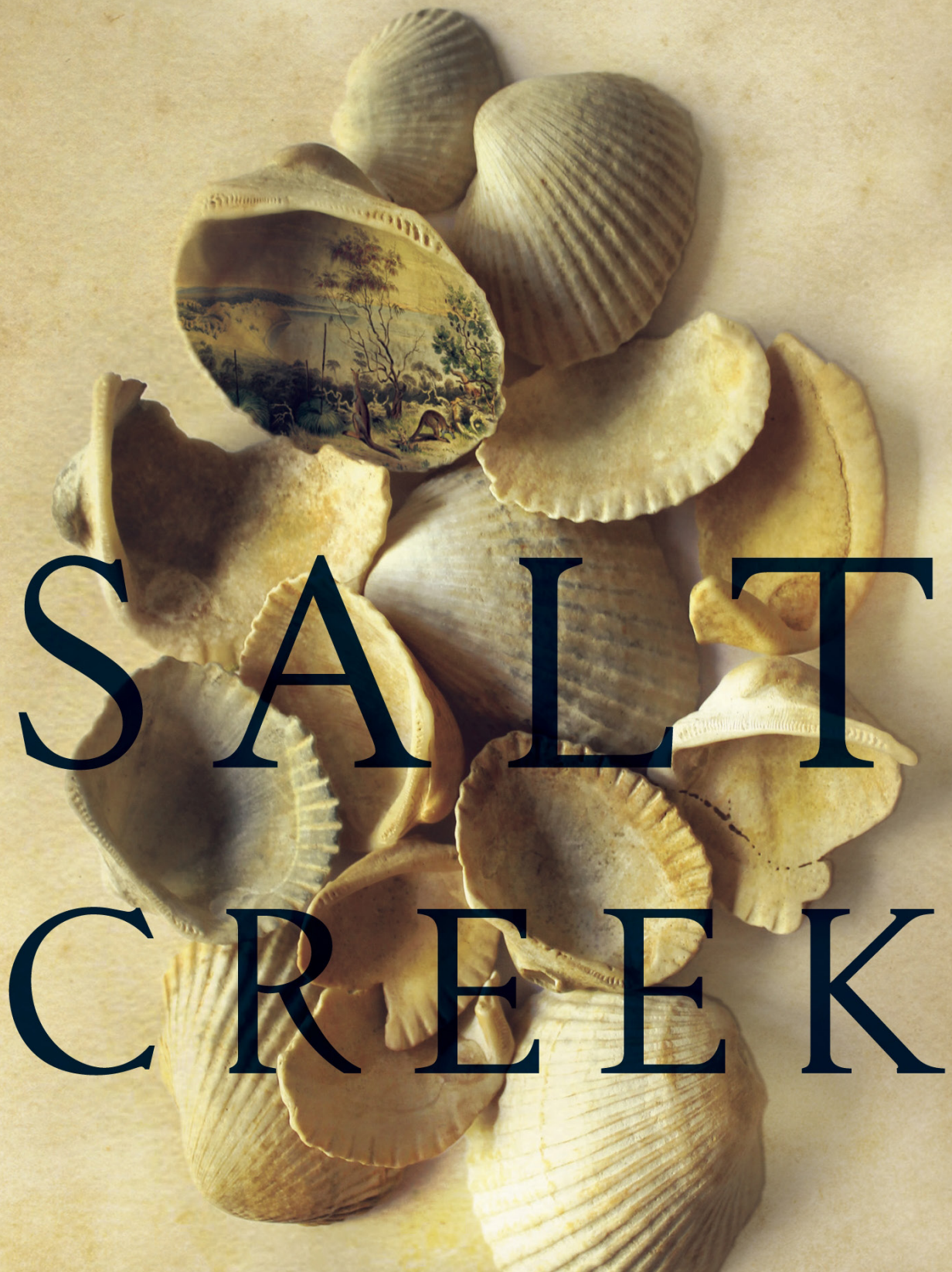


LUCY TRELOAR



SALT CREEK
Lucy Treloar



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Blurb

Salt Creek, 1855, lies at the far reaches of the remote, beautiful and inhospitable coastal region, the Coorong, in the province of South Australia. The area, just opened to graziers willing to chance their luck, becomes home to Stanton Finch and his large family, including fifteen-year-old Hester Finch. Once wealthy political activists, the Finch family has fallen on hard times. Cut adrift from the polite society they were raised to be part of, Hester and her siblings make connections where they can: with the few travellers that pass along the nearby stock route – among them a young artist, Charles – and the Ngarrindjeri people they have dispossessed. Over the years that pass, an Aboriginal boy, Tully, at first a friend, becomes part of the family. Stanton's attempts to tame the harsh landscape bring ruin to the Ngarrindjeri people's home and livelihoods, and unleash a chain of events that will tear the family asunder. As Hester witnesses the destruction of the Ngarrindjeri people's subtle culture and the ideals that her family once held so close, she begins to wonder what civilization is. Was it for this life and this world that she was educated?



