

*Breath* by Tim Winton (Picador) R173  
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It is a commonplace derived from the nineteenth-century realist novel that true universality in fiction originates not in grandiose abstractions and portentous generalisation, but in fidelity to a closely-observed, precisely localised reality.

In his new novel, as in his previous book, *The Turning*, Tim Winton confines himself to a tiny segment of his native Australia – here the little town of Sawyer, a saw-milling village on the south coast of Western Australia. Where he breaks new ground is in placing surfing at the centre of his novel, and basing on that apparently limited activity an absorbing reflection on life and death – more specifically, life as simultaneously a defiance and a courting of death.

The narrator and main character is Bruce Pike, known as Pikelet. Now a middle-aged paramedic, he recollects his youth in Sawyer, his friendship and rivalry with the devil-may-care Loonie, and their relationship, as protégés and disciples, with the charismatic Sando, a thirty-something hippy-surfer, and his embittered wife Eva, an ex-freeform skier incapacitated by a knee injury.

Pikelet is first drawn to surfing under the spell of “How strange it was to see men doing something beautiful. Something pointless and elegant.” But under the tutelage of Sando, surfing becomes more than something beautiful; or rather, it becomes more beautiful the more dangerous it is. Encouraged and goaded by Sando, the two boys take on ever more challenging waves, driven as much by the exhilaration of danger as by the thrill of riding the waves: “in time we surfed to fool with death – but for me there was still the outlaw feeling of doing something graceful, as if dancing on water was the best and bravest thing a man could do.”

With Sando they form a local elite, “a secret society of three”, holding themselves aloof from the more pedestrian “ordinary” surfers hanging around the beaches. Indeed, in Sando’s vocabulary, ‘ordinary’ is the ultimate insult, designating the dull adherence to safe routine that surfing, as they do it, represents a defiance of: “What we did and what we were after, we told ourselves, was the extraordinary.”

As Sando explicates it to his two young disciples: “You’re out there, thinking: am I gunna die? Am I fit enough for this? Do I know what I’m doin? Am I solid? Or am I just ... ordinary?”

The surfing sequences are terrific: never can the movements and patterns of waves, their beauty and terror, have been described in such apparently inexhaustible detail as here.

*Breath* is, amongst other things, a ravishing paean to surfing.

But if the realist novel is founded on its fidelity to a literal universe, at its best it elevates the elements of that universe onto a metaphorical level transcending its origins. If surfing is the activity that provides the novel’s frame of reference and meaning, its related central metaphor is, as the book’s title announces, breath.

From even before they meet Sando, Pikelet and Loonie scare onlookers by diving under the water of the local river and clinging to the weeds for as long as their lungs can bear it: “We scared people, pushing each other harder and further until often as not we scared ourselves.”

In their surfing there is the same mixture of testing their own endurance and challenging others: “More than once since then I’ve wondered whether the life-threatening high jinks

that Loonie and I and Sando and Eva got up to in the years of my adolescence were anything more than a rebellion against the monotony of drawing breath. ... the human will to control is as much about asserting power over your own body as exercising it on others.”

It is in Eva, “a woman not in the least bit ordinary”, that this assertion of power reaches its most sinister level, as she forces the fifteen-year old Pikelet to join in her sexual games, which entail his participation in her self-asphyxiation. In depriving herself of breath for the sake of heightened sensation, Eva represents the most self-destructive aspect of the “rebellion against the monotony of drawing breath.”

Part of Pikelet’s painful growing up is the recognition that “Maybe ordinary’s not so bad,” that Sando and Eva in their relentless search for sensation, and in their proserlytising of their young disciples, are not so much extraordinary as just irresponsible. Living as they do on her father’s trust fund, they haven’t even earned the independence they glory in: they’re really just spoilt rich kids out for kicks.

Having salvaged what he can of a life near-ruined by Sando and Eva (Loonie is not so lucky), the middle-aged Pikelet can return to the simpler beauty that surfing was to him before it became an assertion of power: “the sweet momentum, the turning force underfoot, and those brief, rare moments of grace.”

In its exquisite control, its masterly coordination of the contradictory impulses driving its characters, *Breath* achieves something of this sweet momentum and those moments of grace.

In the midst of the irresponsibility of magic realism, the solemnities of post-colonialism, the coy evasions of post-modernism, Tim Winton reminds us of the reach, the grip, the stable material base of the realist novel, its accountability to a real world in which actions have meanings and consequences, and its celebration of the ordinary even in its search for the extraordinary.