

Sand

Robert Drewe and John Kinsella

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About the Book

Sand features new and collected writing from two of Australia's most renowned authors: novelist and literary non-fiction writer Robert Drewe, and internationally acclaimed poet John Kinsella.

In memoir, stories and poems, Drewe and Kinsella celebrate the all-pervasive Western Australian geological element of sand, and the shifting foundations on which memory, myth and meaning are built.

The two writers explore a landscape both cultural and personal as they consider the intimate, geographical and historical importance of coastal and inland sand, and reveal its influences on their writing.

These are standalone pieces, representing each of the authors' work across time, and including new writing from them both. The pieces 'converse' with each other, and highlight points of similarity and difference in each other across a range of genres.

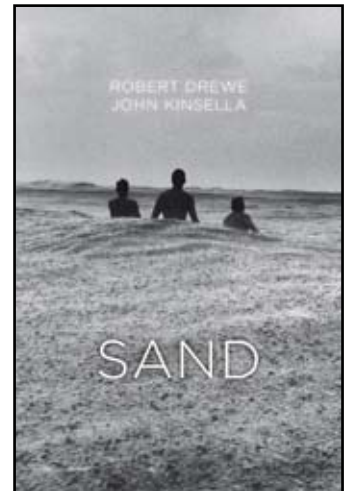
Above all, the writing celebrates a quintessential Australian property: sand – from which many of our stories, assumptions and reckonings are drawn.

About Robert Drewe

Robert Drewe was born in Melbourne and moved with his family to Perth, WA, at the age of six. He worked as a junior reporter with *The West Australian* until his early twenties when he moved back to Melbourne. His novels, short stories and non-fiction, including his best-selling memoir *The Shark Net*, have been widely translated, won many national and international prizes, and been adapted for film, television, radio and theatre. *The Shark Net*, was adapted as an ABC and BBC television miniseries, and won the Western Australian Premier's Book Award in 2000. His 1996 novel *The Drowner* was short listed for all five Australian Premier's Awards. He has also written plays, screenplays, journalism and film criticism, and edited four anthologies of stories.

About John Kinsella

John Kinsella's many volumes of poetry include the prize winning collections *Peripheral Light: New and Selected Poems* and *The New Arcadia*. He published a collection of lectures on landscape and language, *Contrary Rhetoric* (Fremantle Press in conjunction with Edith



Cowan University), and *Wheatlands* with Dorothy Hewett in 2000. He is an Extraordinary Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge University, and a Professorial Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia. John Kinsella lives on a property near Toodyay, Western Australia, with his family.

Study Notes

English Learning Outcomes

- Understanding Language
- Attitudes and Beliefs
- Conventions
- Processes and Strategies
- Reading
- Writing
- Speaking

Before reading

Take time to examine and talk about:

The book cover

1. The cover image features silhouettes of three figures looking into the distance. What do you think their relationship to each other is? Where are they? What might they be looking at?
2. Why was a black-and-white image selected for the cover? What mood does it evoke in the reader? Would the case be different if the image was in colour?
3. How does the image interact with the title?

The title

4. What do you think of when you hear the word 'sand'?
5. To what extent is sand a part of your own landscape and history, both past and present?
6. What are the physical properties of sand?
7. What are some of the social and recreational activities associated with sand?
8. Based on your answers to questions 4–6, consider the metaphoric significance of sand.

The blurb (back cover)

9. Discuss the meaning of the words 'memoir', 'meditation' and 'myth'. How does each of these relate to the concept of memory? What do these words suggest about the literary genres featured in the book?
10. The blurb features a quote from each of the two writers. How are the quotes similar and in what ways are they different? In your response, consider genre, point of view, themes and tone.
11. What does the blurb suggest about the contents of the book?

The preamble

12. We are told one of the authors is a novelist and literary non-fiction writer, and the

other is a poet. Based on your knowledge of these genres, how do you think Drewe's approach to writing about sand may differ from Kinsella's? Discuss in class.

13. Which words in the preamble strike you? Why are the foundations on which memory, myth and meaning are built *shifting*?
14. What do you think might be meant by the *intimate* importance of sand? *Geographical?*
Historical?

