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# contents

<b>Character tables</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Background &amp; context</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Genre, structure &amp; style</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Story-by-story analysis</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Characters &amp; relationships</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Questions &amp; answers</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>References &amp; reading</b>	<b>59</b>

## CHARACTER TABLES

**Table 1: Central male characters and their relationships**

Central Male Character	Stories	Major Relationship	Significant Others	Relationship with Father/Parents
Jerra Nilsam	'Forest Winter', 'Gravity', 'Nilsam's Friend', 'Bay of Angels', 'More', 'Blood and Water'	Rachel Nilsam – wife	Sam – son	Mostly positive: father dies, and in 'Gravity' is missed
'The boy'	'No Memory Comes'	The boy's friend	The friend's girlfriend	Father leaves
Madigan	'Minimum of Two'	Greta – wife	Fred Blakey – Greta's rapist	Unknown
Hart	'Holding'	Clive Genders – friend	Jan Genders – Clive's wife	Unknown
'The Man'	'Death Belongs To The Dead'	'the Dying Gentleman' – customer	None	Remembers father's advice

**Table 2: Central female characters and their relationships**

Central Female Character	Story	Major Relationship	Significant Others	Relationship with Father/Parents
Rachel Nilsam	'The Strong One'	Jerra – husband	Sam – son	Negative; parents absent
Queenie Cookson	'Laps'	Cleve Cookson – husband	Dot – daughter	Misses grandfather
Fat Maz	'Distant Lands'	None	The 'dark man' who reads <i>Distant Lands</i>	Not close
'The girl'	'The Water Was Dark'	Mother	None	Father absent; mother's negativity resented

## INTRODUCTION

Tim Winton is one of Australia's most popular and critically acclaimed authors. These fourteen stories, first published in the 1980s, show Winton in an early, formative phase, deploying a terse, minimalist prose style that occasionally bursts into more lyrical and reflective passages. As always in Winton's fiction, these stories display a profound and compassionate concern for ordinary people who struggle to meet the challenges of everyday life and to negotiate the occasional traumatic episode that leaves lasting scars on the psyche.

*Minimum of Two* reflects the changing nature of Australian society during the 1980s, a period when an increasing divorce rate and new flexibility in gender roles meant family and work patterns had to be freshly negotiated. Yet the stories also explore questions of timeless significance: about the beginning and ending of life, and about the nature of happiness and contentment.

Spanning the collection are seven stories about Jerra and Rachel Nilsam, a young married couple who struggle to raise a child with little in the way of material or educational resources behind them. Interspersed with the Nilsams' stories are seven about a variety of other characters. Some are children and adolescents, some in mid-life and some nearing the end of life. Irrespective of their life stages, they are linked by their experiences of loss and by the difficulty encountered by each of them of achieving lasting intimacy.

The degree to which the characters succeed in responding to these challenges varies considerably. At times it seems as though they are subject to forces beyond their control – a breech birth, a terminal illness, a father who leaves suddenly and irrevocably. At other times, characters yearn for something lost and risk all that they have for what no longer exists.

What unites Winton's characters is their common humanity. And sometimes too there is an uncertain glimpse of the possibility that there is something 'more' to life beyond the mundane here-and-now. For all its grim desperation, there is a hint of beneficence in Winton's fictional worlds, a touch of grace that relieves the arduousness of existence and makes love, as fragile as it is, actually possible.

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Note: for simplicity, the titles of two stories are abbreviated in this text guide. 'The Water Was Dark And It Went Forever Down' is shortened to 'The Water Was Dark...'; and 'Death Belongs To The Dead, His Father Told Him, And Sadness To The Sad' is shortened to 'Death Belongs To The Dead...'.

## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

### Background: About Tim Winton and His Fiction

Tim Winton was born in Perth in 1960 and spent much of his childhood in Perth and the south-coast town of Albany. After leaving school Winton studied creative writing at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin University). Winton's first two novels, *An Open Swimmer* (1982) and *Shallows* (1984), were published when he was in his early twenties and both won major literary awards.

From this auspicious beginning, Winton's writing has continued to receive a high level of critical and popular acclaim. His most recent novel, *Dirt Music* (2001), won the 2002 Miles Franklin Award (amongst other prizes) and has sold over a quarter of a million copies. Other novels that have won the praise and affection of many readers include *Cloudstreet* (1991), which has also been turned into an internationally successful stage play, and *The Riders* (1994), which was shortlisted for the 1995 Booker Prize. In addition to these 'serious' literary works, Winton has also published the Lockie Leonard series of books for children.

### Links Between Winton's Novels and *Minimum of Two*

Winton's first two novels have some interesting connections with the stories in *Minimum of Two*. The two central characters of 'Laps', Queenie and Cleve Cookson, look back on traumatic events that took place when they lived in Angelus, events that are dramatically narrated in *Shallows*. The character Jerra Nilsam, who features in several stories in *Minimum of Two*, is also the protagonist of *An Open Swimmer*. The novel is set earlier than the stories and centres on the friendship between Jerra and Sean. In 'The Strong One', Jerra fondly recalls camping with Sean and then is shocked to learn of Sean's death. However, the friendship as portrayed in *An Open Swimmer* is more fraught than Jerra's affectionate memories in 'The Strong One' suggest.