The Author

Lucy Treloar was born in Malaysia and educated in England, Sweden and Melbourne. A graduate of the University of Melbourne and RMIT, Lucy is a writer and editor and plies her trades both in Australia and in Cambodia, where she lived for a number of years.

Lucy was the winner of the 2014 Commonwealth Short Story Prize (Pacific Region), the 2013 Writing Australia Unpublished Manuscript Award and an Asialink Writer's Residency (Cambodia, 2011). Her short fiction has appeared in Sleepers, Overland, Seizure, and Best Australian Stories 2013.





Plot Summary

In 1855 Stanton (Papa) Finch moves his wife and seven surviving children, aged from eighteen to babyhood, from their upper middle-class life in civilised Adelaide to the remote wetlands of the Coorong, 200 kilometres away. Following a string of failed business ventures, the family is in grave financial and social decline, a situation that Papa believes will be reversed by establishing a thriving agricultural enterprise in this new location. His grand dreams are shattered one by one, though, as each scheme – from dairy farming and cheese-making to sheep raising – fails, and the family's fortunes continue their relentless decline.

While remote and previously unsettled by Europeans, the family's property is far from unoccupied. They discover it is peopled with an Indigenous tribe who have lived there for thousands of years. Initially Papa is determined to view the original inhabitants as equal to Europeans, in theory at least, lacking only education, civilization, and the word of God to enlighten them. To this end Tull, a young Aboriginal boy whose white father had kidnapped his mother, is semi-adopted into the family while his tribe is free to come and go as they please on the property, and there is some exchange of goods between them. The disintegration of the family is mirrored far more tragically in the original occupants' own destruction, though – they succumb to European diseases, their food sources disappear as European agricultural practices destroy habitats, and the pastoralists, including Papa, develop ever harsher attitudes to their continued existence in the area.

The family's disintegration begins with the death of Mama during childbirth. Hester, the oldest girl, had already taken over much of the mothering role in the family since Mama descended into depression following the deaths of two of her youngest children before they left Adelaide. With her death, though, Hester must assume responsibility not just for the cooking, cleaning and washing, but for the care and education of her siblings. It is a duty she accepts even while her yearning for freedom and escape grows ever stronger as the years pass. Two of the few visitors to Salt Creek are a young artist called Charles Bagshott and his father, who pass through the region while on a surveying mission. Though Charles and Hester fall in love, Hester's desire for freedom on her own terms means she refuses his proposal of marriage that would lead to her escape from Salt Creek.

Meanwhile, Hester's wild younger sister Addie falls in love with Tull, but the two are thwarted as her father and brothers cannot countenance her having a relationship with a 'black'. In the tragic conclusion, Addie is forced not only to give up her baby but into a marriage with a neighbour to protect Tull and settle Papa's debts.

- When Hester discovers she too has fallen pregnant outside of marriage, Addie helps her to leave Salt Creek for Adelaide where with the help of her maternal grandparents, Hester moves to England. There, Hester raises her son, Joss, and lives in comfort as a wealthy widow until Charles comes back into her life some 12 years later.
- To what do you attribute the failure of Papa's dreams of success? Is it through bad luck, a curse, a lack of the necessary knowledge and skills on his part, or a fundamental flaw in his character?
- In the end Hester is 'rescued' by the wealth and kind nature of her maternal grandparents, whose resources enable her to not only keep her son, but to pursue fulfilling work that



Plot Summary

matters to her (teaching) and, ultimately, to win back the love of her life. What would her fate have been had she not had them to turn to, and what might have happened to her spirit in the process?

- Of the three main siblings, Fred is the only one to achieve what he desires, both while living at home and then in managing to leave to pursue – successfully in his case – his dream of becoming a naturalist and writing about his discoveries. How do you think Fred was able to achieve what his sisters were not?



Themes

Love

Love in all its forms is without doubt the key driver of the story: love of a parent or child, the intimate love of a life mate, the love inspired by friendship, forbidden love, the love of one's own culture, religion or community, and the love – or denial – of oneself.

