

THE COVES

DAVID WHISH-WILSON

ISBN (PB): 9781925591279

YEAR LEVEL: Y11–12

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITY: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

ABOUT THE BOOK

San Francisco, 1849: a place gripped by gold fever, swarming with desperate men come to seek their fortune. Among them are former convicts, Australians quick to seize control in a town without masters, a town for the taking. Into this world steps an Australian boy in search of his mother. Just twelve years old, and all alone in a time of opportunism, loyalty and violent betrayal, Samuel Bellamy must learn to become one of the Sydney Coves if he is to survive.

Content warning: *The Coves* deals with some challenging themes and, at times, presents confronting scenes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Whish-Wilson was born in Newcastle, NSW, but grew up in Singapore, Victoria and WA. He left Australia aged eighteen to live for a decade in Europe, Africa and Asia, where he worked as a barman, actor, street seller, petty criminal, labourer, exterminator, factory worker, gardener, clerk, travel agent, teacher and drug-trial guinea pig. He now lives in Fremantle and coordinates the creative writing program at Curtin University.

THEMES

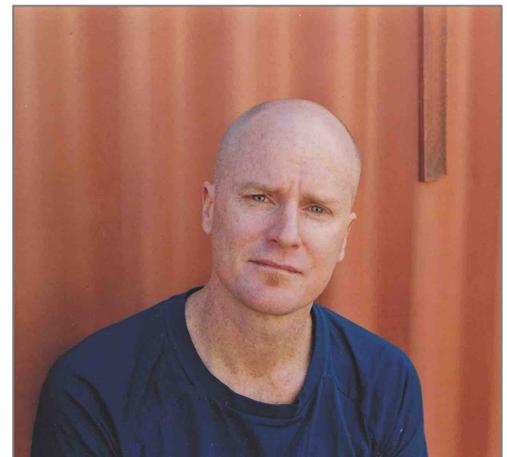
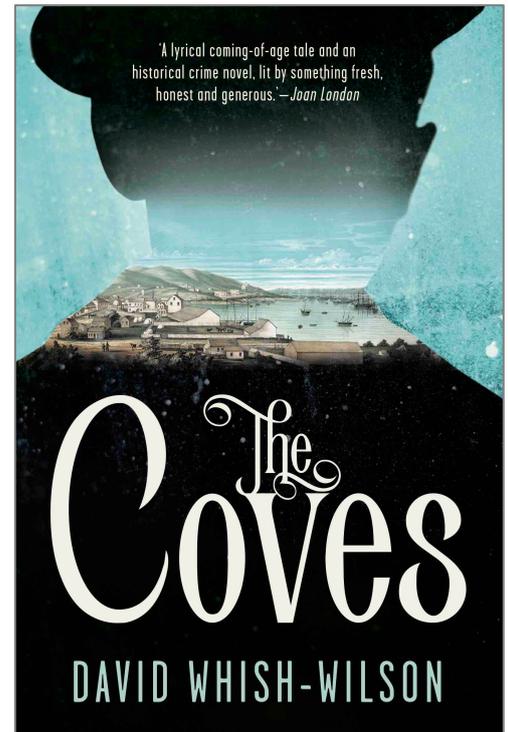
- Belonging
- Survival
- Power and vulnerability
- Desire
- Innocence and experience
- Fear
- Freedom
- Performing roles

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

- Y11–12 English or Literature (depending on the text list restrictions)
- English – focus on genre, language patterns and perspective
- Literature – national identity, the elements and forms that shape meaning
- Cross Curriculum Priorities – Aboriginal and Torres Strait histories and cultures

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Author's website: www.davidwhish-wilson.com



CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

1. Australia's colonial history is infused with crime narratives. Read Stephen Knight's essay '200 Years of Crime Fiction' (theconversation.com/friday-essay-from-convicts-to-contemporary-convictions-200-years-of-australian-crime-fiction-98845) and consider the way crime stories can have a uniquely Australian flavour. What do we expect of the characters in these tales and how might the setting and themes be different to other crime stories from other locations?
2. Clement and Sam include references to King Lear and Lord Byron in conversation to help express their ideas. What does this indicate about the characters and what does it help to communicate?
3. Many of the characters in *The Coves* are outsiders, people who inhabit a world outside of society's margins. But what happens when you have a society made up of outsiders like San Francisco? Discuss the role of social margins and how we respond to them in *The Coves*.
4. This is a novel of in-between or liminal locations – shorelines, harbours, river plains and a leaky whaler boat. Explore the significance of these places as locations of interaction and merging communities.

Narrative elements

1. Consider the impact of the narrator on the novel. It is told from a third person point of view, but the narrator is uniquely connected to Sam. How does this locate the reader in relation to the story?
2. Many of the settings in the novel have symbolic significance to Sam, and to the way we understand the novel. Explore the importance of the following settings: the ship, the porch of the mollie house, Ai's backyard, The Stuck Pig, Mrs Hogan's Lodgings, Nob Hill, the square.
3. Sam's Guides – in a coming of age narrative an important archetype is the guide. Various characters function as Sam's guide in this narrative, but some are more significant than others. Explore the following characters in relation to this archetype – Magistrate George Moore, Sarah Proctor, Thomas Keane and Clement.
4. This novel relies heavily on symbolism to construct the narrative. Track and interpret the role of the following symbols: the dog, the whaler boat, the hurdy-gurdy, scars, yeller/gold.
5. There are also various motifs used throughout the novel to foreshadow moments of trauma or turmoil. Consider the following as you did with the symbols, and explain the context in which they appear: music, ghosts/deaths, the serpent dream, crimes, the earthquakes/sinkholes, the shoreline.
6. Identify and describe the climax of the novel and how this focuses our attention on the genre of the novel.

Essay questions / oral presentation topics

1. Some texts can be said to blend genres. How has Whish-Wilson played with genre in *The Coves*? How might the use of blended genres influence or shape the reader's response?
2. *The Coves* could be read alongside other coming of age stories such as *Jasper Jones* by Craig Silvey and *My Brilliant Career* by Miles Franklin. Each story tells the story of the individual, with lessons of self-knowledge, but the story can also be considered as a story of the young nation developing self-knowledge. If this reading is applied to *The Coves*, what might we infer about the state of Australia as a nation in 1849?

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