### Changing Gender Roles and Family Structures

Unlike some Australian novelists whose work has concentrated on historical settings – Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (1999) is a good example – Winton has been concerned mostly with issues directly

pertaining to his own time and place. One social issue that became more important during the 1980s (when these stories were first published) was the changing nature of family relationships, due both to new attitudes towards gender roles and to the increasing divorce rate. The historically conventional allocation of responsibilities within the family unit, with the father earning all or most of the family's income and the mother performing most domestic and child-rearing duties, continued to be regarded as 'normal'. However, this structure was gradually modified in more and more families during the 1970s and 1980s.

In 'The Strong One', Rachel Nilsam asserts her right to a university education and suggests that Jerra can look after their son, Sam. Jerra admits to being "scared" that he "won't be able to do it properly", to which Rachel retorts: "How do you think I felt?" (p.100). The notions that women are equally entitled to a profession, and are not innately suited to raising children any more than men are, were not new in Australian literature in 1987. The seminal feminist novels *My Brilliant Career* by Miles Franklin (1901) and *The Getting of Wisdom* by Henry Handel Richardson<sup>1</sup> (1910) express precisely these sentiments. Nevertheless, by the late 1980s Rachel's affirmative attitude towards the equality and negotiable nature of gender roles was more widely accepted in Australian society than it ever had been previously.

## Winton's Western Australian Settings

Tim Winton has lived almost all of his life in south-west Western Australia, and the distinctive history and natural features of that area provide the settings for most of his fiction, including *Minimum of Two*. In stories that explore universal human experiences – such as birth, death, feelings of alienation and loss – specific settings are less important. Yet even in these narratives a Western Australian setting is usually indicated, often by a place name such as (Perth's) Kings Park in 'Bay of Angels', Fremantle in 'Minimum of Two' or Bridgetown in 'Forest Winter'.

Alternatively, the narrative sometimes refers to a distinctively Western Australian aspect of the natural environment, like the Karri forests in 'Forest Winter'. Another wood closely identified with Western Australia is jarrah; Blakey's former house in 'Minimum of Two' has 'big jarrah doors' (p.53),

<sup>1</sup> This is a pseudonym; the author's real name was Ethel Florence Lindesay Richardson.

for instance. In 'Gravity', Rachel's tanned skin 'made her look as though she was made from polished jarrah' (p.27), which suggests there is a strong connection between Rachel and the Western Australian environment. The similarity of the names 'Jerra' and 'jarrah' has the same effect.

In other stories, Winton draws his local knowledge more directly into the narrative. Winton lived for a number of years in Albany, which had an important whaling industry from the nineteenth century until the late 1970s, when the Fraser government legislated to end whaling in Australia. In 'Laps', the 'awesome cliffs and beaches' of the southern coastline establish the physical landscape (p.79), and the transition of the whaling industry through protest movements towards tourism forms the cultural and historical backdrop to the story.

## The Role and Value of the Coast

Winton has lived mostly on or near the coast, and his affection for beaches, bays and rivers is reflected in the many such settings in *Minimum of Two*. Recently, the value that Winton attaches to the coast has found a more overtly political expression in the community-based campaign to stop the development of Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia. Winton's involvement in the campaign has been motivated by an appreciation of the intrinsic value of the coastline and its potential for a sustainable ecotourism industry. He has also been moved by anger and regret about the development of the Scarborough beachfront in the late 1980s:

I grew up in the beachside suburb of Scarborough, a community intimately connected with the sea. As a young man I watched as a starstruck Labor government let Alan Bond build his trophy tower on our beachfront where high-rise was outlawed...the 20-storey luxury hotel that isolated us from the sea and ate up the modest shops and apartments that had been our neighbourhood.<sup>2</sup>

This mixture of disbelief and dismay about coastal development also finds expression in two stories in *Minimum of Two*. In 'No Memory Comes', the boy sees the signs of the development on an unnamed beachfront but 'doesn't believe it will happen' (p.17). The story expresses a sense of loss with regard to the demolished 'burger joints and pinball parlours' and a rejection of the 'ugly bones of the hotel tower' (p.17).

<sup>2</sup> Tim Winton, 'Our reef, my belief', *The Weekend Australian* 30 Nov–1 Dec 2002, p.21.

In 'Laps' the same scenario is located explicitly in Scarborough, where 'little men with big money were tearing up the beachfront to build hotels' (p.76). Again, the loss of the older businesses and lifestyles that seemed more attuned to the landscape is registered with a tone of pathos; their absence leaves an 'awful wound in the ground where the burger joints and pinball parlours had been' (p.76).

