



THE ALPHABET OF LIGHT AND DARK

by Danielle Wood

Contents

About Danielle Wood	1
On writing <i>The Alphabet of Light and Dark</i>	1
Reviews	4
Some suggested points for discussion	7
Further reading	8

About Danielle Wood

Danielle Wood was born in Hobart in 1972. Her great-great grandfather was the superintendent of Cape Bruny Lighthouse and remains Australia's longest-serving lighthouse keeper. Danielle comes from a long line of story-tellers and exaggerators. After completing a degree in English at the University of Tasmania, she became a journalist because it seemed like the next best thing to being a novelist. Journalism took her all over Tasmania and much of Australia. She has worked as a newspaper reporter and radio producer in Hobart, Perth and Broome. In 1999, she started writing her first novel, *The Alphabet of Light and Dark*, as part of a PhD in creative writing at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. She now juggles her writing with lecturing in popular fiction at the University of Tasmania and working as a journalist. She lives in Hobart with her husband John, a model kelpie called Axel Rooney, and a motley crew of chickens and sheep.

On writing *The Alphabet of Light and Dark*— Danielle Wood

In the stories I was told about my family's history, there was always a lighthouse. Its beams of light reached me through the darkness of lapsed years and I wanted to write about it. When I first thought about writing about the lighthouse, I was young enough to think, quite simply, that a lighthouse would be a good setting for a book. Later, I realised that other people had thought of lighthouses as good settings for books before, and to speak of a book set at a lighthouse was to risk people hearing 'kitsch period drama with white petticoats and badly written regional accents'. For a time, I was deterred. Then, when I was about 25, I went to the lighthouse for the first time in a while, and I was assailed by a feeling. It was joyful and sorrowful at once. It was physically, almost painfully intense and it seemed to demand to be written about. If *The Alphabet of Light and Dark* can be read as a novel-length answer to a question, then that question is 'how can I describe the feeling I have in this place'.

A few years after the trip to the lighthouse, I was no further ahead. I was still a journalist secretly longing to write fiction. Then I had the good fortune to be sent on a work trip sailing from Sydney to Hobart on the tall ship *Eye of the Wind*. On board I met a beautiful blue-eyed sailor—who is now my husband—who told me the only thing to do with dreams was to do them. If I wanted to write a book then it was simple: I should just do it.

He stepped off the ship after five years of sailing around the world, I made a break with my native Tasmania and we moved to Western Australia where I started a PhD in creative writing through Edith Cowan University. The night before I was due to start the course, I sat on the back step of our house and cried. I told John 'I feel like I've signed up to build the *Titanic*, and I don't have the plans and I can't weld'.

Writing the novel as a PhD thesis gave me three things: a deadline, a small income and a supervisor, the last of which proved the greatest. Dr Richard Rossiter is the most extraordinary reader, and has great wisdom in dealing with people. He coaxed me through the first, awful drafts, and had an uncanny ability to gradually raise the bar. I had no idea where I was going when I started the novel. I had a lighthouse, and a feeling. That was it. To start with, I wrote whatever I could on any given day, and then faced the long, slow task of stitching all the pieces together and trying to entice a story out of the chaos.

After three and a half years work, I finished the manuscript and posted it off to *The Australian/Vogel Literary Award*. Throughout the writing, the Vogel was a shining star for me. Something to hope for, something to aim at. After Allen & Unwin's Annette Barlow rang to tell me I'd won it, I spent the rest of the afternoon ringing Allen & Unwin's switchboard to make sure that she really existed at the end of that telephone number, and it wasn't someone playing a horrible trick on me.

People ask me 'how do you do it? how do you write a novel?' I think it's got to be different for every writer and every novel, but for me and *The Alphabet of Light and Dark*, the recipe was this: the love of a very good man, the wisdom of a very good teacher, a lot of time, and a willingness to do battle every single day with the fear that you'll never be good enough. Writing is the easy part. Fighting your demons is tough.

