

***Insight Text Guide***

Roie Thomas

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**Cloudstreet**  
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Tim Winton  
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ABN 57 005 102 983  
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Elsternwick VIC 3185  
Australia

Tel: +61 3 9523 0044  
Fax: +61 3 9523 2044  
Email: books@insightpublications.com.au

**www.insightpublications.com.au**

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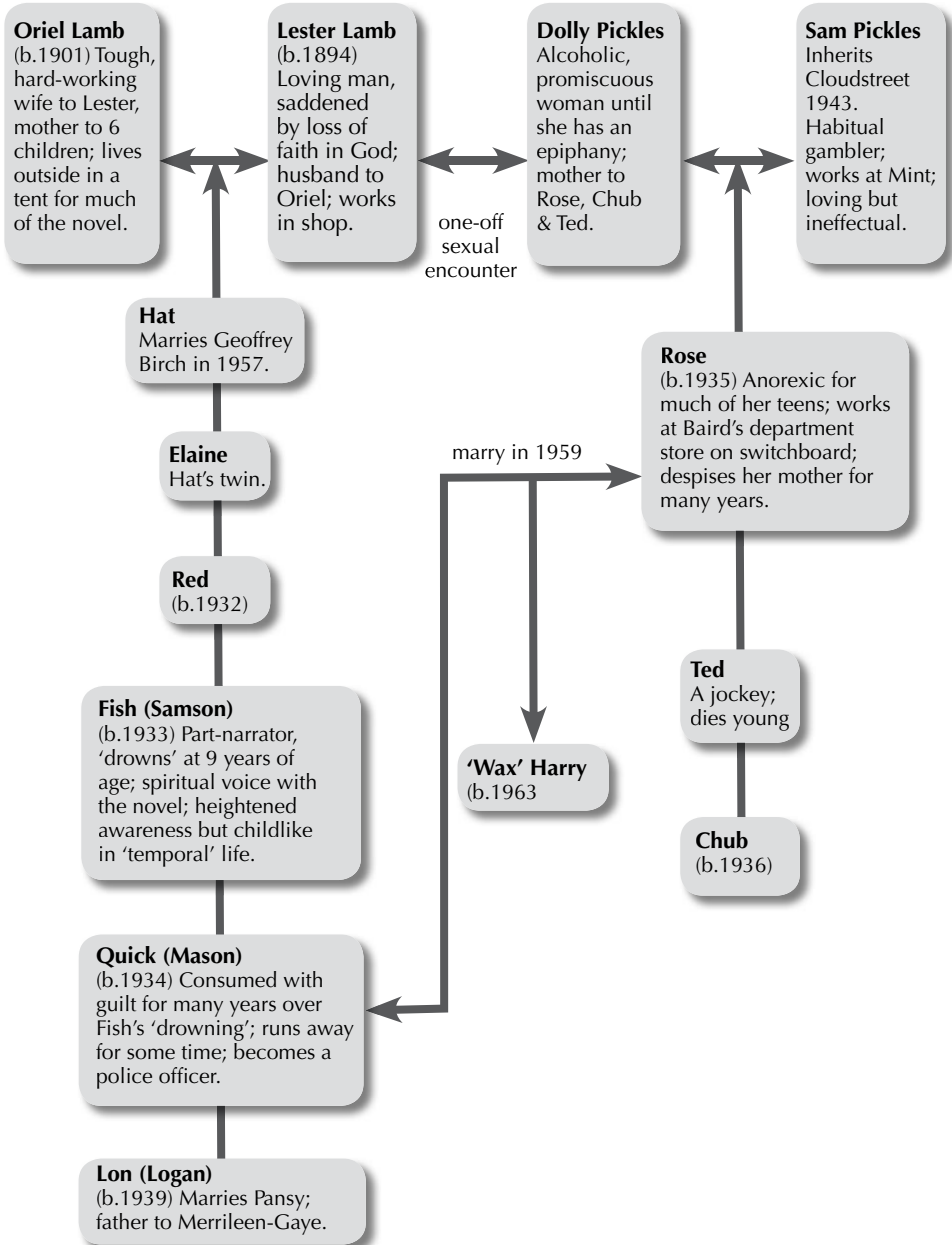
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# CHARACTER MAP



# OVERVIEW

## About the author

Tim Winton is West Australian through and through, having lived there most of his life with the exception of brief periods in Paris, Greece and Ireland. His life has almost always been in coastal towns, and his love of the sea is often reflected in his writing. Born in 1960, Winton began writing at an early age, and he has commented that it was fortunate he was successful as a writer, as he had no other career ideas. He graduated in Creative Writing from the Western Australian Institute of Technology.

