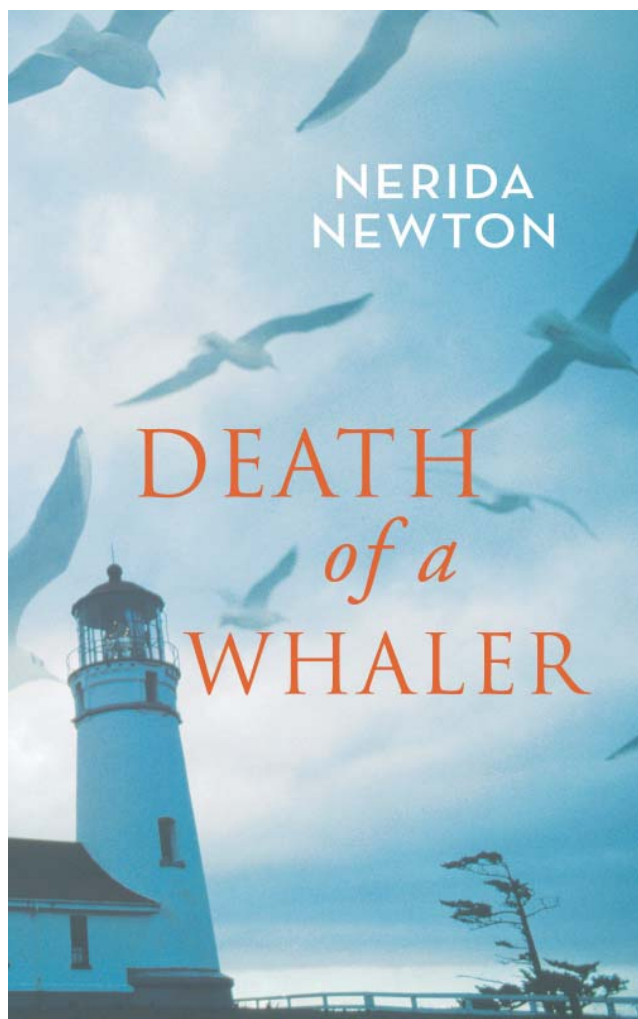


ALLEN & UNWIN



# READING GROUP NOTES

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## About Nerida Newton

Nerida Newton was born in Brisbane, and has lived in Malaysia, South Africa and the UK. Her first novel, *The Lambing Flat*, won the Queensland Premier's Award for an Emerging Author, and was shortlisted for *The Australian/Vogel* award, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Asia/Pacific region (First Book) and One Book One Brisbane. In 2004, she was named by the *Sydney Morning Herald* as one of Australia's best young novelists. Nerida currently lives in Brisbane with her husband and son.

## Nerida Newton on writing *Death of a Whaler*

I have always been affected by place. When I start to write a book, it is most often the landscape I see first in my mind: a desert, a jungle, an ocean, places raw and naked or wild and unpredictable. The landscape around Byron Bay was a familiar haven for me. It was somewhere to which I retreated during the turbulent years of my late teens and early 20s, and it is a place to which I continued to return whenever I felt the need to relax, rejuvenate, and connect with the land and the sea. It never occurred to me to write a book in or about the area. It seemed to me such a raw, spiritual, undefinable place anyway, and I was happy to just enjoy it as a retreat from all else in my life.

But one time when I was there, wandering around, I decided to have a peek into the local library, and happened to open a book about the history of the bay. The book fell open to a picture of a whale being stripped and gutted, blood flowing from it like a river, and behind it a massive shed which had painted upon it 'Byron Whaling Company'. The picture was dated as being taken in the 1960s. I was a bit shocked. I had known Byron only from the late 1980s, and I was surprised to find that the peaceful, environmentally sound, eco-aware township that I so loved had also had its turbulent and difficult years. I wondered how it had turned around so effectively, and what else lay in its past.

So I started to do some reading about the region, discovering that the township had been many things – a tourist hub, firstly, in the late 1800s, then a logging town, then a farming community, then a fishing and whaling town. I came across reports of blood and offal seeping down to the ocean from the meatworks via Belongil Beach, and descriptions of the terrible smell of the slaughter, and of the sharks that used to patrol the waters, lured in by the scent of the blood. For anyone who is familiar with the sheer natural beauty of the bay region, the pristine beaches and ideal surfing, these images are hard to reconcile.

