

BOOK CLUB NOTES

The Hills of Apollo Bay

Peter Cowan

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About the Author

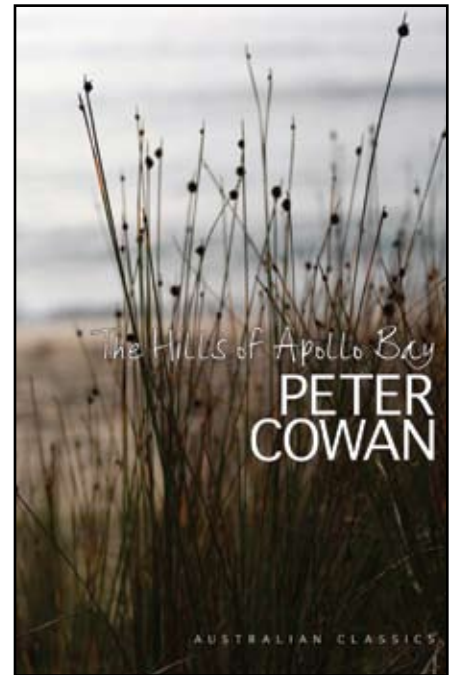
Peter Cowan was born in Perth, Western Australia, in 1914. He worked for many years as a senior tutor with the English Department of the University of Western Australia and after his retirement was an Honorary Research Fellow.

Widely recognised as a major figure in Australian fiction, Peter Cowan's first published short story, 'Living', appeared in *Angry Penguins* in 1943. *The Hills of Apollo Bay* (1989) was his fourth novel. He published four other novels: *Summer* (1963), *Seed* (1966), *The Color of the Sky* (1986), and *The Tenants* (1994); eight collections of short fiction: *Drift*, *The Unploughed Land*, *The Empty Street*, *The Tins and Other Stories*, *New Country* (with others), *Mobiles*, *A Window in Mrs X's Place*, and *Voices*; a history, *A Colonial Experience – Perth and York 1839–1888*; two biographies: *A Unique Position – A Biography of Edith Dircksey Cowan 1861–1932* and *Maitland Brown: A View of Nineteenth Century Western Australia*; and edited a collection of letters: *A Faithful Picture – the letters of Eliza and Thomas Brown at York in the Swan River Colony 1811–1852*. He also edited or co-edited seven anthologies and for several years was co-editor of the literary magazine *Westerly*.

Peter Cowan received the Patrick White Award for Literature in 1992 for his significant contribution to Australian literature and was named a Western Australian living treasure in 1999. He died in 2002.

About the Book

The Hills of Apollo Bay is a vivid recreation of life in Perth and Melbourne in post-war 1940s. The era is delivered to us via different characters, in fragments and across time. Jessica (now) is an old woman, lying in a hospital bed in Perth. Richard (then) is a young writer who leaves his hometown in Perth ('our poor little hairshirt community'). In Melbourne, Richard finds 'a different world' with a richer cultural diversity than the one he's left behind. He discovers a freer existence, in the company of artists, and his best friend Harry, an ex-boxer turned black marketeer, and Harry's girl, French, an old-fashioned 'tart with heart.'



This novel is as much concerned with characters as the nature of the landscape they inhabit, both urban and beyond. Elsewhere, Cowan has said: 'I have always been involved in the Australian landscape, the physical landscape and everything in it. ... Even if I do a suburban piece, I tend to think of it as a particular sort of suburbia.'

Increasingly, Richard also discovers a dark side to the city he inhabits. He locates in the post-war world a growing disregard for both life and the natural world. In the novel's movement between past and present, these portrayals cast their shadow across the future too.

When Cowan was writing this book, he experienced the technical challenge of creating a narrative 'full of short, sharp bits'.* But this began to form its own kind of logic: '[I]f you look back on something, if you look back on a lifetime, if you look back on a period, if you look back on history, it's the bits, and if you put them together they make an odd pattern.'

The book moves between a discussion of our cultural signposts – books and art – and a focus on the most basic of human needs: food, shelter, companionship. The 'odd pattern' Cowan lays down depicts in its many forms the struggle of writers and artists in their pursuit of meaning, and the landscape(s) that they inhabit. It asks whether it is possible to find words to articulate the shape and state of our nation, in the same way that art provides us with images. *The Hills of Apollo Bay* poses these questions and, even as it recognises the inadequacy of words, offers the book itself as an answer.