Winton has received numerous literary honours, including being shortlisted for the Booker Prize and becoming the first person ever to win the Miles Franklin Literary Award four times – one of which was for *Cloudstreet*.

In addition to his much-lauded adult novels and short stories, Winton has published books for children including the Lockie Leonard series, the fable *Blueback* (1997) and picture books like *The Deep* (1998) and *Jesse* (1989). Several of his novels have been adapted for the screen, and *Cloudstreet* is also a successful stage play.

*Cloudstreet* is Winton's fifth novel. Much of it was penned in an outdoor cafe in Paris. Some time later, the completed handwritten manuscript was left behind on a train in Rome, to Winton's utter dismay. A stranger ran after him, handing it back. This unlikely situation seems to reflect perfectly the underlying question of the protagonists in *Cloudstreet*: is life all merely chance, or is there some other explanation for events?

## Synopsis

*Cloudstreet* depicts the lives of two families thrown together, apparently by chance, after separate family tragedies. The Pickles family inherits the Cloud Street house, with a clause in the deeds disallowing its sale for 20 years. They manage to maintain ownership of Cloudstreet despite Sam Pickles' terrible luck with the bookies. But Sam's gambling necessitates the taking in of paying tenants in order to keep the family from starvation. Enter the Lambs, who have suffered unspeakably after the almost-drowning of their son, Fish, which left him with severe mental impairment for the rest of his life. Their loss is palpable, as Fish's condition strips a 'Godfearing' (p.26) family of their former faith. For some time, they appear to be simply existing, without hope and utterly devoid of joy.

The two families live side by side awkwardly for 20 years, each inhabiting half the house. They evade each other for the most part, avoiding lengthy conversation, keeping their relationship businesslike. The three Pickles and six Lamb children grow up barely knowing each other, despite sharing a bathroom.

Sam continues to have good and bad luck at the races – mostly bad – and his wife, Dolly, steadily declines: drinking heavily, regularly being unfaithful to Sam, and losing her looks and her will to live.

Oriel and Lester Lamb work in their grocery shop, a converted front room of the huge house. The only respite from their labours comes in the form of occasional fishing excursions, and their involvement at the Anzac Club – where Lester satisfies his vaudevillian yearnings and Oriel serves supper, both of them unwittingly substituting patriotism for God.

Meanwhile, the children grow up – the Lamb girls procuring boyfriends and the Pickles boys living hedonistically (prioritising their own pleasure). The reader is privy to Quick Lamb's and Rose Pickles' perspectives and we sympathise with Quick's agony and misplaced guilt over Fish's inability to grow up, and with Rose's increasing hatred of her mother and her general unhappiness, manifest in anorexia. Quick runs away to the country where he shoots kangaroos for a living and tries to

find a clear sense of purpose for his life. Rose is a conscientious and intelligent student and does not want to leave school but, at her mother's insistence, goes to work on the switchboard at Bairds, a Perth department store. On the phone at work she meets Toby, a self-professed 'intellectual' who further undermines her self-esteem when she goes out with him.

For Oriel, Quick's leaving is effectively the loss of a second son, since Fish no longer recognises her as his mother since his 'drowning'. In her grief, she works her family into the ground, determined to run any opposition in the area out of business. Her success in this goal causes her no joy, however, and she is forced to say sorry for the first time in decades. Lester has one brief sexual encounter with the promiscuous Dolly, which leaves him feeling guilty. He then helps Sam out of a few tight situations with the 'union men' who come to collect on their losses, and an unlikely friendship develops between the two men.

Quick returns to Cloudstreet and, unaccountably, he is glowing. One night out in the boat on the river he comes across Rose sobbing. They talk, haltingly but meaningfully enough to realise that there is love between them. Their marriage would appear to be the quintessential 'happy ending', uniting the two families, but Winton characteristically refuses to resolve the story so simplistically. Quick enters the police force, a means by which he hopes to become the 'good man' he knows himself to be. Rose miscarries and begins to starve herself again.

It is obvious at this point that things are coming to a climax. Resolution can only occur after a catharsis and here it must take the shape of forgiveness. Dolly tells Rose why she has been so bitter and Rose finally understands her mother's slow path to destruction. She can now carry a pregnancy successfully and – as her name suggests – with it, she blooms. The birth of Rose and Quick's baby, Harry, is the glue that finally binds the families together and even Dolly resolves to be a good grandmother.

