

THE SOUND

SARAH DRUMMOND

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YEAR LEVEL: Y11+

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITIES: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures; Sustainability

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 smuggled 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*.

THEMES

- Imperialism and colonisation
- Racism
- Inequality
- Exploration
- Adventure
- Violence
- Revenge
- Morality
- Honour
- Family
- Identity

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

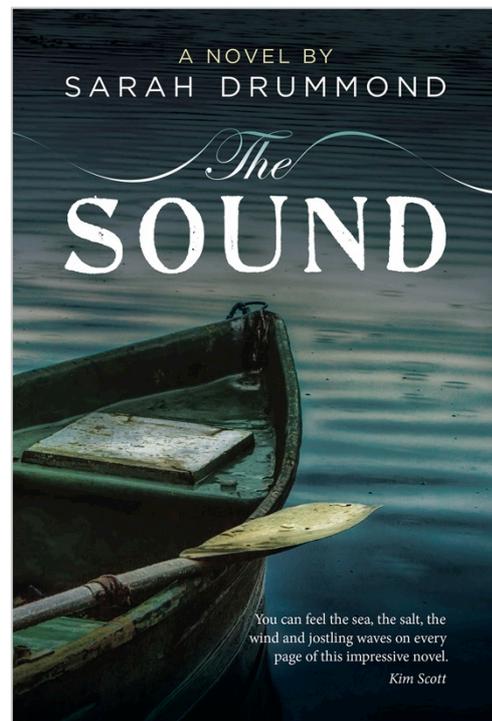
Y11–12 English

Y11–12 Literature

Y11–12 Modern History

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Author's website: <http://sarahdrummond.org>
- Biographies and bibliography of the people of Bass Strait, Tasmanian waters, to 1850: <https://bassstraitto1850.wordpress.com>



CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

1. What are your first impressions of Billhook (Wiremu Heke) and Samuel Bailey? How would you describe the personalities of each? Compare and contrast the two men using a Venn diagram model.
2. Would you classify Billhook as the protagonist of the novel? Why/why not? Is he a hero or an anti-hero? Would you classify Samuel Bailey as the antagonist? What about characters like Jimmy the Nail – where do they fit on a spectrum of morality? To what extent do their personal histories and present circumstances affect or excuse their behaviour in this context?
3. The author uses inference to great effect throughout this text – find examples of ways in which events (such as the violence directed towards Tama Hine) are hinted at without being explicitly described. What is the effect of allowing the reader to ‘fill in the gaps’ and infer meaning? To what extent might these gaps be created by the fact that this story is drawn from history, rather than being a work purely of the imagination?
4. What genres might be used to classify *The Sound*? Historical fiction? The epic narrative? A quest novel? A colonial text? A combination of these? What characteristics of the book lend themselves to such labels? Provide examples with page references.
5. *The Sound* is structured through sections pertaining to specific dates and locations along Billhook’s journey, much like a sailor’s logbook. 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?
6. Chart the moral dilemmas that Billhook faces in the course of his journey in order to create a character map. How does he reflect, grow or change following each dilemma? Have his values and beliefs been altered during the course of the story? In what ways does he remain the same?
7. How are each of the female characters constructed in the novel? Compare and contrast the qualities embodied by Mary, Dancer, Sal and Tama Hine. How is the theme of gender inequality portrayed through each of their storylines? What is the effect of including chapters written from the point of view of Moenann and Dancer (e.g. pp. 84 and 145)? In what ways could *The Sound* be described as a feminist text?
8. Would you say that the characters aboard the *Governor Brisbane* have become desensitised to violence? Why do you think stealing a child crosses a personal line for most of the crew? How does each character deal differently with trauma?
9. What do you think Wiremu Heke means when he says, “Fire in the water, Tama Hine.” (p. 162)? What symbolism might lie beneath these two elements?
10. How is the theme of environmental sustainability depicted in descriptions of life as a sealer in 1825? What are the current laws on whaling/sealing in Australia? Across the globe?
11. Can the *Governor Brisbane* be considered a liminal space? Does it exist outside the realms of law and reason? In what way is the timeframe in which it is set also liminal? In what ways does the story reflect or depart from the history of colonisation and the destruction of indigenous lives and culture that is to come? You might also consider this question in the context of Foucault’s thoughts on a boat as a heterotopia (p. 222).
12. What does this story of ‘first contact’ between the original Australians and the foreign sealers add anything to the broader narrative of ‘Australian history’?
13. Do the descriptions of seal hunting offend our twenty-first century sensibilities? In what ways does the author’s own knowledge of fishing and the ocean make itself apparent in this story?
14. Could this story have been set in another era? Why/why not?

Essay questions / oral presentation topics

1. Critically analyse the representation of one or more of the following themes in *The Sound*: colonisation, imperialism, racism, gender inequality, revenge, violence, morality, honour, family, identity.
2. 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, relationships and agencies are revealed in this exchange?

3. 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.

Creative writing

1. Imagine you are a sealer in 1825 – write a short story detailing a week in your life. What difficulties will arise? How will you feel working away from your family? How will you overcome these challenges?
2. Write a speculative fiction piece detailing the invasion of your home by creatures (human or otherwise) that are determined to take control.
3. Identify the key features of an epic narrative/quest tale, then craft your own historical fiction piece of 2000–3000 words about an explorer living in one of the following time periods: 1600–1700; 1700–1800; 1800–1900.
4. *He wasn’t sure about Samuel Bailey. Bailey never looked frightened. Not even when that wave rose right up from the sea like a fist and punched the whole boat and crew onto the rocks, sucked back and dropped them again onto the barnacles. Barnacles like a man’s hand. (p. 27).*
 - a. How does the author use figurative language (e.g. simile, personification etc.) in passages such as the one above? Consider in particular the parameters the author has set for herself around the kinds of images and language she deploys.
 - b. Experiment with incorporating figurative language in your own creative writing while completing the writing prompts above. Practise being disciplined about the parameters of *your* figurative language use.
5. Write a critical book review of *The Sound* for your school website – in your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the novel? To whom would you recommend this book and why?

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 from the land, whose characters look out to sea. A novel such as this one literally reverses the subject position. 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 19th 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 emigrated 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.

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