

## HOW *INHERITED* BY AMANDA CURTIN MAY BE APPROACHED IN THE CLASSROOM: NOTES FOR TEACHERS

The following is intended as a set of notes on how *Inherited* by Amanda Curtin may be taught to Year 11 and 12 ATAR students, and was first presented as part of the 2015 Westerly Centre Professional Development evening for English teachers. This paper develops a few key themes and ideas in *Inherited* that speak to the objectives of the current curriculum, as well as some of the new cross-curriculum priorities. The second part of this paper touches on stylistic features of Curtin's writing that encourage students to undertake deep textual analysis, and which will draw students' attention to language use and literary devices. To use a geographical analogy: first we go aerial, then we go subterranean.

*Inherited* was Amanda Curtin's second work of fiction, now accompanied by two novels: *The Sinkings* (2008) and *Elemental* (2013), all of which have been published by UWA Publishing. Many of the stories in *Inherited* were published in journals and magazines before appearing in the collection, and received or were shortlisted for awards. These can be found under 'Acknowledgements and Sources' in the book.

A contemporary Western Australian writer interested in the local, the historical and the ontological, Curtin's writing has been praised for causing the reader to reflect on their sense of self and position in the world.

### THEMES AND IDEAS

*Inherited* speaks to our **globalised, digital world** in a subtle but powerful way. Whilst characters, fully situated in the contemporary world, use technology with an ease and nonchalance that student will recognise, this is not where Curtin's interest in our world lies (that being said, the story 'On the Uses of the Dead to the Living' hinges on the narrator's virtual transportation to a childhood place via web images and Google maps, and encourages a discussion on ideas of **location, dislocation**,

connectivity, the authenticity of experience and notions of virtual travel). Instead, a discussion in the classroom could focus on Curtin's **compression of time** through text structure and language use. Many of the stories, in particular 'Renovation', 'The Prospect of Grace' and 'Paris bled into the Indian Ocean', use various literary devices to suggest that during recent history our sense of time has accelerated: things move at a faster pace, so fast, in fact, that history is not in the past but rather part of the atmosphere of the present. In other words, we are now moving so fast that 'recent history' appears to belong to same "moment." This sense of compressed or condensed time provides readers with an interesting paradigm through which to discuss the characteristics of their own context. As the narrator states in Cradle of Shadows, one of the first-person stories, "Am I merely a product of my ancestors, incapable of moving forward?" (123).

This leads me onto another theme in *Inherited*: **the debris and detritus of the past**. In many of the stories characters engage with and reflect on objects from the past that exist in the present, and the ways in which we value them. What makes some things 'stuff' and others 'treasure'? In 'Sarah's ark' the protagonist keeps corks for no other reason than they hark to her childhood and a family of drunken men. Her stash of corks grows and becomes an embarrassment to her family, supposedly because they serve no purpose, they are corks for corks' sake. Material does not make seem to make sense in our contemporary Western society unless it is connected with notions of productivity and usefulness. 'Sarah's ark' asks us to rethink the way we look at stuff and purpose. Similarly, in the story 'Synapses', a dying woman defiles a painting by a largely unknown artist so that the act of vandalising one painting may call attention to the value of the rest and inspire a new wave of appreciation for the artist. This complex ethical and moral instance is characteristic of *Inherited*, and may be used as fodder for classroom discussion.

An extension, perhaps, of the previous theme is **the idea of personal meaning-making and the development of selfhood**. In *Inherited*, Curtin explores the processes by which we make sense and attribute value to our lives, and how this is

commonly done through the relationships we forge between humans and non-humans, including animals, plants and objects. In 'At that Point', for example, an ailing dog, a distant and distressed wife, a sick daughter and a jacaranda tree orbit around the protagonist. The structure and language of the story suggests that these components in the protagonist's life are like nodes in a network to which his sense of self is pinned.