The denouement of the story brings it full circle: Fish returns to the water which had almost claimed him 20 years before, and which had been calling him home all these years.

## Character summaries

### The Pickles family

*Sam Pickles*: ex-guano miner; works at the Perth Mint; gambles, especially on horses.

*Dolly Pickles*: wife of Sam; mother of the three Pickles children; alcoholic; cheats on her husband; consumed with despair for much of the novel.

*Rose Pickles*: (b.1935) works at Bairds department store; marries Quick Lamb in 1959; gives birth to Wax Harry in 1963.

*Ted Pickles*: marries and moves away; becomes a jockey; dies in sauna.

*Chub Pickles*: (b.1936) remains at Cloudstreet.

### The Lamb family

*Lester Lamb*: (b.1894) husband of Oriel; father to the six Lamb children; ex-policeman and farmer, now works in and cooks for the Cloudstreet grocery shop.

*Oriel Lamb*: (b.1901) ex-farmer; works in Cloudstreet shop; married to Lester and mother to the six Lamb children; lives in a tent in Cloudstreet's backyard for much of the novel.

*Hattie ('Hat') Lamb*: marries Geoffrey Birch.

*Elaine Lamb*: Hat's twin sister; suffers frequent headaches; has a long engagement but doesn't marry by the novel's end.

*Red Lamb*: (b.1932) tomboyish and stubborn; becomes a nurse.

*Mason ('Quick') Lamb*: (b.1934) becomes a police officer; marries Rose Pickles with whom he has a son, Wax Harry.

*Samson ('Fish') Lamb*: (b.1933) 'drowned' at age nine but revived by his family; suffers brain damage from the incident and never grows beyond a mental age of about five.

*Logan ('Lon') Lamb*: (b.1939) marries Pansy with whom he has two children.

**Minor characters**

*Aboriginal man* (unnamed): sporadic, unannounced visitor and gentle, mysterious adviser to the inhabitants of Cloudstreet; a kind of prophet/angel character.

*Toby Raven*: frustrated writer and quasi-intellectual; Rose's boyfriend for a brief time, to whom she loses her virginity.

*Lucy Wentworth*: farmer's daughter who seduces Quick in the wheat belt; the discovery of their tryst eventually forces Quick to leave the area.

*Beryl Lee*: lonely war-widow who meets Oriel at the Anzac Club and is invited to live at Cloudstreet. Beryl works in the Lambs' shop and after some time leaves to become a nun.

*The 'Nedlands Monster'*: based on an actual serial killer (Eric Cooke) who preyed on young women in the early 1960s in Perth; eventually caught, tried and executed.

*The Cloudstreet house itself*: experiences feelings and memories; responds to the pain and joy of its inhabitants.

## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

*Cloudstreet* is a rambling novel of epic proportions, spanning about 20 years and encompassing World War II (1939–45). The story opens in the northern coastal town of Geraldton and a southern coastal town, both in Western Australia, in 1943. In these settings the reader learns of the two central families' motives for coming to Perth to live in the huge house that becomes known as 'Cloudstreet'. Literally, the Lamb and the Pickles families come from opposite directions and meet in the middle, establishing the metaphor for when they come together emotionally at the novel's close. Although the families leave the coast and come together in the house, water (whether the Indian Ocean or the Swan River that leads to the sea) is a metaphor for life in this novel, and it is pivotal to the families' epiphanies that they not stray too far from it.

### Politics

Politically, the narrative voice is sympathetic towards the working class and displays some antipathy towards those who exploit them. Robert Menzies, Prime Minister from 1939 to 1941 and again from 1949 to 1966 (most of the period covered by *Cloudstreet*), is an arch-conservative referred to as 'that bastard' (p.156) and not afforded any sympathy in the novel. Sam feels that there is little point voting, as the political party of 'tightfisted boss lovers' (p.405) has been in power for so long. However, more left-wing political sympathies are not exactly lauded, either. Sam notes:

There's two other things people say are worth believin in – the Labor party and God, but they're a bit on the iffy side for my money. The ALP and the Big Fella, well they always got what I call a tendency to try an give ya what they think ya need.  
(pp.101–2)

Sam regards the Menzies establishment as 'the enemy' and yet 'the big knobs of the union didn't seem much different ... You'd never pick em for workers, not in a month of Sundays' (p.156). In his own small way he