Contents page

15. Look over the titles listed in the contents. Choose three or four titles that intrigue you. For each of these, predict whether the work will be a fictional short story, a non-fiction piece or a poem. Record your predictions and discuss them in small groups, explaining your rationale. You will be able to check your predictions later, once you have read the book.
16. Identify any place names that appear in the titles (e.g. Perth, Lake Ninan). Do you think it is important to understand the geographical context-of-production of literature?
17. Does one's physical environment affect their ways of thinking and writing, and in what ways?

Research ideas: understanding context

18. Collect information (individually or in groups) about sand. How and where is sand formed? What are its constituents? What are some of its uses?
19. Search the internet or books and magazines for images containing sand. Place these images onto a map of Australia (or your own state) in their relevant environment. How does looking at your state in the context of a particular element like sand change the way you think about where you live/come from?

During reading

Genre

1. What are the stylistic criteria that define a poem? A short story? A creative non-fiction piece? List these in a table and discuss in groups/in class.
2. Are there any areas of overlap between the genres' stylistic criteria?
3. Do you think the three genres – poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction – are easily identifiable in the collection? Are there any pieces in which the genre is difficult to identify? Is the identification of genre important to your understanding of a piece?

Context

4. What are some of the themes you identify in the book?
5. How do you understand your relationship to place? To the place you grew up, the place you live now, the places you've visited? How does a particular landscape/setting/geography impact on you?
6. What is the history of white settlement in the place where you live? What do you know about the impact of white settlement on the original owners of the land? What do you know about the Aboriginal history of your own area? In doing your research, utilise reading, audio and visual documentation.
7. Compare your findings to Question 24 with those of someone else in your class. What similarities and differences are there?
8. How does your knowledge of the original owners of the land affect your own

perspective and your sense of belonging?

Structure

9. Use the table below to classify the titles of the works you have read so far. Note some pieces may suit more than one of these tags.

URBAN	SUBURBAN	BUSH	COAST	RIVER

10. As the book progresses, we notice a gradual shift in the physical environments that are in focus. In geographical terms, what is the direction of this shift?
11. Now make a table or a mind map (with 'SAND' at its centre) to classifying the works according to i) theme ii) genre iii) biography/time of life.
12. What are other possible ways that the pieces of the volume may have been ordered? What difference would such a reordering make?

Discussion topics

1. What is belonging, and how does one attain it?
2. How might one be displaced from belonging?
3. How does a knowledge of the history and geography of place contribute to notions of belonging?
4. Why might writers have a preoccupation with place?
5. How can the writing of others contribute to our own sense of place?
6. What tensions or complications do different pieces exhibit in their representation of place?
7. What parallels do you find between the lives of the two authors as represented in these pieces?
8. What themes/preoccupations do the pieces reveal about each author?
9. Which pieces appear to be 'conversing' with each other? What kinds of 'conversations' do they have? What kinds of conversations do they trigger in you, the reader? You might like to look at shared elements (like water, or emotion, or historical positioning) in your answer.
10. Look at John Kinsella's poem 'River, Bird, City ... Inland'. The poem opens with two epigraphs: one from Australian artist Julie Dowling, the other from Australian playwright Jack Davis. What is the message these epigraphs impart? Why are epigraphs important?
11. Look at the shape and movement of John Kinsella's 'Perth Poem'. How does it reflect the 'shape' of Perth itself?
12. What sensory elements does Robert Drewe evoke in his pieces 'The Sand People' and 'The Midnight Ferry' (for example)?
13. Which piece by each author creates the strongest picture in your mind? What personal associations do you have with this picture?

14. What would happen to Andy Melrose in the paragraph immediately following the end of 'The Water Person and the Tree Person'?
15. What is the impact on Brigid in 'Stones Like Hearts' of the encounter of the body on Shelly Beach?
16. What does John Kinsella reveal about his school days through his prose and poetry in the course of this book? How did the geographical setting of Geraldton itself impact on his sense of place? What kind of a 'Gero Dero' was John himself?
17. What has been the meaning of the desert for the last explorer in the story of the same title?

After reading

1. What are the implications of having two writers presenting their works together in one book? In what ways is it different to an anthology that's exclusive to one writer?
2. Can you think of other writers whose work would belong in a volume like this?
3. Some of the most powerful texts we read move us despite the fact they are set in distant, or even fictional, places. (Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, is set in Verona, Italy yet for over 400 years it is a story that continues to be performed and has been told and retold in many forms.) The anthologised pieces in *Sand* are all set in Western Australia. Does their appeal work beyond the borders of this state? What might resonate or be relevant to other readers unfamiliar with Western Australia? What is it that gives a literary work relevance?

