

Heat and Light by Ellen van Neerven

UQP



'Humans never see what's coming. Everything is seasonal, cyclical, dependent on environment and weather conditions. Would I love you in the winter, when my toes are frost? Would I love you in the summer, when the wind comes tumbling on me?'

Ellen van Neerven, *Heat and Light*

NOTES ON STUDYING THE TEXT

This collection of stories is best suited for study by upper secondary year levels, however 'Water', the novella found in the middle of the book, could easily be studied in isolation, and may be considered suitable for Year 10 students.

Alice Healy has written an excellent critical analysis of her challenges and successes as a non-Indigenous Australian teaching Indigenous texts. This is a valuable resource, available at the link below, for teachers studying *Heat and Light* or other Indigenous texts in the classroom.

http://www.academia.edu/1631032/Teaching_Indigenous_Literature_an_Ethics_of_Voice

Healy suggests that:

'Indigenous writing, whether creative or critical, provides an important critical point at which a shift in understanding national narratives, identity and history can be examined.'

She continues:

'Indigenous writing is necessarily political, whether the purpose is to speak back to past colonial injustices or to offer a more affirmative celebration of Indigenous people... It is political especially in its reception – in the offering of subjectivities that rupture normalised 'white' values.'

Healy also refers to an essay by Geraldine Balzer, referenced at the end of these notes, who writes on teaching Canadian Aboriginal literature and suggests that 'empowering students to make meaning using a

diversity of lenses enables them to see the text from several locations'.

It is worth reading Balzer's piece in full, as it offers valuable thoughts on teaching Indigenous authors, as well as a number of points that could be used to initiate discussions around the text in the classroom.

Indigenous author Ambelin Kwaymullina has also written an excellent piece on the need for diversity in Australian children's and young adult literature that could be used as background reading or for classroom discussion: <http://www.wheelercentre.com/notes/we-need-diverse-books-because-an-indigenous-perspective-on-diversity-in-young-adult-and-children-s-literature-in-australia>

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

Heat and Light is an unusually structured collection of short stories by debut author Ellen van Neerven. One of the stories, 'S&J', was first published in Dave Eggers' prestigious literary magazine *McSweeney's Quarterly*, alongside Tara June Winch, Tony Birch and Melissa Lucashenko. After completing the full manuscript of *Heat and Light*, van Neerven entered, and won, the David Unaipon Award for an unpublished manuscript by an Indigenous author in the 2013 Queensland Literary Awards. The book was subsequently published by UQP, and was shortlisted for the 2015 Stella Prize.

The book is divided into three parts: 'Heat', 'Water' and 'Light'. It is structurally unusual in that the three parts are quite separate, and while 'Heat' and 'Light' are collections of short stories, 'Water' takes the form

of a single novella. From a publishing perspective, it is striking to see a book break the standard form in this way, but it offers wonderful opportunities to study the book in a variety of ways and at various levels of student ability.

Teachers wanting to look at the political and cultural context of Indigenous Australia might find it useful to conduct a close study of 'Water', comparing this speculative vision of Australia to current and historical events. Readers might consider the good intentions behind the creation of 'Australia 2', and discuss the resulting displacement of Indigenous Australians from their land, as well as the forced removal of the Indigenous inhabitants of Australia 2.

Others may wish to study the book at a technical level, looking at the techniques used in the short stories of the 'Heat' and 'Light' sections. The stories collected in 'Heat' revolve around the Kresinger family, and are narrated by various family members at different times in their personal history. The stories of 'Light', on the other hand, are linked thematically, looking at the desires of young people both to belong and to assert their own individuality. Ellen van Neerven has created a variety of characters with clear, individual identities and strong narrative voices. Students will learn a great deal about storytelling, narrative and the construction of character through the close study of these pieces.

There is also space to study the book as a whole, as there are recurring themes in each of the pieces. Comparing the descriptions of place in each of the pieces would be a good starting point for this. Or the book as a whole could be considered in terms of its place in the political and cultural history of Indigenous writing in Australia.

There are many good reasons to study this book, and as many different ways into the text. The following notes are broken up into four units: 'Heat', 'Water', 'Light' and Overall, to enable teachers to introduce the book into their classroom in any of the ways described above.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ELLEN VAN NEERVEN is a Brisbane-based writer. She was the 2013 winner of the David Unaipon Award. Her first book, *Heat and Light* (UQP) was released in 2014.

Divided into three sections, it is inspired by the intersection of familial history, location and identity.

Ellen's writing has appeared widely in publications such as *McSweeney's*, *Review of Australian Fiction*, *The Lifted Brow*, *Meanjin*, *Ora Nui* and *Mascara Literary Review*.

