

THE BREAK

Deb Fitzpatrick

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Themes: family, forgiveness, environmental conservation, natural disaster, trauma, grief, rural community life

Year level: Y10–12

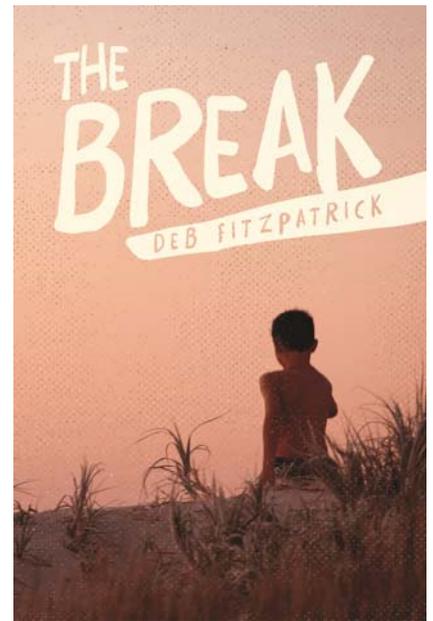
Cross-curriculum priority: Sustainability

ABOUT THE BOOK

The south-west coast is the kind of place people escape to. Unless you have lived there all your life, in which case, you long to get away. Rosie and Cray chuck in their city jobs to move to Margaret River while Liza, Ferg and Sam have been there forever, working the family farm. Under pressure from developers the families unite against change. But when a natural disaster strikes, the true nature of community is revealed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deb Fitzpatrick lives and works in Fremantle, Western Australia. She has a Master of Arts (Creative Writing) from UWA and occasionally teaches professional writing and editing at Curtin University. Deb is the author of *The Amazing Spencer Gray* (2013), a novel for younger readers. Her two novels for young adults – *90 packets of instant noodles* (2010) and *Have you seen Ally Queen?* (2011) – were both awarded Notable Books by the Children’s Book Council of Australia. *The Break* is her first adult fiction work.



STUDY NOTES

LITERACY: COMPREHENDING TEXTS THROUGH LISTENING, READING AND VIEWING

(A) Before Reading

Predicting

1. Explore the front cover and blurb as a class. Brainstorm possible connotations of the title.
2. Create a class prediction chart detailing what students think may happen in the novel.

Genre analysis: regional Australian literature

3. Create a definition for the term ‘region’.
4. Have any students explored a regional Australian novel before? Which title/s?
5. Create a list of well-known regions in which Australian authors have chosen to set their stories (e.g. the West Australian Wheatbelt).
6. Name five famous regional Australian authors. Which region do they write about? (e.g. Peter Cowan, Tim Winton)
7. Create a list of the key features of this genre. Which do students expect will be present in *The Break*? Why?
8. Have students debate the validity of the following statement: ‘A city can be considered a region.’ To stimulate discussion, consider novels students may have read in Years 8–10 that take place in Australian cities (e.g. *Looking for Alibrandi*, set in suburban Sydney).
 - a. Do these texts ‘present a rich sense of the uniqueness of place, and its importance to characters’ personal identity’?
 - b. This is a defining characteristic of regional literature, therefore some theorists argue that urban novels constitute regional literature, alongside their more traditional rural counterparts. Do you agree? Why/why not?
 - c. Research recent opinions on this debate that have been put forward by literary scholars.

(B) During Reading

Language and textual analysis; engaging and responding; reflecting

Suggested reading plan: alternate between ...

- reading chapters together as a class (allocating one page or one paragraph per student)
- allowing students to read to one another in pairs or small groups
- assigning independent reading for homework

Comprehension strategies to model and practise

- Inferring
- Summarising
- Identifying key ideas/themes
- Drawing conclusions

Reader response journal

9. Have students keep a reader response journal throughout their study of the text. This document should record any important quotes and emotional reactions to each chapter, as well as any questions or discussion topics they may wish to raise in class. The reader response journal can also be used at the end of the unit to help students plan critical responses to the essay questions (providing a bank of significant quotes from which to structure their argument).

Discussion points

Below is a list of questions you may wish to discuss with your students throughout the reading process.