Questions for discussion

The Hills of Apollo Bay is in many ways a meditation, a novel of ideas. It is, for example, deeply conscious of the after-effects of the Second World War and of how a nation might express itself in such an aftermath. Thus Richard comments on a book he has read by Leonard Mann:

But right at the end, he comes up with the nation established on the battlefield idea, then he suggests, very quietly as if it might be blasted away, the other idea that out of it all there might also be the birth of what he calls a small creative ferment. And he says only by science, letters, and art can a people become great. He hopes for a new flowering, presumably of these things. ... I admire him for saying it. But it comes after all the words, the wreckage, the nation founded on slaughter idea. I've never been able to see why that is where a nation is born. It's obscene. (p. 81)

This novel is a meditation because it considers possibilities, alternative ways of seeing the world, but at the same time its characters must inhabit the world they have inherited. What kind of an Australia do we see in Cowan's book? What is the role of the creative artist in this society?

1. Have a look at the original artworks and novels that Cowan's characters discuss and encounter. What kind of 'Australia' do they suggest, individually and en masse? What

is his purpose in bringing them together?

2. In an interview with Cowan which took place while he was still writing this book, he comments that he believes his fragmentary approach to novel writing is a logical one: 'I think you've got to do that, because with the whole parameter of the place today, I find it hard to think consecutively about a sort of smashed-up society like our own, and I think everything is this way. Television, which is the main source of everyone's information of life, God help us, is brilliant in its juxtapositions.' What points of commonality does the Australia of the 1940s have with the Australia of the late 1980s (when Cowan was writing this book) and the Australia of today?
3. How does the structure/form of this novel complement its meaning? You might consider not only the fragmentary scenes and the economical form of delivery in dialogue and description, but the way Cowan uses white space to move between characters, places, past and present.
4. Richard describes art as 'a universal language' that can express itself across boundaries in a way that writing cannot (pp. 79–80). To what extent can/does this novel address Richard's own preoccupation in this regard? To what extent might Richard's views coincide with those of the author himself?
5. Even as the characters consider art, books, the world of ideas, life goes on around them. The fate of French, in particular, is poignant and bitter: 'Good luck,' she says. 'Not there's that much of it about' (p. 211). How does Cowan's inclusion of these gritty details (French's job as a prostitute, her anxiety over Harry, his demise) sit against the notion that this is a 'novel of ideas'? In what ways is it more than this?
6. Cowan has said, 'I find it hard thinking about anything in which the landscape isn't there. Even if I do a suburban piece, I tend to think of it as a particular sort of suburbia.' How is suburbia (then and now) represented as 'landscape' in this book?
7. Cowan, again: 'This sort of landscape [Australia] is a landscape of silences and spaces. You can't really talk about it in a language which is lavish and over-ornamented. You struggle with finding a style to fit that concept, as much as expressing the concept ... You have to try and find a prose that expresses it within itself.' How is landscape itself represented in this novel? How do the content and form of this book 'represent' the kind of landscape that Cowan 'draws'? In what ways is he a 'landscape artist'?
8. This novel begins with an epigraph drawn from T.S. Eliot's 'Rhapsody on a windy night', a poem that was published in the early years of the First World War. It is worth reading this poem in its entirety for parallels it offers to this book.** How is this novel a 'little lamp', spreading a ring of light 'on the stair'? And what might we make of the final lines of Eliot's poem, 'Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life'? How does memory assist one to 'prepare for life'? In what way might the use of this poem in the epigraph be ironic?
9. Consider also the scene at p. 17 in which Richard visits Jessica, when the 'light from

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the bedside lamp [draws] shapes still distant' in the room in which she lies. What is the importance of memory as a frame to this narrative? How does Cowan use a character like Kathy as a 'filter' for the narrative, as she moves between her mother and Richard in the present day?

10. Why does this novel, deeply urban and suburban in many ways, end with Jessica's memory of the hills of Apollo Bay? Why has Cowan used this image to give the novel its title? What might be the connection between these hills and the hills of Kerr's poem on pp. 287–88?

* All quotes taken from 'Practitioner of Silence', interview of Peter Cowan by Wendy Jenkins, Fremantle Arts Review, Vol 1, No 2. March 1986.

** visit http://www.poetry-archive.com/e/rhapsody_on_a_windy_night.html