- What did 'love' actually mean in the Finch family in the mid 1800s? Which characters demonstrate what kind of love, and is one more valuable or worthy than another? Why?
- A popular western 'truism' has long deemed that 'Love conquers all'. Is that evident in this story, or is it wishful thinking rather than reality? Is it something worth aiming for even if the possibility of achieving it is in doubt?
- Is love always a good thing? Can it have unexpectedly destructive results? What evidence for this is there in the story?

Colonisation

The action takes place against the backdrop of the biggest upheaval and movement of people in recorded history to that time. Not all of this movement was welcome, of course – many, including those whose lands were taken and whose custodianship of it was usurped, have argued that it was a form of genocide.

- In the mid-nineteenth century, industrialisation and empire building were seen to make western European countries progressive and powerful as well as being of great benefit to the 'savages' they encountered, but the beginnings of the dark legacy colonisation would leave are already evident in the Finches' world. What are the signs of it?
- Pioneer pastoralists are often lauded as heroes in Australia for their courage in creating a new land where 'no one' had been before, and for doing it on their own. The reality was far more complex, though, as Fred indicates when he sets out to stay on the peninsula alone to see 'if I can survive there without Tull.' How might life have panned out for these 'pioneers' without the cooperation and assistance of Indigenous people?

Civilization vs barbarism

Threading through the whole story is the notion that some peoples and practices are 'civilized' while others are barbarous. Obviously the Finches belong to the former category, in their own eyes and the eyes of their fellow Europeans, but what criteria are they using to judge by? Is it superficial, or does it speak to the deeper human condition?

- What makes a person 'civilized'? Going to a Christian church service on Sunday, knowing how to address someone or put a visitor at their ease, wearing gloves and a hat whenever you leave the house? In what way does this constitute 'civilization'? Conversely, what makes a person or practice 'uncivilized'? Simply that it is the opposite of something done in one's own culture, such as going about naked if one is used to dressing in clothes, or burying a deceased person in the ground when one is used to leaving them on a tree platform?



Themes

- Is civilization always a good thing and barbarity always bad? Hester tells us 'In the Coorong we lost society, its benefits as well as its strictures.' Do you think she equated 'society' with 'civilization'? What do you imagine she experienced as its 'benefits', and who did those benefits apply to? Did 'civilization' lead to uniform good for all the characters in the novel – or for any of them?

Social expectations and constraints

All cultures at all times have their own rules, mores, laws and standards of permissible behaviour that impact enormously on the lives and choices of those living in that culture. Indigenous culture and that of western Europe in the mid 1800s could not have been more different, yet both circumscribed the individual lives of the characters in this story.

- In the mid-nineteenth century, duty, obligation and obedience, especially to family, were seen not only as perhaps the most highly valued qualities in an individual but a primary indicator of their morality and worth as a 'good' and decent person. There are residues of this belief even 200 years later, when notions of self-sacrifice are regularly touted in the popular media as the highest of human endeavours. But is the unquestioning performance of one's duty and sacrificing oneself to others always the 'right' thing to do? Does it always benefit others, or can it do just as much harm as good? Discuss in relation to the key characters in this novel.
- To what extent do you think social expectations and constraints – both the notion of 'duty', and the desire to belong to a certain social class – drove Papa to act as he did? What degree of personal choice do you think he had about the decisions he made? Would you have chosen differently in his shoes? In what ways, and why?
- Although there was a flowering of education of women in Victorian England (and its colonies), women remained subordinate to men. What were the possibilities for women in the Finch family? In what other ways are these and other power dynamics explored in the book?



Characters

Hester:

Hester is a sensitive, observant, thoughtful and spirited narrator who is compelled by her overriding sense of duty, obligation and obedience to stay buried in the Coorong as the family's linchpin and carer following Mama's disappearance into depression and then death in childbirth. Even when unexpected love comes to her in the form of artist Charles Bagshott, her own anxieties along with a series of miscommunications rob her of an opportunity for release. Only falling pregnant out of wedlock compels her to leave the family and create a new life for herself – one with the possibilities of reclaimed love as Charles manages to find her again.

- What do you think held Hester back from making her escape into the wider world she yearned for, especially when her siblings had all grown?
- What do you think were the real reasons for Hester resisting and refusing Charles given that their feelings for each other were reciprocal?

Papa:

Papa's character is both progressive and enlightened for the era, but also typically patriarchal and authoritarian. Despite his fine sentiments and well-intentioned efforts to act on them, particularly in relation to the Indigenous people the family encounters and, to some extent, his daughters, at the end of the day they don't seem to have made much difference at all to the outcomes: his ultimate treatment of the 'natives', including Tull, is no better than that of his neighbours, and he marries off even a favoured daughter as though she were as much a possession as any of his horses or cattle.