Ellen works at the State Library of Queensland as a part of the black&write! Indigenous writing and editing project, which aims to support and promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers. Ellen is the editor of the digital collection *Writing Black: New Indigenous Writing from Australia*.

Taken from the author's website:

www.ellenvanneervencurrie.wordpress.com

OVERALL THEMES OF HEAT AND LIGHT

Prejudice
Displacement
Cultural identification
Family
Australian landscape
Sexuality
Belonging
Identity

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ What is the significance of each of the book's subheadings: 'Heat', 'Water' and 'Light'? Consider this question both before you read the book and after. How do your responses change?
- ◆ Ellen van Neerven has said in an interview that she wants readers to have a 'fictional experience'¹. What do you think she means by this? Has she succeeded?

¹ <http://ifoa.org/2014/by-foa-authors/five-questions-ellen-van-neerven>

'HEAT'**SYNOPSIS**

The author describes this section as 'a deconstructed family tree'². The story is passed from family member to family member, a technique that includes different characters' voices across several generations. 'Heat' follows the bloodline of the Kresinger family. The oldest character in the collection, and in many ways the point from which the rest of the family spreads out, is Pearl Kresinger. She is the eponymous subject of 'Pearl', the first story in the collection. We learn about her through the descriptions others give of her to her granddaughter, Amy. Pearl is chaos, and she is described as having an affinity with the wind, giving her qualities that are mythical and destructive.

'I heard about the freak storm in the early fifties, Pearl Kresinger cheating death for the second time. The wind ripped the Kresinger tent up, into a tree. The others ran for shelter and Pearl stood there and let it lift her, she went into the electricity wires and they curled into each other like lovers as she was jolted. Her brother moved to her lifeless body and she touched him, and he took her place.'

As Amy learns about her grandmother from a local woman, she recognises in her own character the same qualities that set Pearl apart, that drew her to destruction, that kept her spinning, wild. But discovering this part of her history also cuts her off from the truth as it has been told to her so far.

In 'Pearl', Amy and Pearl reflect each other across generations. They are introduced to readers simultaneously, as young women feeling disconnected, possessed by reckless energy. As we are drawn further into the rest of the stories in 'Heat', we see them again, at different times, revealed to us as they appear to other members of their family: lover, daughter, mother, cousin. Readers are presented with characters who are multifaceted and richly flawed.

THEMES

Family
Sexuality
Power

2 <http://ifoa.org/2014/by-foa-authors/five-questions-ellen-van-neerven>

Identity
Country

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ How are the characters of Amy and Pearl similar? How are they different?
- ◆ What kind of language does the author use to describe Pearl? What does this tell you about her character?
- ◆ What is Pearl's relationship with Marie? What is Amy's relationship with Marie?
- ◆ How is Marie described differently from Pearl?
- ◆ How is motherhood portrayed in these stories? How is it similar or different from your own thoughts and understandings about motherhood?
- ◆ Who is the narrator in each story? How does this affect our understanding of the characters?
- ◆ Where are each of the stories set in relation to the others, both in time and in space?
- ◆ How does this affect how the characters position themselves in the world?
- ◆ How is sexuality used by and against each of the characters?
- ◆ How would you describe the Kresinger family?
- ◆ In what ways do each of the Kresingers belong? In what ways are they set apart from others?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. One of the themes of 'Heat' is the way we interpret similar events differently depending on our position in our family. Think of an event that involved you and at least two other members of your family. Write down your memory of this event, including as many details as possible. When you have done this, have a conversation with the other family members who were there. Let them tell you their memories of the same event. How do they differ from yours? If you view the event from their perspective, how does it make you think differently about your own actions?
2. Another take on this is to look at the different ways people in our families view each other. Write

a short description of someone from your family. As above, choose at least two other family members and interview them. Ask them for their memories of their interactions with the family member you have chosen. Ask them to choose three words to describe this person. How are their descriptions different from yours? How does this change the way you see your family?

3. Based on one of the two above activities, and drawing inspiration from the stories in ‘Heat’, write your own short story. Think carefully about who is telling the story and who the story is about. Try to recreate your characters as fully as possible, using things you’ve noticed about them and things other people have noticed, as well as exploring their position in your family and their relationships with other family members.

4. Choose two of the main characters from ‘Heat’ and complete the following activities and questions.

- How is this character described by other members of the Kresinger family? Give two examples.
- How is this character described by someone outside of the Kresinger family? Give one example.
- How does this character view themselves? Give two examples.
- Find three separate words used to describe your chosen character.
- As you’re reading ‘Heat’, keep a character journal for each of your chosen characters. Note which stories they appear in, how old they are in each, who is telling the story, how they behave, how they have changed from other stories. When you have finished this section of the book, write a short paragraph about each of your two characters, describing their journey and how they come to be understood by others, and how they understand themselves.