10. *The broken old marri arm hides a narrow hollow. Tucked inside in a plastic bag is a rolled-up map of the night sky, protected from the wind and rain and sun.* (p. 7)
 - a. The novel opens with an example of 'foreshadowing' – create a definition for this term.
 - b. How/why do you think this map came to be in such an unusual place?
11. *'Rosie,' he laughed, 'it's the nineties – nothing's sacred anymore.'*
Isn't it? she thought. She took a breath. 'But this is a community newspaper! Surely there's another story I can cover, I mean, it's what we put in the paper that becomes news –' (p. 11)
 - a. What do you think is meant by the phrase 'nothing's sacred anymore'?
 - b. Read your own community newspaper in pairs – what kinds of stories have been included? Are there any that you feel support the claim 'nothing's sacred anymore'?
 - c. What is the role of the media in covering tragedies like the attempted suicide with which the book opens? Does Frank make a valid point when he says the public has a right to know (p. 18)?
 - d. What are your first impressions of the protagonist Rosie? How would you describe her?
 - e. Does the world need people like Frank as well as people like Rosie?
12. Re-read the second part of page 13 and consider the portrayal of fly-in fly-out (FIFO) work on mine sites.
 - a. What percentage of Western Australians work in a FIFO position in the mining sector? What percentage of Australians?
 - b. In what ways could FIFO work be difficult for family life or maintaining relationships such as Rosie and Cray's?
 - c. Is this a career you would consider? Why/why not?
 - d. How does Cray feel about his job?
13. *He still used a typewriter ... 'You've gotta move with the times, Frank,' they'd implore. 'It takes ages to re-key your stories.'* (p. 16)
 - a. Research the history of the Australian publishing industry. How has technology changed the publishing process? Create a timeline illustrating the technology used in each decade of the twentieth century.
 - b. Invite a guest speaker from your local newspaper to share their experiences of working in journalism.
14. *The water was Cray's obsession ... The whole coastal world had opened up to her through him: reef breaks, wind direction, headlands, currents.* (p. 19)
 - a. Create definitions for each of these terms. Why are they important to surfers?
 - b. Research and discuss the surfing industry in your Australia (see also www.surfingaustralia.com).

15. *Money ... is driving the world fucking bonkers – no one knows what they're doing anymore, just do whatever it is for the money, accumulate the stuff like food in a bomb shelter, just because everyone else does the same.* (p. 20)
- What kind of economic system exists in Australia?
 - Create definitions for the following terms: capitalism; free market economy; mixed economy.
 - Do you agree with Cray's opinion that 'money doesn't buy happiness'? Why/why not?
 - Research statistics on job satisfaction in Australia.
 - What is the relationship between job satisfaction and salary?
 - What industries report the highest records of job satisfaction? Why?
 - What industries present the lowest records of job satisfaction? Why?
 - What is the difference between a 'job' and a 'vocation'? Which would you classify Cray's job on the mine? Why?
 - Investigate the economic climate in Western Australia during the time the book was set. Can Cray's reaction be seen in the context of something larger?
16. *Dairy farming wasn't the staple of this town anymore, not since the arrival of the alternative lifestylers in the seventies and the vineyards and now the tourists.* (p. 27)
- Research the history of the Margaret River region using the website of the Margaret River & Districts Historical Society at: www.mrdhs.com.au/?file=kop1.php.
 - When was the town of Margaret River established?
 - Have any of your students visited the region before?
 - View some photographs of the region (including its beaches) as a class.
 - Compare the town's primary industries since its formation, and now. How has the profile of the town changed?
17. Re-read page 33 and consider the characterisation of Ferg.
- Why do you think Ferg is jealous of his brother Mike?
 - Do you think Mike is in turn envious of Ferg? Why?
 - How is the theme of 'sibling rivalry' portrayed in this chapter?
18. This novel continually switches point of view, so that readers receive insight into the thoughts of Sam, Liza, Ferg, Mike, Pip, Rosie and Cray. This is an example of 'alternating third-person limited' narration.
- Create a definition for this term.
 - Why do you think the author has chosen to structure the text in this way?
 - What effects are created?
 - How else might the story have been structured?
19. Examining the structure of the novel, three striking stylistic choices are also evident:
- The alternating focus between Rosie and Cray's story, and that of Ferg, Liza and Sam's (until the two eventually merge).
 - The italicised 'poetic prose' passages in present tense, interspersed between the chapters.
 - The division of the story into three sections.
- Why do you think the author has chosen to structure her novel in three sections?
 - What is the significance of the beginning and ending of each section?
 - Create a definition for the term 'poetic prose'. Would you classify the italicised passages as 'poetic prose'? Why/why not?
 - In your opinion, what is the effect of these italicised passages? What do they add to the reading experience?
 - Each short italicised passage is a description of the natural world. What is the relationship of these short passages to the characters? Can each passage be attributed to a single character, or are they broader than that?
 - What is the relationship between these nature passages and the natural disaster that looms for the community?
20. Re-read page 46.
- Why do you think Liza feels bored? Do you think she has a 'tragic life'?
 - How do you think Sam can 'save' her from this? How might Liza think Sam could 'save' her?
21. Re-read pages 47–50.
- Compare and contrast the characterisation of Cray and Don in this chapter. Support your argument with evidence from the text.
 - How are conflicting concepts of masculinity portrayed through their working relationship?

