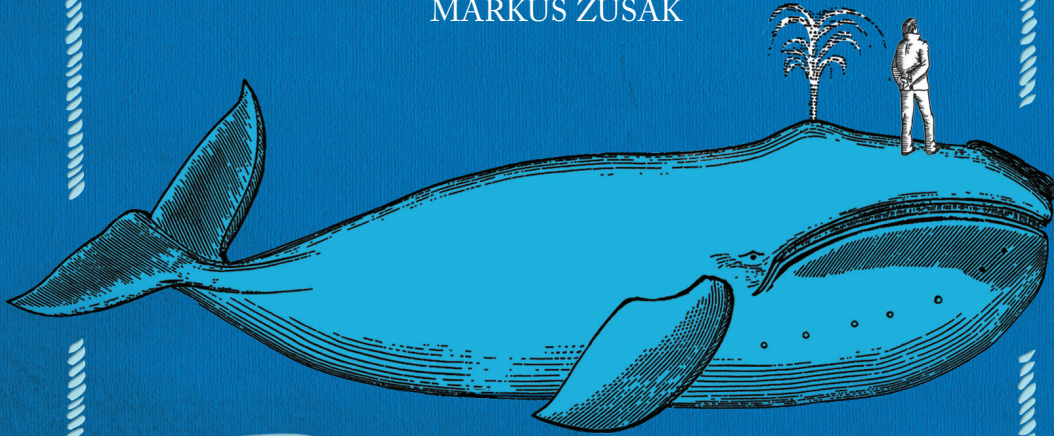
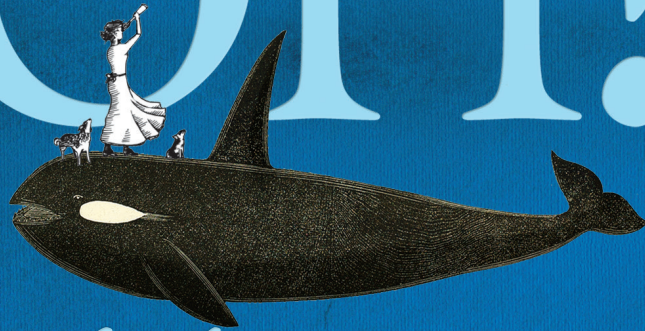


'Beautiful and brutal, witty and kind, *Rush Oh!* is a story of great surprises and a beating heart – a book to never forget.'

MARKUS ZUSAK



RUSH OH!



Shirley Barrett

Book Notes

'Hugely funny and peopled with a cast of characters I came to treasure like my own friends, *Rush Oh!* reminded me why I love reading.'

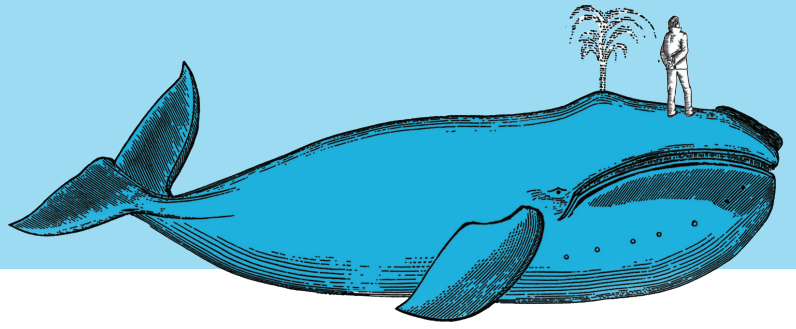
HANNAH KENT, author of *Burial Rites*

A DISTINCTIVE AUSTRALIAN VOICE

Shirley Barrett is a filmmaker and screenwriter, best known for the Cannes Film Festival award-winning *Love Serenade*. She has written and directed a further two feature films (*Walk the Talk*, *South Solitary*) and worked extensively as a director in television (*Love My Way*, *Offspring*, *Wild Boys*). *Rush Oh!* is Shirley's first novel.



Synopsis



When the eldest daughter of a whaling family in Eden, New South Wales, sets out to chronicle the particularly difficult season of 1908, the story she tells is poignant and hilarious, filled with drama and misadventure.

Swinging from her own hopes and disappointments, both domestic and romantic, to the challenges that beset their tiny whaling operation, Mary's tale is entirely relatable despite the hundred-odd years that separate her world from ours.