5. An interesting comparison for this portion of the text would be Christos Tsiolkas’ *The Slap* (either the book or the ABC miniseries adaptation). Like *Heat and Light*, *The Slap* also deals with family relationships and looks at the way people and events are viewed differently by different characters.

Students could consider the similarities and differences between these two texts from a number of perspectives: writing style, the cultural background of the authors and characters, the gender of the author or narrator, and the way this appears in each of the works.

‘WATER’

SYNOPSIS

Although it shares some common themes, ‘Water’ sits quite separate from the ‘Heat’ and ‘Light’ sections of the book. Unlike the other two sections, this is a single novella, rather than a collection of short stories, and it is set in the future, whereas the rest of the book sits fairly well in the present or the not-too-distant past.

‘Water’ follows Kaden, a young Aboriginal woman who has taken on a position with a company who are responsible for the development of Australia 2. The new Australia is a project that has been initiated by President Tanya Sparkle, who is determined to make up for what the Aboriginal people have lost by offering them a purpose-built second country formed from the islands off southern Moreton Bay.

There is a sharp wit to this piece, used to draw out real political issues and the problems associated with blanket understandings or simplistic assumptions about collective groups of people. President Sparkle describes herself as ‘an optimist’ who believes that ‘one day Aboriginal people will get back what they lost and more’. Her unquestioning optimism blinds her to problems with identity during the application process, the disconnect to culture experienced by Aboriginal youths, and the issue of the land rights held by the native inhabitants of the islands being used to create Australia 2 – a breed of plantpeople, considered non-human and therefore not worthy of consideration.

Kaden is forced to confront these issues in relation to her own ethics and identity. As Cultural Liaison Officer, her job is essentially to convince the sandplants, or plantpeople, to leave their islands willingly. Early on, she develops a bond with one of the plantpeople, Larapinta. Their relationship forces

Kaden to consider her role in the displacement of the plantpeople, and to reconnect with her own cultural identity.

THEMES

Cultural identity
Ethical responsibility
Land ownership
Sexuality
Politics
Humanity

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ What is the story trying to say?
- ◆ How does Kaden feel about the Australia 2 project?
- ◆ What is her relationship to the islands?
- ◆ How does Kaden's relationship with Larapinta influence her actions?
- ◆ How is humour used in this piece to highlight important issues?
- ◆ What are the political and social issues arising from this piece?
- ◆ Why does Kaden think that 'plantpeople are more sensitive than sandplants'?
- ◆ How do both President Sparkle and Milligan use language to push their agenda?
- ◆ What is the nature of Kaden's relationship with her family? How does this influence her confidence and her actions?
- ◆ Are the plantpeople human? Does it matter?
- ◆ What makes Kaden decide to help the plantpeople?
- ◆ On page 96, why is Larapinta satisfied that Kaden finally makes what she calls 'a political statement'? What is the statement? Why is it political?
- ◆ What is the ethical responsibility of people beyond their 'individual jobs'?
- ◆ What are the problems with Australia 2?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. The last paragraph of 'Water' reads:

'In the clear water behind the ferry I can see them. They are everywhere. Stretching out as far as my vision reaches. And then I know there are as many behind them. The brown reeds of their hair are all that is showing. They move in formations, in shapes similar to the last letter of the alphabet. Larapinta is one of them. There must be thousands. I step onto the ferry and stand next to my uncle. The water is rising around us and I can feel the force in the leaping waves and what we're about to do.'

Consider everything that has led up to this scene, and write the next part of the story. You could choose to write a piece that follows on immediately from the paragraph above, or imagine the outcome for the characters from 'Water' slightly into the future. Try to keep your characters faithful to those van Neerven has created. Think about why they act the way they do, and the implications this might have.

2. 'Water' evokes parallels between the treatment of the plantpeople on Australia 2 and the treatment of the Aboriginal people at the time of the European settlement of Australia. Consider this story against the historical context.

- ◆ Research European settlement, and discuss the similarities you find between this period in Australia's history and this story.
- ◆ Consider your responses to this piece based on your new historical knowledge. Have your reactions to this story changed based on your research?
- ◆ Look also at current affairs. Discuss whether current issues affecting Indigenous people are reflected in this piece as well, or whether it seems entirely fictitious.

'LIGHT'

SYNOPSIS

The final section of *Heat and Light* returns to the short story form. These stories are linked thematically, showing a series of young people searching for both freedom and belonging. The

characters in these stories are finding themselves – physically, sexually and emotionally. They battle to matter, to make a mark on the people and places around them.