Reviews

The Sunday Age—Christopher Bantick A luminous debut in the shadow of the lighthouse

... Danielle Wood is the 2002 Vogel winner. Her novel, *The Alphabet of Light and Dark*, may well be seen as something of a watershed for the award. Wood's finely told and assured story is an impressive debut.

... With *The Alphabet of Light and Dark*, Wood's assured sense of place and her confidence with language single her novel out as a distinctively mature work... Wood is a Tasmanian and her prose resonates with the wash of waves gathered in Bass Strait...

But to assume that this novel is a story that is about an individual exploring and connecting with a family history, including its related secrets and lies, would be a far too narrow reading. Essie on returning to the lighthouse, begins to identify with a character from way out on the tide of her past. Her great Aunt Alva, the lighthouse keeper's daughter, becomes the focus of Essie's imagining at Cape Bruny. She begins to write her aunt's story. In doing so she begins to understand herself.

It is a mark of Wood's self belief as a writer that she is prepared to take a risk with her readers. Besides the secure narrative spars she erects over the novel, when Wood introduces Peter Shelverton, a sculptor and feral-cat hunter who does his 'forgetting' on islands, this could have appeared just too neat.

Essie, we discover, remembers him from her childhood. But this is no contrived act on Wood's part. Instead, Wood brings to Essie's story the diversion of tenderness and empathy found in an unexpected reunion with Pete.

Bound to Essie's engaging with her family's past, there is also a deeper concern Wood liberates into Essie's story. These are the miasmas of Aboriginal inhabitants of Tasmania and Bruny Island in particular. It is the personal negotiation of the past treatment of Aboriginals Essie must make that in turn prompts us to consider the wider issues of Tasmania's indigenous history.

But for all the themes of the individual finding a sense of place, dealing with issues of the past, place and belonging, *The Alphabet of Light and Dark* is at its simplest a love story. Like the lighthouse that warned ships at sea, Wood illuminates the primacy of love. For Essie and Pete, it

comes unbidden and shimmering, 'like rainbow scales found on a beach'. It is what they discover on a weathered empty shore which shines through Wood's prose.

***The Sydney Morning Herald*—Brigid Delaney
Returning to her roots in fertile soil**

We all have a spiritual home. Our bodies tell us when we arrive—our hearts kick over in our chest and our breath catches. They are usually places that are covered with fingerprints of the past—street corners, shop windows, sand dunes and sea. Danielle Wood's spiritual home is Bruny Island, south-east of Hobart. First she got to know it by sea—learning the contours of the coast with her grandfather on a sailing boat each Easter, then later, the contours of the land—its sand banks and old English trees. She says she goes there now as an adult when she needs to breathe its briny air.

Her debut novel, the 2002 Vogel Award winner *The Alphabet of Light and Dark*, is about the pull of these places. Wood likens it to a form of native title, while her character, Essie, travels to Western Australia looking for her own *terra nullius*. . . [Danielle says] 'When I go there [to Tasmania] I feel pride, as well as shame, love and nostalgia. It's also a sense of mortality. Our landscape is very gothic. It makes me think of my own death.' Tasmania's history of race relations also tinges the island with mortality and sadness, she says. 'White Tasmanians had obliterated black Tasmanians. It's not a wound that can close easily or be covered with a Band-Aid.' . . .

***Good Reading*—Jody Lee**

. . . Wood's style is breathtaking at times, particularly her descriptions of the sea and the starkness of the light glittering through the dreamy landscape. Without sentimentality *The Alphabet of Light and Dark* powerfully conveys the importance of finding a place within history and the timeless craving for a sense of belonging.

***Lighthouses of Australia PRISM*—David Hurburgh**

. . . Some readers will find the author's style, particularly the first 60 or so pages of the book a bit overloaded with adjectival descriptions. There is barely a noun that doesn't get two or more (and often hyphenated) qualifiers . . .

