

*The Turning* by Tim Winton (Picador) R89.00

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At the relatively early age of 46, Tim Winton has published seven novels and two collections of short stories. Two of his novels have been short-listed for the Booker Prize, and in his native Australia he has won several of the country's most prestigious prizes. It is thus almost embarrassing to admit that this is the first of his books that I have read – possibly, in spite of Patrick White and Peter Carey, a wariness in the face of the Great Australian Novel, a suspicion that the Lucky Country is by that token not suited to fiction. What does one write about in a country where even JM Coetzee is reduced to writing about cycling accidents?

*The Turning*, then, comes as a surprise, a rebuke, a discovery. As if Australia were not remote enough from the wilder shores of fiction, Winton restricts himself to his own home state, Western Australia; and he wrings, hammers and coaxes from it the stuff of tremendous story-telling.

*The Turning* is best, though not adequately, described as a series of interrelated short stories. Most of the stories are situated in the bleak harbour town of Angelus, a former whaling station, now still home to a meat-packing-factory, smelly, dank, a miasma of fog and sand. The inhabitants grab with a kind of desperation at such pleasures as the place offers: fishing, surfing and sex, though less of the last than one might expect. They mostly resign themselves with grim ferocity to the life fate has dealt them or is about to deal them; their contacts with other people, though often obsessive, are fleeting; lasting relationships are rare, and as often as not abusive.

What prevents this collection from being merely a lugubrious wallowing in whale blood and human blubber? In the first place, the quality of the writing: without the least ostentation, Winton captures the precise tone of a colour, the exact nuance of an emotion, and the connection between them: "Walking home through the last of the peppermints, he brushes hair from his eyes and as he does he smells fish on his fingers, and much later that night, in the last long hour that he lies awake in bed, he sniffs his hand now and then, full of regret, sensing that the smell of fish will be all that he'll ever have of Agnes Larwood and that it would have been better to have nothing at all."

Often, as here, the experience is that of an adolescent; but in this respect Winton's characters rarely grow up: they remain trapped or enthralled by the prospect of some transfiguring experience; and it is this transfiguring experience, the Turning of the title, that brings light and air to what might otherwise have been a singularly claustrophobic narrative.

In the title story, Raelene, an abused wife, of which there are several in this collection, tries to grasp the mystery of the equanimity and apparent happiness of her glamorous friends Sherry and Dan. Since they are Christians, she assumes that that is the secret, and probes Sherry about "The moment when you suddenly got it, when it clicked . . . You know, the change. When you turned, or whatever you call it."

Religious people call it, of course, conversion; and Winton gives us a series of secular conversions, by which people through an act of will or insight (or grace?) turn, however briefly, from the squalid circumstances of their lives to a larger vision, a new understanding, a glimpse of whatever it is that keeps people searching. Thus the grinding

descriptions of material and emotional deprivation are illumined by moments of sheer beauty. At the end of "Big World", the first story, two young men, having fled their meat-packing jobs in Angelus in a second-hand Kombi, are stranded in the Western Australian desolation when their vehicle burns out: "Right now, standing with Biggie on the salt lake at sunset, each of us still in our southern-boy uniforms pf boots, jeans and flannel shirt, I don't care what happens beyond this moment. In the hot northern dusk, the world suddenly gets big around us, so big we just give in and watch."

It is something of a miracle that Winton can convince us, without irony, of the bigness of his apparently circumscribed world. At a time when the direction of South African literature is being anxiously debated, Winton's spell-binding collection offers a salutary reminder that the local is not necessarily the parochial: if he can conjure such heart-wrenching material from the mean streets of Angelus, we can not complain of lack of material. Just add talent.

Technically, the collection is an almost arrogantly assured tour de force. The links between the stories are planted so surreptitiously that it takes a while before you realise that you are reading, much of the time, multiple perspectives on a single story, with a single protagonist, one Vic Lang. He is mentioned in passing in the very first story as "Vic Lang, the copper's son"; only later does the full drama emerge of Vic's father, the only straight cop in a bent district, and the price he and his family pay for his rectitude. In different stories the perspective shifts, over a span of some thirty years, from Vic to his father to Vic's wife; and the tortured narrative even achieves a kind of resolution (or Turning) in the last story of all. We have, in effect, the breadth of a novel, enlivened by the opportunistic flexibility of the short story, the master narrative emerging only gradually from oblique angles and apparently disjointed fragments, into the clarity of achieved art. .