22. *But he was bored too, if he was honest. Underwhelmed. Still on the farm, following his old man's dream. He tried to think. Had it ever become his own dream?* (p. 56)
- Do you think it was ever Ferg's dream to run his father's farm? Why/why not?
 - What other dreams do you think he may have had? In what ways might Ferg's life be seen to be fulfilled?
 - Why is it important to follow your own dreams and not only those your parents may have for you?
 - If your family owned a farm, do you think it would be fair of them to expect you to take it over?
23. *You can't actually change the past. Lord, how he wanted to! He'd hated Ferg and Liza at times – despised them – for how good their lives were.* (p. 59)
- How is the theme of regret portrayed in this quote?
 - Are there things you wish you could change about your past, as Mike does? Is it possible to work in a positive way with regret?
24. *'To be our own people,' she eventually managed, in a whisper. 'Instead of ...' And he was quiet for a moment. 'Being other people's people,' he said finally.* (p. 61)
What do you think Cray means here by 'being other people's people'?
25. *'Birth, school, work, death. It's hypnotising, just saying it ... Life according to our parents' generation.'* (p. 68)
- How is the theme of intergenerational difference portrayed in the novel (between Rosie and her parents, and Ferg and his parents)?
 - What values do the older generation hold? What values do the younger generation hold? Why do you think they sometimes come into conflict?
 - What values do you hold that may be different to your own parents or grandparents? Why is this so?
26. *Anyway, all that travelling, Liza thought, all that soul-searching. You could do it in your back garden under the Hills Hoist, find the most serene place in the world next to the agapanthus.* (p. 70)
- Create a definition for the term 'soul-searching'.
 - Do you agree with Liza? Is travel necessary for soul-searching? Why/why not?
 - Do you have a special place you like to go when 'soul-searching'? What is it about this particular setting that draws you to it?
27. What do you think is meant by the following reference to Margaret River: *'If he wants to go, he has to go, Sarah. You never know how you feel about this place until you see it from a distance.'* (p. 82)
28. Re-read page 81.
- Why do you think Margaret River is such a popular destination for 'runaways' like Rosie and Cray?
 - Are there towns in your state or region that are like that?
 - Do you expect the growing population and 'busy' feel will change the town? In what ways?
29. *'Life's not complicated at all,' Cray said gently, turning to her, lying beside him. 'It's we who make it complicated. We fill it with pieces of crap.'* (p. 85)
- Do you agree with Cray?
 - What kinds of 'crap' do you think he is referring to? List five examples.
 - Small-town life can be stifling for those who live there, and it can be a sanctuary for those who choose to seek refuge there. Consider the attitude of each of the characters to life in and around the coastal community of Margaret River. What is it that Rosie, Cray and Mike hope to find by moving there?
30. Re-read pages 95–96.
- In what ways is Cray an 'idealistic hippie'? Is a tree change or sea change hippie in the 90s a different kind of person to the hippies of the 70s?
 - What definitions of 'living' are on offer? Which definition do you identify more closely with? Why?
31. Re-read page 98.
- Create a definition for the term 'depression'.
 - Do you think this might be what Sam describes in this page, although he is too young to know the term?
32. What is the significance of Liza's dream (p. 101)? What real life concerns might it symbolise?
33. *It shuddered with the gusts that found their way along the verandah, that found their way to the marri. The wind, seeking out instruments to play.* (p. 102)
- Collect examples of personification (such as this) throughout the novel.
 - What effect is created by the author's frequent personification of the natural world?
 - Setting plays a vital role in the lives of the characters. Would you argue that nature is portrayed as 'transcendental'?