The stories in *Inherited* can be used to further students' **emotional intelligence**, and indeed their understanding of this term. Of course, we can immediately glean this concern of the text when we skim the contents page. The stories in *Inherited* are divided up into the sections "Keeping; Wanting; Surviving; Remembering; Breaking; Leaving; and Returning." Some active, some passive, these dynamic verbs evoke the forces that propel us forward and those that send us back. The stories themselves tend to centre on domestic situations and work at a moral, ethical and/or emotional knot contained within that situation. For example, in 'Cradle of Shadows' the narrator ultimately asks herself what the difference is between her abortion and her great-grandmother's infanticide. In the process, she explores notions of guilt, blame, choice and self-preservation. 'Dove' and 'Sarah's Ark' raise questions about the definition of 'waste', the practices of consuming, collecting, keeping, reusing and recycling, and our incessant need to assign purposes/uses for things.

Perhaps the story that will resonate best with students in this way is 'Rush'. Two high school graduates, girls, decide to go to a Western Australian ghost town during leavers instead of to a party destination. Their parents think they are celebrating in Dunsborough when in fact they are in Kanowna in the Goldfields. They know their parents would not have approved, yet they cannot fathom why a drunken sojourn Down South is preferable to a research-trip up North. Weaving together voices from the past and the girls' movements in the present, the story concludes with both girls being attacked by a lone man and their nearly-lifeless bodies disposed of – one down a mine shaft and the other in an unnamed elsewhere. What appears, at first, as a cautionary tale becomes something much more complex, raising questions of

liberty, gender, behaviour and social norms.

Clearly the way I have approached this analysis has been to **consider *Inherited* as a complete work**, as opposed to extracting individual stories. I believe this to be the most productive way to study the text, and indeed most, if not all, short story collections. This is akin to considering an album as a complete work as opposed to listening to individual songs on shuffle. Concept albums are the best examples of this, such as *Tommy* by The Who or Side 2 of *Abbey Road*. There are a number of exercises that could be useful for students to understand how short story collections differ to other works of prose fiction, such as novels or novellas. For example, students could be asked to do two rearrangements of the stories in *Inherited* and write an analysis on how the order of the stories alters interpretation.

## DEEP TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

*Inherited* provides many opportunities for deep textual analysis as Curtin's prose is at once clean and rich. This means that the writing is accessible for younger readers, but is also 'artistic' and provides students with ample room for critical engagement. *Inherited* offers students fertile ground to consider the craft of writing well, and how good writing may help us make sense of our lives.

Some questions that may be posed to students include:

What is the poetic effect of ungrammatical sentences? Students may consider how many grammatical breaches reflect dialogue, half-formed thoughts, notes, and the work-in-progress quality of life as it unfolds.

What impact does the use of different narrative points of view have upon the text? Curtin makes wide use of point of view, regularly swapping between omniscient third person to first person, and even occasionally second person narration. Students may like to consider what must be considered when

selecting a narrative point of view, and, as an exercise, could rewrite passages of the text using an alternative point of view. The story where this technique is most apparent is called ‘Renovation’, as the narration jumps between first person present tense to describe the path of the protagonist through a house up for sale, to omniscient third person past tense to recall moments in the house’s history.

How do genre conventions govern the readers’ expectations? Certain stories in *Inherited* draw the reader’s attention to the conventions of different texts and their purposes, and can be used as a way in to studying conventions of genre. For instance, the story ‘Gratitude’ tells of a photographer and journalist who cover ‘grief stories’ for the newspaper, and how there are conventions of this particular type of article, communicative tools. In this extreme example, the conventions of the ‘grief article’, specifically the photograph that accompanies the text, make different experiences of loss and pain appear the same.

How do the conclusions of Curtin’s stories function as “endings” but not as “resolutions,” and what is the effect of this? Curtin’s stories tend to end in a state of suspended animation; there is a freeze frame where the narrative is both severed and continues on in the reader’s mind. The story spills over the confines of the text. It could be explored how this state of unresolved action or tension incites the reader to formulate their own set of possible resolutions.

Curtin’s stories spill over their boundaries, just as individuals extend beyond the self. That is to say that *Inherited* reminds us that much of what makes me *me* comes from elsewhere, is inherited. Such ideas would make for productive classroom discussion in an age where the notion of *what is passed on* is so high on the national and global agenda. Environmental matters being the most obvious, but social and political issues as well. Ultimately, *Inherited* by Amanda Curtin causes us to reflect

on what we choose to take on, what we choose to discard, what we may not have a choice to bear.