## GENRE, STRUCTURE & STYLE

### The Arrangement of Stories

The order of the fourteen stories in the collection has a particular effect on the way in which the stories are read – assuming the reader proceeds from first page to last. The seven stories concerning Jerra and Rachel Nilsam are evenly distributed, mostly being separated by one story about unrelated characters. These various characters are at different life stages from one another but they often face similar difficulties. The juxtaposition of certain stories encourages the observation of links between them, such as:

- in the second, third and fourth stories, characters experience or remember the loss of their father;
- 'More' and the following story, 'Death Belongs to the Dead...!', have characters with terminal illnesses;
- water settings and images of swimming link 'Laps' and 'Bay of Angels'.

### Jerra and Rachel: Stories that Span the Collection

The stories about Rachel and Jerra Nilsam span the collection, including its opening and closing stories. The vicissitudes of their lives invest the collection with much of its dramatic tension and coherence. One or both of Jerra and Rachel appear in 'Forest Winter', 'Gravity', 'Nilsam's Friend', 'Bay of Angels' (Jerra is identified by his reference to his son, Sam), 'The Strong One', 'More' and 'Blood and Water'.

These stories chart a period of transition in Rachel and Jerra's lives, from the end of a time of optimism and of Jerra's time with his band – 'cruising up and down the coast in a Kombi' as Rachel recalls it (p.100) – to the beginning of a new phase, settled in a Perth suburb. During these years they experience the traumatic birth of their son, Sam; the death of

Jerra's father, Tom; the constant stress of an uncertain and limited income; and the changes that come with Rachel studying at university, including Jerra taking over the primary parenting responsibilities.

Interestingly, the order of these stories in the collection does not strictly follow the chronology of Jerra and Rachel's lives. 'Blood and Water', the story of Sam's birth which concludes the collection, has the earliest setting. 'Forest Winter', which opens the volume, is set nine weeks later, during the Nilsams' bleak sojourn in the country. In 'Gravity', one of the latest in setting, Sam is three years old and Rachel is establishing herself in social work.

Thus, questions raised in such stories as 'Forest Winter' and 'The Strong One' about the circumstances of Sam's birth are only answered in the final story, allowing the reader's curiosity to build progressively. Similarly, the nature of Jerra's relationship with his father, crucial to his memories and feelings in 'Gravity', is explored in 'More', set earlier than 'Gravity' but placed later in the collection.

## How the Stories are Structured

The stories range in length from brief sketches of a few pages to longer, more complexly plotted stories of around ten pages. The shorter stories, such as 'Bay of Angels', 'Nilsam's Friend' and 'The Water Was Dark...', cover a brief period of time and involve only one or two characters. The interest in these stories is less in a sequence of events than in the evocation of a strong mood or feeling – of anger, in the case of the girl in 'The Water Was Dark...', or of sadness in 'Bay of Angels'. No sooner is the scene set than the story concludes, without the tension implicit in the situation being resolved.

In the longer stories, the narrative tension is sustained and developed toward a climax, such as Madigan's assault of Blakey and his girlfriend in 'Minimum of Two' or Sam's birth and first breath in 'Blood and Water'. Even in these more conventionally structured stories, though, Winton typically ends on a note of ambiguity. 'More' is a good example: although Jerra and Rachel are partially reconciled at the end, their attempt to kiss is interrupted by the sudden flight of quail from the undergrowth. The story concludes with Jerra hearing 'the blood beating at his throat' (p.131), fearful rather than reassured.

**KEY POINT**

In the traditional form of the short story, tensions and conflicts are neatly resolved. However, Winton manipulates this structure to suggest that tension in people's lives does not necessarily disappear, but often must simply be accepted in an ongoing struggle for survival and contentment.

**Style: Things that Remain Unsaid**

Winton's style in *Minimum of Two* tends to be minimalist, and there are two main ways in which this style is thematically significant. Firstly, it reflects Winton's interest in ordinary people who are not well educated, not wealthy and not working in white-collar professions. They are not completely inarticulate, but nor do they use a sophisticated vocabulary or express themselves with great fluency.

Winton's interest in ordinary people is also reflected in the absence of character names. In some stories, the narrative refers to characters by such generic labels as 'the boy', 'the girl', 'The Man' and 'the Dying Gentleman'. This gives the stories a folkloric quality. The narrative focus is less on the individual and more on the universal dimensions of their experience, such as an encounter with death, an adolescence filled with fear and anger, or simply a struggle to complete a day's work.

Secondly, Winton's minimalist prose style understates or conceals details of the characters' thoughts and feelings. For instance, the boy in 'No Memory Comes' remembers 'a mob of things' (p.18) but, rather than describe the memories, the narrative simply gives the words to the song that triggers them. This withholding of details reflects the reluctance of characters to talk about, or even acknowledge to themselves, their true circumstances. It also heightens the sense of distance between reader and character, forcing the reader to guess at a character's deeper reasons for acting in a certain way and thereby mimicking the emotional distance between many of the characters.

**Style: Poetic Qualities in Water Imagery**

Offsetting the minimalist aspects of Winton's prose style is a more poetic and expansive quality evident in descriptions of water. Although Winton tends to use adjectives sparingly, when evoking images of water he uses adjectives in strings, as in 'clean, shallow water' or 'shifting filter of river