34. *Cray flopped the book down. Jesus bloody Christ, he thought. I'm only gunna live eighty years. And forty are meant to be spent working; forty trying to make money. People seemed to do anything to get the stuff, and expected him to do the same. And yet they all had those mugs with Countdown to the weekend and Thank God it's Friday on their desks. The least you could do, he reckoned, was have a job that fulfilled the basic human need of pleasure.* (p. 109)
- Do you agree with Cray?
 - What job do you think could bring you 'pleasure'? What is your dream career?
35. *He dug around in his bag and pulled out a bottle of vodka. Surprise, surprise. From one addiction to another. At least this one you could do with family and friends.* (p. 111)
- Why do you think alcohol is such a socially acceptable drug in Australian culture?
 - What are some of the health risks of alcoholism?
 - Mike is a recovering heroin addict. Research the health risks and treatment available for individuals with this addiction.
 - How would you describe Mike's relationship to his addiction, and to his recovery from that addiction?
36. *Rosie stood in the garden overlooking the ocean's midnight blue ... It was so quiet after the radio. Thick quietness. No urban sounds in the distance, no traffic near or far. No voices, even. Just the ticking engine cooling. Hearing the silence, listening to the lack of sound, almost made her panicky. Greys Bay was remote. No, she corrected: peaceful. Both, she compromised.* (p. 112)
- Close your eyes for a five-minute period and focus only on the sounds you hear. Write a free verse poem using these sounds.
 - Create a definition for the term 'remote'.
 - Why do you think Rosie feels on the verge of panic living in Greys Bay as opposed to Fremantle?
37. Re-read page 122.
- Do you think Mike's story supports the idea that it's never too late to change, or to save yourself? Why/why not?
 - How are the themes of guilt, forgiveness and regret represented through the characterisation of Mike?
38. Re-read pages 125–127.
- Consider the characterisation of Ferg in this chapter – do you think he will ever be able to forgive Mike? Why/why not?
 - How is the theme of resentment portrayed through the characterisation of both brothers?
 - In what ways do you think Mike's lifestyle may have made his brother conservative?
39. *Rosie could barely imagine bulldozers there, crushing the scrub, transforming the place into a twig-covered dustbowl, a developer's delight.* (p. 129)
- Are you for or against the planned development at Nurrabup? Why?
 - Why do you think so many locals are opposed?
 - Brainstorm some of the pros and cons of clearing this area for development.
40. *Liza's face clouded. 'Sharks. Developing their way to the bank. Crooks wearing shire councillor outfits. The accountant's in with them, I reckon. Helping them diddle the figures.'* (p. 151) How is the theme of corruption linked to money in this chapter, and throughout the text as a whole?
41. Re-read page 155.
- In what ways is the internet an escape for Sam?
 - What technologies are you passionate about, or do you think you couldn't live without?
 - Imagine you grew up in the 1990s – what technologies do you use today that wouldn't have existed then? How do you imagine your school and social life experiences during childhood would have been different? (e.g. no Instagram, Snapchat or Twitter)
42. *Pip ... decided to keep out of things. She could only watch her children flounder, as though maybe they were just actors on a screen after all, not real people – her people – just outside, shouting in the car, parked on the farm that she and Jack had built from nothing.* (p. 157) Families and relationships can be knotty, difficult things. Why is it important to each of the characters to bother to negotiate them at all?
43. Re-read pages 158–159.
- What is the nature of Mike's epiphany in this chapter?
 - What is it that he has already learned that will equip him to help his brother?
 - What is his role as a character in this novel?