Chronicling her family's struggle to survive the season and her own attempts to navigate an all-consuming crush on an itinerant whaleman with a murky past, *Rush Oh!* is also a celebration of an extraordinary episode in Australian history when a family of whalers formed a fond, unique allegiance with a pod of Killer whales - and in particular, a Killer whale named Tom.

Thematic plot and summary



Voices Whisper...

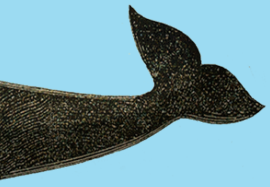
'That the Killers, true to their custom, are about; and whales may be expected soon to show – or cry 'hello,' and bellow.' (p. 13)

Rush Oh! is the irresistibly charming memoir of the fictional Mary Davidson, eldest daughter of real-life whale man, George 'Fearless' Davidson. Many years after the closure of the family whaling station, Mary sets out to document a particularly troublesome whaling season for the benefit of her beloved nephews. With disarming wit and whimsy, *Rush Oh!* provides a unique snapshot of early 20th century coastal Australian life, and delivers a deeply relatable and endearing heroine in the awkward and earnest Mary.

Set in Eden, New South Wales, Mary's story begins in June 1908 with the arrival of a stranger at the Davidson family home. This visitor is soon introduced as John Beck, a former Methodist Minister seeking a sea change, volunteering to join the crew of whalers under the command of Mary's father, George. Mary is immediately taken with the handsome and enigmatic outsider, but the mild-mannered facade he presents may be hiding a more sinister truth...

While the mystery of John Beck's past and the slow-burning but ill-fated romance between he and Mary is threaded throughout the novel, it is the Davidson family at the heart of this story. Nineteen-year-old Mary lives with her father, two brothers and three sisters, her mother having passed away some years ago. The full extent of her family could also be said to include the steadfast whale men in her father's employ, and the Killer whales who work so closely with them. As the eldest Davidson girl, it is up to Mary to take care of everyone in the house and on the waves.

With much nostalgia, and some sadness and regret, Mary recounts the poor whaling season of 1908, to which she feels she can 'trace the beginning of the despondency that characterised (her father's) later years', pinpointing the loss of a particularly valuable black whale after a lengthy and traumatic chase (p. 152).

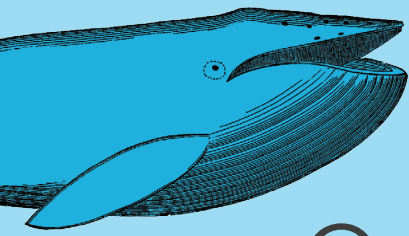


Thematic plot and summary (cont'd)

Throughout the novel are allusions to events in the future up to 1938, the year in which Mary writes the memoir. These allusions mould the prism through which both the narrator and the reader view the events that she portrays. Mary, as narrator, is aware that her memory is fickle, acknowledging how time and distance not only impact the accuracy of her recollections, but also how she interprets their significance. The story tumbles out of her memory like a stream, diverging and digressing, torrenting in parts and trickling in others. In aiming to simply document the whaling season for her nephews, Mary inadvertently reveals much of her inner life and addresses a range of social issues and themes, from race relations to gender roles, from animal cruelty to the role that myths and legends have historically played in our understanding of the world.

And though we know from Mary's narration that the unsuccessful and tragic whaling season of 1908 was the beginning of the end for George 'Fearless' Davidson and his whaling crew, the story ends on a quietly hopeful note:

'We'll let him go,' said my father, opening up the throttle. 'He'll be bigger next year.' (p. 349)



Questions for discussion

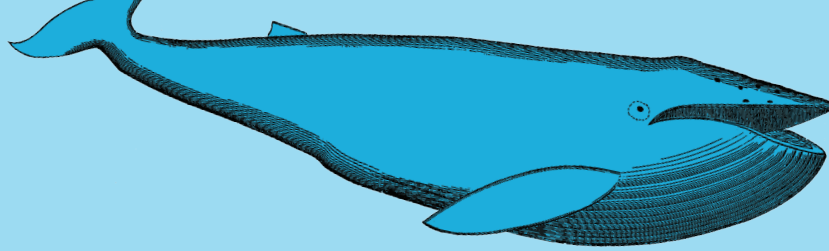
1. 'Many times in the ensuing years, I have run this moment through again in my mind; taken it out of my small box of precious things and turned it over, examining its every facet minutely' (p. 49).