Danielle Wood's achievements as a writer shine through when you appreciated how effectively she adopts the different voices of her characters. She can range from the convincing gentility of her Victorian-era female forebears to the brusque, blokiness of Pete.

The most powerful scenes in the book have an almost dream-like quality. The author was evidently inspired by Gaelic folk-tales of water sprites and storm-girls. In this book, the link between the transcendental and the tangible world is the lighthouse itself . . .

***Australian Bookseller and Publisher*—Tim Coronel**

. . . The style of this novel is deliberate and elaborate, the unfolding of the story gradual. As Essie delves deeper, the narrative flashes back between present and past, perhaps conflating the two. Does Essie's life mirror that of her ancestors, or is she rewriting their history within her own story? . . . Ultimately I found the book's pace a little too slow and both central characters hard to warm to, but I have little doubt that some readers will find this mix of history and the present entrancing.

***Weekend Australian*—Michael Sharkey**

. . . *The Alphabet of Light and Dark* employs some familiar strategies and figures of first novels that deal with the centring of an individual within a culture; at the same time, it steers clear of many of the traps . . .

The former relationship between Essie's mother and Pete's father is handled with a restraint that adds to the compassionate tone of the entire novel. Wood's tact is everywhere apparent as she sifts the master narratives of family history to realize the unspoken accounts of private endurance by those who have been relegated to a role instead of being considered as individuals . . .

For those like Essie and Pete, the patterns of the past have significance beyond curiosity value: the stories serve as cautions and encouragement to self-realisation. Pete, pondering his knock-about life, understands the impact of physical removal on relationships; Essie, reflecting on her own experience, sees the gulf set between people who misinterpret or ignore each other's emotional drives.

The Alphabet of Light and Dark celebrates the best achievements of past and present people who make us what we are while shrewdly observing what has not been well managed. Wood dignifies friendship, and expresses affection for those who have moulded present lives and hopes. This is a family history with an appreciative twist.

Some suggested points for discussion

- ◆ One of the judges of the 2002 *The Australian/Vogel* Literary Award, Liam Davison, wrote that *The Alphabet of Light and Dark* isn't a historical novel, but a novel about history. Do you agree?
- ◆ Danielle's writing is particularly evocative in her descriptions of landscape or, as in the main character's case, seascape. Discuss examples of prose you found particularly memorable. Would you classify such lyrical writing and the novel as a whole as literary?
- ◆ This novel deals with writing as a theme: it is a story about stories, writing and history. What do you think of the story within the story as a device?
- ◆ The novel deals with a family history, or genealogy, as well as a larger cultural and social history. Imagination plays a large part in Essie's own personal history—what ramifications are there in this interweaving of real and imagined histories for Essie, for the story, and for the reader?
- ◆ Place is very important in this novel—Bruny Island 'follows Tasmania like a comma, a space for pause'. What does place symbolise and what meaning does place have for Essie specifically?
- ◆ Debra Adelaide has said 'this novel generates an intense dialogue with matters of self, past and place, patiently teasing out connections across time and space in a way that makes a strong statement about the point of purpose of fiction narrative for settler/immigrant communities plagued by a sense of "depthlessness" '—how does it do this?
- ◆ Did you find the relationship between Essie and Pete realistic?
- ◆ Mermaid stories infuse *The Alphabet of Light and Dark*, with the characters of Alva and Essie being closely aligned with the silent, watery women of myth and fairytale. How do you think this intertextuality functions within the novel?
- ◆ How are ideas of light and darkness constructed within *The Alphabet of Light and Dark*?

Further reading

The Seal Wife by Kathryn Harrison

Carrion Colony by Richard King

Gould's Book of Fish by Richard Flanagan

Skins by Sarah Hay

Dirt Music by Tim Winton

Journey to the Stone Country and *Conditions of Faith* by Alex Miller