The characters in the ‘Light’ section are in a tug of war between the fight to separate their identities from the image their families hold of them, and the desperate need to feel a part of something bigger. The character in ‘Anything Can Happen’ is forced to choose between her role as a daughter and her role as a partner. ‘S&J’ follows two young Aboriginal women on a trip as they reconnect with their past, and each fights to claim her own identity. In ‘The Falls’ and ‘The Wheel’, young girls struggle against the suffocation of family secrets.

In this section, van Neerven also examines the notion of ‘otherness’, looking at the way characters are defined or limited by their circumstances. These scenes introduce characters set apart by disability, economic disadvantage, sexuality, race and family circumstances. Without preaching or resorting to didacticism, this collection of stories offers readers a chance to explore their own subjectivity and attitudes.

‘Light’ rounds the book out nicely, bringing many of the themes introduced in the earlier parts of the book into this selection of intimate snapshots of the lives of young people.

THEMES

Sexuality
Freedom
Belonging
Self-awareness
Isolation
Abandonment
Disadvantage

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ Which characters are abandoned in these pieces? Who by? How does their abandonment influence their actions and, as a result, the outcome of the story?
- ◆ What family relationships are explored in these pieces? How are families depicted differently in

the ‘Light’ and ‘Heat’ sections? What impression does this create of the characters in each of these parts of the book?

- ◆ Although the author rarely (if at all) tells us the exact locations of the stories in ‘Heat’, they all have a strong sense of place. What techniques does van Neerven use to create this? How does the place in each of the stories further develop the themes of the piece? How does it shape each of the characters?
- ◆ How would you describe the endings of the stories in ‘Light’? How are they different from the endings of the stories in ‘Heat’ or ‘Water’? What do you think happens after each story ends? Do you need to know?
- ◆ Which characters in these stories are similar? How?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. In one interview Ellen van Neerven talks about the characters in this section. She describes them as ‘making it’ or not. What do you think she means by this? Make a chart of the characters you think have made it, and those who haven’t. Choose one character from each side and respond to the following.

- ◆ How has this character’s success or failure been defined by their own actions?
- ◆ How has it been influenced by the actions of others?
- ◆ Has the character who has ‘made it’ done better than the character who hasn’t? Are they happier?
- ◆ See if you can write an alternative ending for your chosen character. What would need to happen for things to end well? What would need to go wrong for things to end badly?

2. Read the following piece by the author Richard Ford on writing short stories.

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/nov/03/featuresreviews.guardianreview1>

- ◆ Discuss in class what you think are some key elements of a short story. Using Ford’s piece as an inspiration, consider such aspects as beginnings and endings, the differences between novels and

short stories, and the techniques used to involve the reader. How does Ellen van Neerven achieve these elements? What makes her stories resonate?

- ◆ Think about the themes from the stories in 'Light', and your discussions about what makes a good short story. Use this to inform you as you write a short story of your own, inspired by one of the themes or characters from this final section of the book.

FURTHER READING

On Ellen van Neerven and *Heat and Light*

Away!: Radio National: Ellen van Neerven: *Heat and Light*

http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2014/09/aye_20140906_1805.mp3

Digital Writers' Festival 2015: *Kill Your Darlings* First Book Club: Ellen van Neerven's *Heat and Light*
<http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/kyd-book-club/>

Digital Writers' Festival 2015: Presenting the Stella Prize Longlist (Ellen reading from *Heat and Light*)
44:00-47:53
<http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/stella-longlist/>

Kindness and Failure: The journey of writing *Heat and Light*: Ellen van Neerven: *Kill Your Darlings*
<http://www.killyourdarlingsjournal.com/2015/01/kindness-and-failure-the-journey-of-writing-heat-and-light/>

Review by Tony Birch: Readings Books
<http://www.readings.com.au/products/18549479/heat-and-light>

Review by Linda Funnell: *Newtown Review of Books*
<http://newtownreviewofbooks.com.au/2015/03/05/ellen-van-neerven-heat-and-light-reviewed-by-linda-funnell/>

The Stella Interview: Ellen van Neerven
<http://thestellaprize.com.au/2015/04/the-stella-interview-ellen-van-neerven/>

Stella Prize 2015: the shortlisted authors on the stories behind their books: *The Guardian*
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/17/stella-prize-2015-six-australian-authors-on-the-stories-behind-their-books>

On cultural context and reading Indigenous literature

Teaching Indigenous literature: An ethics of voice by Alice Healy

http://www.academia.edu/1631032/Teaching_Indigenous_Literature_an_Ethics_of_Voice

http://ecommons.usask.ca/bitstream/handle/10388/etd-10252006-070549/balzer_dissertation.pdf

On writing short stories

'Highwire Performers' by Richard Ford: *The Guardian*

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/nov/03/featuresreviews.guardianreview1>