'And yet even to attempt to describe this moment between us seems to diminish it somehow, so I shall desist from going any further. I have only these memories to hold on to, and am anxious lest I wear them out' (p.143).

Written as a memoir, what does *Rush Oh!* have to say about the nature of memory?

2. *Rush Oh!* is set in rural-coastal Australia at the start of the 20th century. This is prior to Aboriginal Australians being recognised as citizens or granted the right to vote. White Australia at this time (and even to a considerable extent today) was not kind to the Aboriginal community. However, the Aboriginal whalers in this story are treated with great respect and fairness. Indeed, as Shirley Barrett explains in the Author Note, they were 'highly regarded for their superior eyesight and ability' and 'by most accounts... (they) received the same pay and conditions as the white whale men' (p. 355). How is the contrast between their treatment by the whaling crew and by the wider community handled in the novel?
3. 'To see this noble creature slaughtered by our own kith and kin was very difficult for us, and we found ourselves unable to respond with any civility to the hearty congratulations that were heaped upon us in the aftermath' (p. 281).

It is now widely accepted in western society that killing whales is inherently wrong. It is understood to be both cruel to the whale, which is romanticised as a noble and majestic creature, and damaging to the ecological stability of our oceans. Similar views are also often held in regards to hunting for sport and, increasingly, in the treatment of our livestock. What does *Rush Oh!* indicate about changing attitudes towards animal welfare and environmental responsibility?



Questions for discussion (cont'd)

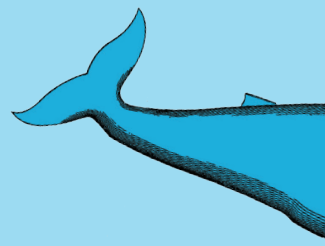
4. 'My sisters and I were slave to a great many 'kitchen superstitions', some of which we had learned from others, and many of we had simply invented ourselves' (p. 2).

'I happened to comment in passing that after sweeping out the kitchen, I had accidentally left the broom in the corner of the room. I reminded her that we used to believe this indicated that the sweeper would shortly meet her true love' (p. 341). While Mary addresses her family's superstitions with humour and some flippancy, do you think there is a part of her that truly believes in them, even as an adult?

5. As Shirley Barrett concedes in her Author Note, it's difficult not to feel 'nostalgic for a time when the killer whales' annual arrival in Twofold Bay warranted an excited snippet in the local newspaper' (p. 358). Indeed, the whalers and the troupe of killer whales are much celebrated in the town of Eden today. The Eden Killer Whale Museum has a number of informative displays about the whales and the history of the area, while the original home of George 'Fearless' Davidson is preserved as a tourist attraction. Given our current distaste for whaling, what do you think fuels this nostalgia?
6. 'In truth, I suspect that the real reason 'Stern All, Boys!' was deemed unworthy of a prize is that the subject matter was considered unsuitable for a young lady' (p. 7). Traditional gender roles are deeply embedded in the Davidson family and society in general. In what ways does Mary conform to these roles, and in what ways does she challenge them?
7. "I think you will find that there is a lot of blood, perhaps more than one would reasonably expect."

"Yes," murmured the stranger. "That is so often the case." (p. 9)

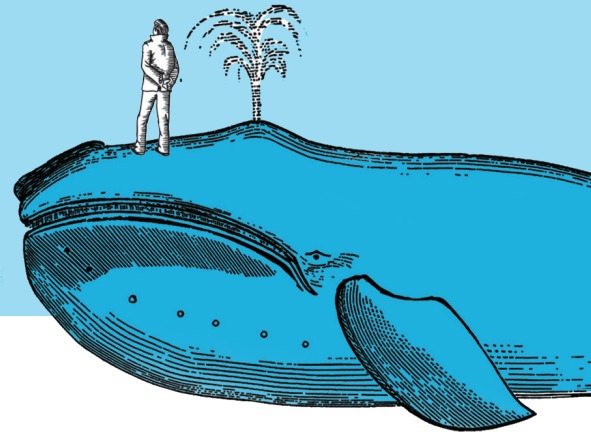
Considering the fact that John Beck is a clergyman with no whaling experience, what could he have meant by this? How does this foreshadow the rumours brought to light later in the novel?