44. *Rosie felt furious – was it too much to ask, to want? A place that was left just as it was? Where birds scooped in and out, animals scuttled low down and the wind sent waves through the bush, like a sheet being thrown over a bed. She shook her head. She couldn't think of anything good that could come out of ploughing it down. Nothing.* (p. 182)
- Is the reader positioned to agree with the novel's protagonist, Rosie, on this issue?
 - In what ways does her characterisation attempt to position readers to accept her point of view?
45. What is the metaphorical import of the fall of Valstran?
- What do you think Sam learns from this? (p. 190)
 - Why do you think the author chose to have the Valstran story end this way?
46. Read the section of Chapter 56 on page 196 that begins, '*If she'd been at the ocean, Liza would have seen it like the wind coming in from the horizon ...*' to the end of the chapter.
- How does setting function to foreshadow danger and create a sense of foreboding?
 - How are simile, metaphor and personification used in describing the natural world?
 - What do you think the wind may symbolise?
47. It can be possible to read the marri tree as a character in its own right. What is its actual and metaphorical role in the unfolding of this story?
48. What is it that Sam sees in Chapter 59? (p. 201)
49. Re-read pages 211–212.
- How is the theme of trauma portrayed in this chapter?
 - This novel is a fictional reimagining of the Gracetown cliff collapse, which occurred at Huzza's Beach on 27 September 1996, and took the lives of nine people. To date, the Gracetown cliff collapse is Western Australia's worst natural disaster. Research media coverage of the disaster using the following website: www.waholiday.com.au/wa-holiday-articles/1996/9/27/wa-cliff-collapse-kills-nine
 - How does the fictional portrayal in *The Break* differ to the historical event? How is it similar?
50. Re-read pages 219–221.
- How is the theme of grief portrayed through the characterisation of each of the main characters following the tragedy?
 - What do you think Mike means when he declares, '*this was life*'? (p. 220)
 - How do the individual characters deal with the tragedy? Compare and contrast the responses of Ferg, Liza, Pip, Mike, Cray and Rosie.
 - How do the relationships between the characters shift and realign after the disaster? Does it change anything fundamental in each of them?
 - Compare the characterisation of Ferg, Liza, Pip, Mike, Cray and Rosie at the beginning and at the end of the novel. Who has changed the most/the least? Why do you think this is?
51. Re-read page 234. How has Mike and Ferg's relationship changed in comparison to the beginning of the novel?
52. Is there something to be said for running away? Which of the characters might be seen to have run away in this novel?
53. How do we see the community interact at different stages of the novel, including in the local pub, at the environmental rallies and in the aftermath of the disaster?
- How might one define a 'community'?
 - Why is community important in this novel (and at all!)?
54. How does Cray, a surfer, make sense of the disaster? What is his contribution to the community's healing process?

LITERACY: COMPOSING TEXTS THROUGH SPEAKING, WRITING AND CREATING

Written comprehension activities

Have students write paragraph answers for the questions above, providing at least one quote from the text to support their claims.

Suggested essay questions

The following questions can be adapted for in-class assessment or used for a take-home research essay:

55. The author has stated, 'all my books have had the natural environment at their core.' Is this true of *The Break*? Discuss.
56. The author has stated, 'It's water and sand, yet so much more than that, and represents so much about our lives and life itself.' Critically analyse the significance of symbolic settings in *The Break*.

57. Debate the validity of the following claim: 'It can be possible to read the marri tree as a character in its own right.' Discuss with reference to its 'actual' and 'metaphorical' role in the story.
58. The author has stated, 'The key worker on the farm may be Fergus, but emotionally it's the women – Pip and Liza – who keep the show on the road. Because it's the emotional that can bring everything down.' Critically discuss the portrayal of masculinity and femininity in *The Break*. Does the novel challenge or reinforce traditional gender roles?
59. The author has stated, 'Rosie struggles to reconcile how she sees herself with how she thinks her parents see her.' How is the theme of 'generational difference' portrayed in *The Break*? Compare and contrast Rosie's relationship with her parents to Ferg and Mike's relationship with their parents.
60. Critically discuss the representation of one or more of the following themes in *The Break*: resentment, forgiveness, regret, family, love, trauma, community, vocation, sibling rivalry, addiction, jealousy.
61. Critically analyse the validity of the following claim: '*The Break* is a quintessential example of the regional Australian novel.'

Oral presentation topics

62. Create a five-minute presentation analysing the author's claim: 'all my books have had the natural environment at their core.' Is this true of *The Break*?
63. Create a five-minute presentation discussing the representation of one or more of the following themes in the text: resentment, forgiveness, regret, family, love, trauma, community, vocation, sibling rivalry, addiction.
64. Create a five-minute presentation critically analysing the validity of the following claim: '*The Break* is a quintessential example of the regional Australian novel.'

Debate

65. In teams of three, have students debate for/against the development of Nurrabup.
66. In teams of three, have students debate the role of newspapers in covering stories of personal tragedy.