Writing Topics

4. Search newspapers and/or the internet for an image containing sand (or use images from the exercise at 19 above). This can be in any context: sand at the beach, in an hour-glass or being used in construction. Choose one of the three genres — poetry, creative non-fiction, short story — and write your own sand piece.
5. Art can often be a strong source of inspiration for writers. John Kinsella's poem 'River, Bird, City ... Inland' on p. 86 makes reference to a painting by Australian artist Julie Dowling* which tells the story 'of the Benedictine monks of New Norcia / walking their Aboriginal cricket team / to Perth to play against the whites' (p. 88).

In pairs, choose an artwork for your project (this can be a painting or sculpture you know, one you find in the online collection of an art gallery, or one brought in to class by your teacher). Research the context of production of the work and record the names of the artwork and artist and the year and place of its creation. In your pairs, use the artwork as the focal point for writing a poem of your own (of 20 to 30 lines). When writing, consider the stylistic elements of poetry that you have learned.

**Dowling's painting, titled The Invincibles, is housed at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, and can be viewed by searching their collection online at www.ngv.vic.gov.au.*

Speaking Topics

6. Poetry does not only exist on the page; it is an aural (and oral) literary form and benefits from being read aloud. Perform John Kinsella's poem 'Signature at Ludlow: a verse-play of transliterated voices for radio' in class. Choose a person for each voice and a group for the Coda Chorus. You can either read out loud with voices only, or add other performance elements, such as movement and props.

Interview with John Kinsella

John Kinsella doesn't write anything without some kind of purpose. Here, he explains how the ecological concerns of his work have been expressed through his collaboration with Robert Drewe in Sand.

You're known as a poet, but have several autobiographical prose pieces in this collection – how different is your approach to stories and poetry?

Oh, categorically. It's a very different process. For one thing it's much slower; I only write a few stories each year, rather than dozens. I do find poetry an easier process – it's a mode I grew up with – although I have been writing short stories since I was a teenager. I view the short story as a really precious thing. And I write a certain kind of story, vignettes that focus on a moment or experience. I admire plot-driven stories, I like them a lot, but I don't really write like that. Of course there's a lot in common between poetry and these anecdotal kinds of short stories. I also write autobiographical vignettes, and a few of these are featured in the book.

How much of this is new material, and how much existed before the book? Were many of these pieces written with the theme of 'sand' in mind?

It's primarily 'new' material, in that almost all of it has been published in journals, but besides three or four older pieces from earlier volumes of mine, none of it has appeared in book form before. So it's largely a new collection.

The way it came about was that Rob [Drewe] and I started discussing a collaborative book several years ago, and when we tossed around some ideas, the theme of sand came to the top; we both found ourselves writing about sand quite a lot. That original idea gestated for quite a while, which means that pieces I was writing anyway were written in the context of that discussion, were informed by the idea of sand.

But the book wasn't contrived; it was actually quite organic. It grew from writing that was already happening. Georgia [Richter, publisher at Fremantle Press] had a significant role to play in that I gave her a large amount of material and she selected and edited from that. She really shaped and directed the book; as a process it was pleasant and interesting.

Would you say there is a dialogue between the pieces in *Sand*?

There is a certain dialogue between my work and Rob's, and I think that came about naturally because we were showing each other the material that we were submitting to Georgia as we went along. And while you might observe the dialogue between the pieces in the book, I would even say the dialogue was three-way: between Georgia, Rob and myself.

I've been a long-time admirer of Rob's writing. I read his first two novels in 1983, and even launched *The Drowner* at Australia House in London in the late '90s. His work has become part of the 'background' to my own writing, in the way that favourite authors often are; as Dorothy Hewett is too.

Do you relate to his work mainly through your shared childhood experiences?

Absolutely. But there are strong differences too. Like Rob, I spent a large part of my childhood in Perth, but I also grew up in the country — I went to high school in Geraldton and spent a lot of time in rural areas. Also, Rob is pretty much a whole generation ahead of me — although I hadn't really thought about that before, and the characteristics of our generations are pretty similar, both post-war and both perceiving themselves through the Perth markers of 'sun' and 'sand'.