Papa is also a dreamer, but his grand dreams never come to fruition. One after another his attempts to turn the family into wealthy and well-regarded members of Adelaide society fail, and they become more impoverished, not less, as their fortunes decline. Perhaps the greatest tragedy is his dogged adherence to his various dreams in the face of deep unhappiness on the part of his family, and their eventual disintegration and abandonment of him. He claimed to be doing it all for them, but was blind to the reality of the misery and destruction he caused.

- To what extent do you think it was personal pride rather than love, care and duty that drove Papa's actions, ultimately causing the disintegration of his family?
- What do you make of Papa's attitude to and treatment of the Indigenous people? Were his beliefs and behaviour congruent or contradictory? Self-serving or altruistic? Genuine or applicable only when convenient? And how much was a result of unresolved guilt?



Characters

Addie:

Addie is the counterpoint to the responsible, dutiful Hester. As the wayward and wilful younger sister who does only what she wants and not a thing more, she gets away with it not only because she is the apple of her father's eye, but because she is charming as well as cheeky, which disarms her siblings. In their tolerance and affection for her there may also be an unadmitted regard for her insouciance and refusal to sacrifice herself, something none of the other siblings have achieved except perhaps for Fred. It is her greatest tragedy, then, that the only thing she does want and is prepared to put herself second for – Tull, and a life together with him – is not only denied her but forces her into a marriage with someone else in order to protect Tull's life. Love indeed, and could there be a greater sacrifice?

- Addie proves through her later actions, including her rescuing of Grace, that she is more than willing to put others before herself, and to take responsibility. What do you think motivated her to behave as she did within the family before she fell in love with Tull?
- What kind of life do you think Addie and Tull would have had if they had managed to escape and be together?

Tully:

Tully is in many ways the bridge between two cultures – the Ngarrindjeri and the colonial settlers – feeling pressure from each, without completely belonging to either. While Papa wants Tull to be the conduit for western civilization to flow to the indigenous population, his family hope that he will be a tool enabling them to negotiate with the Finch family who have effectively stolen their land. Highly intelligent and capable, Tull is in many ways the central figure around whom the Finch siblings revolve. He moves between the two cultures with apparent ease and understanding, but despite all his learning and reading, and having lived with the Finches for so long, he remains unaware of the limits of Papa's belief in racial equality and what he will ultimately allow, or the scale of the social barriers that prevent him and Addie being together. In the end, not even his rescue of Addie is enough to make him acceptable in Papa's eyes and he is completely separated from Addie.

- What might life have been like for Tull if he had not left the Coorong with Fred?
- How might life have unfolded for Tull and the Ngarrindjeri of Salt Creek if Papa had agreed to Tull's proposal to co-manage the property?



Setting

Almost all the action happens in the Coorong, a stretch of South Australian coast about 140 kilometres long and some 200 kilometres south east of Adelaide near the mouth of the Murray River. It is an undulating, bleached landscape of lagoons, saltpans and wetlands, separated from the Southern Ocean only by a ridge of enormous sand dunes that form a peninsula. Early Europeans were awed – and intimidated – by the ‘stupendous’ landscape, with one describing it as ‘a truly wild and desolate place’. It was confronting compared to the more conventionally pretty landscapes of England, but far from being bleak and arid. It was teeming with life, still providing a home for more than 240 bird species, and is one of the world’s most important wetland areas.

- How does the author’s evocation of the landscape echo what is happening in the story itself? What was your emotional reaction to the landscape evoked, and how did each of the Finch family members respond to it?
- The Finch family had always lived in the city until 1855. What do you think is the author’s purpose in moving them to a remote coastal location for the final failure in a string of Papa’s disastrous enterprises? How has she been able to layer and deepen the story by using this kind of setting?



Writing Style

The story moves back and forth in time from 1855 in the Australian colonies to 1874 in the English countryside, and the prose style reflects both the sensibilities of the era in terms of the way the world and people were perceived, and also the manner of writing and speaking that was deemed civilised and sophisticated in those times. It is redolent of the style of writers such as Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters.

- What does the movement back and forth between time periods add to the drama and suspense of the way the events of the story are revealed? Would it work as well if the narrative moved in a straight line from 1855 to 1875?
- How does the author's adoption of a nineteenth century prose style help us to understand the characters and their actions? Does it make the story more authentic?