Journalism study

67. Research the conventions of a newspaper article. How is it structured? How is it different to an essay or a short story?
68. Act as a journalist – interview people in your community on an issue that interests you. Write a newspaper article on your findings using the following structure:
 - Lead sentence – hook your reader!
 - Introduction – which facts and figures will act as the foundation for your story? Make sure to tell your readers the basics: who, where, when, what and how the story is unfolding.
 - Opening quotation – aim to give your reader a sense of the people involved and their opinions.
 - Main body – what is at the heart of your story?
 - Closing quotation – something that sums up the article.
 - Conclusion – what is a memorable way to end your story?
69. Consider an excursion to a local news station, or invite a guest journalist to speak to your class about their experience in the role.
70. How has journalism changed with the expansion of the internet in the twenty-first century?

Creative writing

71. Write either an epilogue or a prologue for *The Break*. Depending on which you choose, set your prologue/epilogue five years into the past or future. You may do this from any character's point of view.
72. Write a free verse poem on one of the key themes of the novel: resentment, forgiveness, regret, family, love, trauma, community, vocation, sibling rivalry, addiction, jealousy.

General skills to revise in creating texts (through study of *The Break*)

- Model appropriate planning and drafting strategies, including underlining and highlighting key words in an essay question, and analysing the 'directive words' that instruct you how to answer the question (e.g. evaluate, compare and contrast, critically discuss etc.).
- Provide an essay-planning template. Revise how to structure an effective proposition.
- Use the text as stimulus for teaching a number of points of spelling and grammar to improve students' ability to effectively proofread their own work.

General skills to revise in interpreting, analysing, evaluating texts (through study of *The Break*)

- Set small reading activities to encourage students to practise a variety of reading strategies (e.g. skimming through a page to find a relevant quote).
- Set comprehension tasks requiring the students to justify their response with appropriate evidence from the text or their wider reading and viewing.
- Set compare-and-contrast activities to encourage students to make connections between the text and their wider reading and viewing.

CROSS-CURRICULAR LINKS

Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

73. Create a Book Trailer using iMovie/Windows Movie Maker: students can create a storyboard and advertisement for *The Break*.
- a. Source copyright-free images at: www.imagebase.net
 - b. Source creative commons licensed music at: creativecommons.org/legalmusicforvideos

Biology

74. In conjunction with reading *The Break*, have students complete a unit on conservation ecology.
- a. Why is it important to preserve Australia's unique environment?
 - b. What ecosystems and species of plant and animal are currently under threat in your local area? In your state? Across Australia?
 - c. What environmental protection organisations exist and how can you become involved?

Astronomy

75. Sam is fascinated by the night sky: *Behind him, through his parents' bedroom window, Sam could see the two stars of Centaurus, the pointers, showing the way through the sky to the Southern Cross. He loved the Cross, the way some of its stars were brighter than others, loved the way someone had looked up at the sky one night and linked them all together, those five stars and their two pointers, like join-the-dots, even though they were light-years apart from one another, from Earth.* (p. 123)
Complete a unit of study on astronomy with exploration of constellations in the Southern Hemisphere.

Art

76. Research famous Margaret River landscape artists, and view photo collections of the region. Complete a watercolour painting inspired by this research or one of the settings described in the book.

History

77. The events described in this book are a fictional reimagining of the Gracetown cliff collapse, which occurred at Huzza's Beach on 27 September 1996, and took the lives of nine people. To date, the Gracetown cliff collapse is Western Australia's worst natural disaster. Research this event and write a historical report detailing the suspected cause/s, damage, loss of life, and aftermath of the tragedy, both in the immediate term and also with particular reference to the coverage of the 2006 ten-year anniversary of the disaster.

Geography

78. *To get out to Nurrabup Beach you had to drive through Preston, into scrub-covered sand dunes and towards lonely limestone coast that offered long right-hand waves at Gas Bay and Grunters.* (p. 129)
Create a map of the Margaret River region in the south-west of Western Australia.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Visit the author's website: www.debfitzpatrick.com.au

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR □

This book moves irrevocably towards the natural disaster that will redefine its characters' lives. Why was the Gracetown cliff collapse something you wanted to write about?

