

## THE SOUND SARAH DRUMMOND

### ABOUT THE BOOK

Wiremu Heke is newly a man when the chiefs call a meeting about Captain Kelly and the *Sophia* in Aramoana, Otakau, in 1825. Eight years have passed, and still his people wait for an opportunity to avenge the family members they lost in the slaughter of 1817. Ordered to work aboard a sealer to track down Kelly, Wiremu finds himself on a voyage across the Southern Ocean with a crew of men from many nations. Christened 'Billhook' by the men, his priorities begin to change as he witnesses the abuse of Indigenous women by his shipmates. He makes it his mission to protect a young Aboriginal girl stolen from her family and taken aboard their vessel. For each of them – sealers, women and child alike – their survival relies on a complex web of relationships and dependencies.

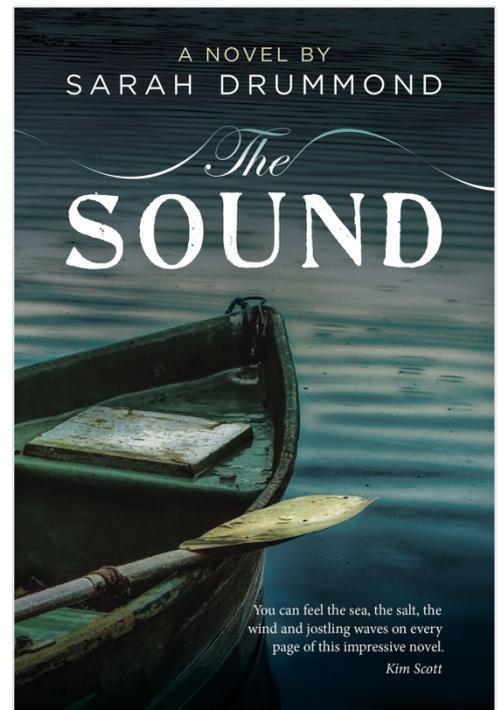
*The Sound* is based on a true story of the men, women and children who travelled from Bass Strait to King George Sound in 1825 on the sealing schooners *Hunter* and *Governor Brisbane*.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Drummond is a fisherwoman, PhD student and blogger. She is the author of *Salt Story: of sea-dogs and fisherwomen* (Fremantle Press 2013) and has had essays and short fiction published in *Purple Prose*, *Shadow Plays: an anthology of speculative fiction*, *Short Stories Australia*, *indigo journal*, *The Best Australian Essays 2010*, *LINQ Journal*, *Kurungabaa Journal* and *Overland*.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kind of a man is Wiremu Heke? Why has the author chosen him as the narrator of this tale?
2. What constraints might there be for the author who undertakes to write historical fiction rather than a novel drawn from the imagination? What freedoms might this approach allow?
3. How might an author manage the 'gaps' that are created by this approach (i.e. where information cannot be found, for instance, on a particular character or event)?
4. How does the writer inhabit a 19<sup>th</sup> century sensibility in her depiction of the every day lives of the sealers?
5. How does this sensibility make itself felt in relation to the experiences and transactions between sealers and the indigenous women they take with them?
6. Do the descriptions of seal hunting offend our 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibilities? In what ways do the author's own knowledge of fishing and the ocean reveal themselves in this story?
7. Most of the text is written in the third person from the point of view of Billhook. However the beginning and ending segments that frame this story are in first person instead. Why do you think the author has chosen to frame the story this way?



8. Consider the following scene from p. 107:

*As if she'd seen his thoughts spread out for her like a blanket, Sal broke away from talking with Dancer and Mary and said, "What are you doing here, Billhook?"*

*He was shocked away from his memory of the oily flesh of eels and all he could think to say was, "Here? We are looking for food."*

*The women were quiet as they waited, staring at him.*

*"No, no! In King George Sound. With that mob," she flicked a finger towards the sealers' camp on Breaksea Island.*

*"Same thing as you, Sal," he said.*

*She looked upset and reached out to pat his arm. "Oh ... poor Mister Hook. Did some nasty whitefella grab you off a beach too?"*

*Dancer and Mary erupted. Their laughter seemed to infect the child until she was hiccupping and out of breath. Sal smacked the rock with her palm, nodding, her eyes shut, her lips splitting into a toothsome grin.*

What complex roles and relationships and agencies are made evident in this exchange?