Questions for discussion (cont'd)

8. Familial responsibility plays a profound role in Mary Davidson's life, from 1908 (when the story begins) to 1938 (when the story is being ostensibly written). Mary spends her life working hard and making sacrifices for her family. She lives with her father until his death and, at age 44, moves in with her younger sister's family. 'It is not an especially large house, but I have the back room, a covered-in verandah, and I find it quite suitable for my needs' (p. 327). Do you believe Mary is satisfied with where her hard work and sacrifices have brought her? Is she pragmatic and sensible, or unfulfilled?
9. 'To be honest, I am beginning to feel somewhat impatient with myself about it all... So I will provide this one small memory before moving on with the story: that upon kissing me beneath the mulberry trees that night, he murmured softly that my lips tasted deliciously of blackberry cordial (excise all this later)' (p. 344). Mary clearly means for all of these romantic and personal details to be removed from her recount; what do you think motivates her to write them out in the first place?
10. Legends and myths are frequently referenced in *Rush Oh!* – from the terrifying bunyip (pp. 59-64) to the belief held by the Aboriginal whale men 'that each individual Killer whale represented the reincarnated spirit of a deceased tribe member' (p. 238). In what ways do these myths shape the characters' experiences and understanding of the world? Discuss the myths and legends you grew up with and how they affected your own perception of the world.
11. Many of the animals in *Rush Oh!* are given names and imbued with distinct characters: Old Tom, the lead Killer whale with the 'demeanour... of a cheeky schoolboy' (p. 17); Mr and Mrs Maudry, the noisy and ill-tempered plovers; Two Socks the moody horse and Betty the self-satisfied cow. Why do you think this is?
12. [Watch the video](#) of Shirley Barrett discussing the inspiration and motivation behind *Rush Oh!* Here she conveys her dual interest in the intimate, domestic lives of the Davidson family and the adventures of the whalers and the Killers out at sea. How is this duality captured in the novel?

Writing style



1. *Rush Oh!* is speculative historical fiction, set in a coastal Australian town. The author has researched the history of the area and woven a story both real and imagined. While there did exist a man named George 'Fearless' Davidson and a Killer whale named Tom who worked together in Twofold Bay, and some of the events detailed in *Rush Oh!* did indeed occur, the author has 'used them fictitiously without any intent to describe actual conduct'. If, to paraphrase Picasso, art is a lie that tells the truth – what truths does this fictional tale tell us about the real people and events that inspired them?
2. Illustrations are scattered throughout the text, ostensibly created by the main character, Mary Davidson. What do these illustrations add to the story? How do they complement or enrich the text?
3. 'I see that in my anxiety to explain the circumstances of Darcy and Louisa's elopement, I had left the chapter concerning the Plain and Fancy Dress Ball unfinished, at the point where John Beck suggested we step outside to "take some air"' (p. 331).

Rush Oh! is loosely structured with a personal, rambling quality, akin to a 'stream of consciousness'. What does this approach to storytelling indicate about Mary?

4. Mary frequently references her 'hazy' memories (p. 151) or worries about the accuracy of the impressions she makes in asides to the reader, '(I do not wish to give the impression that I am forever moaning about the loss of my mother. Most of the time, I do not think about it.)' (p. 66). What does this tell us about Mary's reliability as a narrator?
5. Interspersed throughout the novel are actual excerpts from articles and poems, published in local newspapers at the time. How do these snippets anchor the story?
6. While *Rush Oh!* contains many sad and tragic events, the story is told with a great deal of joviality and humour. Discuss how this affects the overarching tone of the novel.

The author

Shirley Barrett is best known for her work as a screenwriter and director. Shirley's first film, *Love Serenade* won the Camera D'Or (Best First Feature) at Cannes Film Festival in 1996. The script for her film *South Solitary* won the Queensland Premier's Prize (script) 2010, the West Australian Premier's Literary Prize (script) 2010, and the West Australian Premier's Prize 2010. *Rush Oh!* is Shirley's first novel. She lives in Sydney, Australia.