□

Like many Western Australians, I have a strong relationship to the south-west coast of WA. It's where we go to relax, to play, and to explore a rich and varied environment. I lived and worked in Margaret River and Gracetown in the mid-1990s, and when the cliff collapse happened in 1996, it felt very close to me. I had learned a lot about the community in my time there, and the matter of how individuals and a community cope with such a tragedy was very interesting to me. I wanted to create some characters and see them moving in and out of that setting, learning how to become members of a community. Further, I wanted to explore the idea of community amid tragedy. □

How did you begin the writing process? With the collapse, or with the characters?

My writing began with two things that for me are wrapped up together: the characters and the landscapes around them. I wanted to capture the feeling so many Western Australians have when they are in the Margaret River region – and that feeling is inextricably linked to the natural places that we immerse ourselves in when we are down there. Whether it's the ocean, the forest or the farming land, even the night sky, the sound of gravel under your tyres or the fog of your breath on a freezing down south morning, these places are very much part of that 'down south' experience, so, for me, drawing my characters had to be done from *within* that landscape. In fact, all my books have had the natural environment at their core. □

Is the Western Australian coastline important to you – as a writer and as a person?

Yes. It's immensely evocative, and therefore quite moving for me. It's water and sand, yet so much more than that, and represents so much about our lives and life itself. The WA coastline has also been important to other writers whose work has influenced me: Robert Drewe and Tim Winton. For me it's not necessarily about being 'a beachy person' – I don't have to get wet to get something meaningful from my explorations along our long coast – though of course I do love to throw myself in the drink over the summer months! And every time is like the first time, somehow. I should say, though, that the bush, the forest and the desert all capture my awe in similar and yet different ways as does the coast – it is nature itself that I find so affecting, and therefore such an important part of all of my books. *90 packets of instant noodles*, for example, is about a fifteen-year-old boy who spends three months on his own in a shack close to the Bibbulmun Track in the south-west of WA (a little further inland from where *The Break* is set). The book deals with the experience of an adolescent being alone and immersed in forest and how that sort of 'time-out' in nature, away from the usual distractions and complications of our urban lives, can re-set our minds and hearts as to what is really important, and what really holds meaning in our lives.

It seems that Rosie's anxieties often stem from the process of differentiating herself from her parents. Do you think her concerns are particular to a woman in her early twenties?

Rosie struggles to reconcile how she sees herself with how she thinks her parents see her. She is trying to forge her own views and make her own choices, but the opinions of her parents, as they often are with people in their twenties, are never far from her mind. She is anxious to stake her own moral, social and political claim, but she's aware that doing so is to defy much of what she has learnt from them, and therefore defies them to an extent – and this is despite the fact she has long been 'independent' of them.

Rosie is also very keen to place herself outside of many of her peers. She is critical of a couple that is about to marry, and who have just bought a house; indeed, she and Cray outwardly reject the trappings of affluence. I suspect that rebelling against the views and behaviours of adults close to us is largely the territory of younger people, though I don't think it's restricted to young women.

It often seemed to me that this is a story about the pleasure – and pain – of being a woman defined by relationships: a wife, a mother, a daughter. Do you think of this story as somehow belonging to the women: to Rosie, Liza and to Pip?

Yes, the comforts and joys that relationships offer and can be offered, and the pain that necessarily goes with them – *The Break* definitely explores the tender yin and yang of that. The story is the women's, in many senses, though it relies on the men to see it through. Rosie's search is the dominant one, yet it's Cray who has brought her to Margaret River in many ways. The key worker on the farm may be Fergus, but emotionally it's the women – Pip and Liza – who keep the show on the road. Because it's the emotional that can bring everything down. And when Mike rocks up, there's a lot of conflict to work through.

As a parent, did you find it difficult to write about the tragedy that visits Liza and Ferg?

It's funny how you can separate writing from your own life, even when it might be quite close to the bone! Somehow, when the words are coming out on the page in front of me, they are the characters' words and feelings, even if those are drawn from my imagination. I'm not someone who cries as I re-read my books' saddest bits. For me, what was hardest about this was making sure I was true to the experience parents (and the wider community) might go through in a tragedy such as this, and within that I had to make sure Liza and Ferg's reactions were clearly their own. Of course, I reflected on my own young family and how we would cope in such circumstances – but I don't let myself go too far into those thoughts, because they are so very upsetting. I leave that up to my characters.