What's so brilliant about Rob's writing is that he takes the familiar and makes it bizarre; I mean, is anything ordinary? I find that really appealing.

The Perth landscape has changed dramatically since you were a child, and your writing is acutely aware of how the landscape and ecology have been affected by urban growth. How deliberate is this?

It's really my life work, these ecological concerns. So it's very deliberate. This work is more focused on Perth than my other books have been; I've written primarily on the wheatbelt before. But I went to primary school in Perth and lived on the edge of the Canning River, which in those days was also the edge of the bush. There were hundreds of acres of bush a relatively short distance from my house.

Things have really changed. They've been clearing bush around Perth at the rate of 851.5 hectares a year over the past eight years according to the WWF — that's roughly 8 WACAs [Western Australian Cricket Grounds] per week! Yes, we have an 'expanding population', but there are ways to accommodate that without destroying bushland. I consider it ecological vandalism, and I strongly oppose how powerful the mining and development dollar is in this state. I want to make people aware of what has been lost already, and what might be lost in the future. This is what I want to achieve through writing.

Do you try to evoke a sense of nostalgia through landscape?

I intensely dislike nostalgia and 'the nostalgic', but I suppose I have a sense of 'nostalgia' for things that are gone and can't be repaired or brought back. In the sense that nostalgia is a longing for what has been environmentally lost, then yes. But I don't really like to use the word 'nostalgia' — it's too celebratory and indulgent, to my mind. I don't like to look back at the past for the sake of it. I would rather be proactive in talking about history and what is lost, to warn people not to let the same things happen again. I don't write anything without some kind of purpose, which is an ethical and political purpose, to demonstrate and learn from mistakes made in the past.

That also means I try to show respect for the traditional owners and custodians of the

land. So, for instance, in 'River, Bird, City ... Inland' I am reaching for something that many non-indigenous Western Australians, especially urban dwellers, aren't conscious of when they look around, the stories and connections to the land that Indigenous people have. That poem came out of an email conversation I had five or six years ago with Julie Dowling about relationship to place, how the signs of belonging and connection are there if we know how to look, to see. The poem is a dialogue with her art, with her issues of presence and belonging. I'm really interested in these discussions about belonging and ownership and respect.

It's not surprising that you've been able to write so much on the theme of sand; the West Australian landscape is dominated by it. You even capture the varieties of sand in your poem 'The Dream Of'.

Yes, sand really is everywhere. It's amazing that people don't write on it more often. Although since doing this book I've noticed how many WA writers have written about sand.

Growing up I think we almost took it for granted; because it was so all-pervasive we didn't question its existence. That poem, 'The Dream Of', delves into sand in its various forms, whether grey sand or white beach sand or black sand or the yellow sand our parents put over buffalo grass. It was part of everything we did. And the sand itself shows differences in geography across the state, not only in Perth. I wrote that poem in 2008 — it uses a Chaucer poem to 'bounce off' and came about after I took Tracy, my partner, for a tour of where I lived as a child. The markers of sand were still very visible.

Even sand is under threat from mining, though. Another piece, a verse play, 'Signature at Ludlow', is a protest against sand mining that's happening down south. So much of the Tuart Forest is being cut down so that they can get to the sand beneath. Ludlow (near Busselton) is also the place the Irish side of my family came to in early 1850s Western Australia, and the play-poem deals with issues of appropriation, intrusion, and colonisation in general.

Your 'Perth Poem' skims over the surface of Perth and reveals a really diverse range of people and situations. Do you set out to observe people, or do you just come across them?

Well, I used to get around a lot! Years ago I was crashing headlong into everything, and it was pretty full-on, but it did bring me into contact with lots of people. So I learnt about all these people, and about myself too — you only learn about yourself by interaction with other people. So yeah, there are a lot of characters in that poem; it was part of my earlier writing life. But I'm different now, more of a hermit really. I live relatively secluded in the country, and my aims are to make people think about what is impacting their environment, and how they can change things. I remain a committed activist.

This poem has the idea of Perth as a hub, of branching out around the city. And in an interesting parallel, it really became the pin around which I handed in various other work for Georgia to consider including in the book.