I had had themes in mind for a while for a book I wanted to write. I wanted to write a story of rebirth, of reawakening – but I had no setting. Hence the story had been a hazy idea, not much more. When I discovered the history of the Byron Bay region, the characters, for a long time just vague shadows in my mind, appeared with flesh and bone in my imagination, and the story just about wrote itself. It isn't often that this happens. Well, not to me, anyway. This story was a gift, it arrived fully formed in my mind, like some nut that I simply had to crack open. Characters still did things I didn't expect them to do, which does sometimes happen, but the story as a whole came together exactly as I expected.

Having written an historical novel before, I knew that I would have to do substantial research to write the story. Weighing perhaps more heavily was the pressure to represent the bay empathetically, neither romanticise it nor judge it. The first thing I did was arrange to live there for some time. I had spent a lot of time there over a decade, but I wanted to know it on a deeper level, its daily moods. So I packed up husband, dog and cat and we moved there – initially for a month, while I consolidated my research, and then returning many times over the following year to conduct interviews and get my elemental settings as descriptive as possible.

For an accurate portrayal of the bay at that time, I did a lot of reading, including transcripts of conversations with the people who worked there, everyone from whalers to lighthouse-keepers. I also interviewed a number of locals who had lived there during those years – the most memorable being a few of the founders of the Aquarius festival, which had taken place in the early 1970s in Nimbin. They were staging a protest outside the Ballina courthouse, at the time of the interview – it was, as to be expected, a peaceful protest. They'd more or less set up camp – banners and prayer flags flying, music playing, people sitting and eating and talking. They shed some light on why they had come to the region, what they had found when they arrived, and their efforts to transform the area into the artistic, accepting kind of community it is today.

Whales play a thematic role in the novel; their return to the waters around the region is representative of the renewed life of both the bay and various characters. However, given their extensive romanticisation in the Western world (such as symbolising Greenpeace, for example), I had to be careful that I didn't play into the old clichés. The only way to avoid this, I thought, was to experience them first-hand, so I travelled to Tonga, which is one of the only places in the world where you are allowed to snorkel with humpback whales. The ocean around the islands of Tonga offers a kind of harbour for the humpbacks – they make their way there, after travelling up the East coast of Australia (past Byron Bay), to give birth in the calmer waters, so it is in effect their nursery. I was pregnant at the time I went, and I don't know if this made me more susceptible to feeling emotional about the whole experience, but I found it truly incredible. We swam metres away from them, the mothers and their new calves, and they were so trusting. The first time I saw one up close, I forgot I couldn't breathe underwater, I just hung suspended letting the swell lap over me, I was so grateful, so awestruck. I felt as if I were witnessing something not designed for the eyes of mere mortals. In the novel, I was able to pass on this experience through Flinch, the protagonist, the character in most need of revelation.

A predominant element of the novel is abuse – both parental, for the main characters, and environmental, for the region – and how to move on from a difficult past to a fulfilling future. By the way, I have a very happy family background and have wonderful, supportive parents, so this is not autobiographical. But it is something I wanted to explore, and there are parallels between a damaged individual and a damaged environment and the way both must work to recover. Byron Bay presented a perfect example of how a township can go from almost destroying its surrounds and itself to a more peaceful, respectful community, during an age in which many other towns were (and still are) doing the opposite, trying to make things bigger, faster, and noisier.


There is a sense of eternity about the Bay, something ancient and elemental and raw about that view from the eastern-most point of the continent, the wind that whips up the cliffs smelling only of the sea. And Byron Bay will


continue, despite, or perhaps because of, its turbulent years, to be a place with which I have a deep connection.


## Reviews

Reviews to come.


## Some suggested points for discussion


 Does Nerida Newton succeed in capturing the physical atmosphere of Byron Bay? How important is it that she gets the landscape and the environment right in this novel?

 Did you like the character of Flinch? Why do you think it is important for the novel that he is a damaged man, a 'lopsided man on a hill'?

 Flinch reads in his copy of *Moby Dick* that '... *there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself.*' He goes on to muse that '... the passage seems to him more like a parable. No warmth without cold. No joy without sorrow. No sense of freedom without imprisonment. No resurrection before death.' There are many contrasts, or opposites, in *Death of a Whaler* – the killing of the whales giving way to the peace and love of the hippies, for example. Can you think of others?

 Why does Flinch have to swim with the whales? Why is this so important to him?

 What does it take for Flinch to heal himself? Does Eleanor take a similar or a different path for her own healing? And what about Nate?

 Discuss the theme of abuse and healing in the novel and how it is reflected in both people and the environment.

## Further reading

*Salt Rain* by Sarah Armstrong

*The Alphabet of Light and Dark* by Danielle Wood

*The White Earth* by Andrew McGahan

*Journey to the Stone Country* by Alex Miller