9. In what ways could *The Sound* be read as a feminist text?
10. This novel is a set on a boat, off the mainland, at the time just before British colonial law was established in Western Australia. What power is there in a story that is played out at the margins, via this kind of temporal or geographical liminality? (You might find it useful to look at Foucault's quote on boat as heterotopia at p. 222).
11. Explore the section at the end of the book called 'Relics, Curiosities and Autographs'. Use a number of these historical fragments as a beginning point to discuss the relationship between history and fiction, and why it is sometimes that history might be stranger than fiction.
12. Why do you think the author chooses to end her novel where she does?

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

### ***What was your inspiration for writing *The Sound*?***

I first heard about the Breaksea Island sealing community about ten years ago, and I wondered at the wildness of that mob. I thought their story sounded far more interesting than the usual settlement history of King George Sound, where the Breaksea Islanders tend to be relegated to a couple of lines in the history books. I wanted to find out who they were, where they came from and how they survived despite their circumstances.

### ***What made you choose this era, and these characters, to write about? And why did you give the story to Billhook?***

Because it was still a contact period between the Aboriginal people and Europeans in Western Australia, there are great opportunities for a writer to explore these interpersonal relationships on a more intimate scale. It was also quite lawless, at least for the sealers. So there was a lot of scope for a writer to tease out how people respond to situations where they are not constrained by social contracts and legal systems. The characters fascinated me. They came from all over the world and so the story, although based in King George Sound, is global in its nature. They were tough, rough and resourceful people.

William Hook first sparked my interest when I read that he had informed on his crew mate Samuel Bailey. His statement to Major Edmund Lockyer is the blueprint for this novel, by the way. I wondered why he informed, because the sealers were his only family at the time and they all depended upon each other for survival. I speculated that he took a moral stance against some of the sealers' behaviour. That made him an interesting narrator, and his sense of what is right and wrong drives the story.

***Were there limitations to what you could discover about the backgrounds of different characters – points at which the trail you were on went cold? How did you overcome this?***

Yes, some of the characters were very difficult to track down. Names were spelled incorrectly, or not recorded at all, most of the historical characters were illiterate and left no written records of their own, and a myriad of other glitches happened during the research. This can be a blessing for a writer of historical fiction. It allows the writer to step into the negative spaces, to dream, imagine and invoke. And a writer can also research 'around' the character, to form an idea of what life would have been like for that person.

***In many Australian novels, we read about Australia as a continent inhabited on from the land, whose characters look out to sea. A novel such as this one utterly reverses this dynamic. Do you think that this altered perspective of the island continent viewed from the water enables us to consider the entity that is 'Australia' in a different way?***

In the early years of colonisation, most business was done from the sea. Ship's crews were the equivalent of the modern day truckie and everyone travelled by sea if they needed to cover vast distances. The view of the land from the sea was a European settler's view of Australia. I think we have turned our backs on the sea, to become a culture obsessed with land, and on colonisation narratives that focussed on the taming of the bush. It was a second form of colonisation really: that of the mind. I mean, if non-indigenous Australians still promoted themselves as a sea people, how could they legitimately claim to be 'of the land'? If hungry for the spoils of the great south land, the sealers definitely understood that they were only visitors. Acts of negotiation or violence could get them what they wanted but they knew they didn't belong here.

***How does your own experience of being a fisherwoman affect your approach to the subject matter?***

Working on small boats as a deckhand was just about the closest physical experience a contemporary writer could have, when it comes to writing about 19<sup>th</sup> century sealers. I was also learning how to sail, which is quite different to handling boats with outboard motors. Although I've never been good at killing animals, fishing can occasionally be visceral and challenging when it comes to the blood and guts. Finally, when working on boats you are always have a 'weather eye' out, which meant I was constantly observing the water, the wind and the coast with both a deckie and a writer's mind.

***Has writing this book changed the way you see yourself as an 'Australian' – or, more particularly, has it altered your perspective as an inhabitant of the Great Southern.***

Definitely. It helped me understand the settlement narrative for what it is – a narrative. Writing the Aboriginal characters, who lived in the Great Southern and were subject to some pretty extreme treatment by the sealers and other visitors, forced me to visit the story from their perspective. On my mum's side (she immigrated as a ten-pound Pom) I am first generation Australian. This is my home. The journey of research and writing has made me feel profoundly grateful to be living in such a beautiful place. To a certain extent, within the bounds of my origins, I understand what happened here now.

## ***What is next for Sarah Drummond?***

Well! I am percolating another yarn of historical fiction at the moment. Some of it is on the page and some is still in my head. I'm enjoying beginning the journey of new research. My recent change in location (still on the south coast) has contributed to fresh ideas about relationships, landscape, physically and socially isolated places, secret-keeping and historic crimes.

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