

# Albany

THE  
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## A TALK WITH TIM

Albany's favourite literary son  
opens up on his old home  
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# A TOWN LIKE ALBANY

Born in Perth and growing up in Albany, Tim Winton still draws much inspiration from days spent fishing at Gull Rock, camping at Cheynes Beach and taking to the waves without a wetsuit to cool down. The multi-award-winning author reminisced with **Liz Newell** and discussed *Rising Water*, his first play, which came to Albany in July.



*Imagine for a moment the fictional town of Angelus.*

*It sits between two mountains, has a main street with a railway line at one end hugging the harbour's edge, a meatworks and a whaling station. There is one hospital and driving five minutes in any direction takes you "out of town".*

*To Tim Winton, Angelus is a real place – he created it based on the coastal town in which he spent his adolescence, from 1972 until 1976. There, he found the beach and the ocean, rolling waves and freezing water. He discovered his love of the environment and went cobbling in the waters near the sailing club.*

*If it sounds a lot like Albany, that's because it is.*

WINTON COULD BE INTRODUCED any number of ways.

His debut novel *An Open Swimmer* earned him *The Australian Vogel Literary Award*, Australia's most prestigious prize for an unpublished manuscript, in 1981; his follow-up, *Shallows*, won him the first of his four Miles Franklin Literary Awards to date.

His passion for the ocean and coastal living was born in the days "when you're young and you're frustrated and everybody's older and smarter and richer than you", and diving into the cool waters or fishing off rocks "was what I did instead of taking drugs and destroying my life by other means".

"And there's so many other means, especially for a country kid, of injuring yourself or messing yourself up just out of boredom or frustration," Winton, now 50, said.

"For me, the ocean was really a kind of... It was one form of salvation, really. It saved my bacon many a time. Believe me, back in the day in Albany, before I had a wetsuit, going to the ocean really was a matter of cooling off."

Winton has been called at various instances in his 30-year career one of Australia's favourite sons, "a writer of supreme integrity and honesty" and the most celebrated writer of his generation.

Talking to him via phone, it's

difficult to imagine any of these titles fitting him at all.

Initially worried about the old adage "never meet your heroes", I was greeted by a slightly reserved voice on the other end of the line who, after a moment's pause, felt obliged to check, "I was supposed to call you, right? Or else you're hiding your surprise very well."

Little did he know, I was surprised.

Of the many things he is not, Winton is notoriously media-shy, something that doesn't at all translate in the amount of time we talk. He speaks like he writes, in long, broken sentences, with barely a word wasted, and gives the impression of a bloke fairly oblivious to what all the fuss is about.

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LATELY, HOWEVER, WINTON HAS given everyone plenty of reason to fuss.

His debut play, *Rising Water*, enjoyed its world premiere in the Heath Ledger Theatre on June 29 and ran until July 17.

His foray into writing for the stage marks an entrance into new territory. Though an avid fan of theatre – he thinks the first show he ever saw was at the Albany Town Hall – the novelist-come-playwright admits to feeling the stress of floundering in uncharted waters in the lead-up to the play's premiere.

"I'm bricking it, really," he laughed. "It feels like there's never enough time to rehearse and get it ready... I'm the

only amateur on the block. Everyone else knows what they're doing except me."

If he sounds surprised by the situation he's in, that's probably because what started out as developing the story of an odd character (Jackie Martin from Boner McPharlin's Moll, a story included in his 2004 collection *The Turning*) turned into his first ever play.

"I can't blame anybody else, I keep throwing myself in the deep end," Winton said. "It was like most of my things, it was just sort of an accident. I didn't realise what I was doing for a while and once I realised, you sort of surrender to it or stop. I just thought, oh well, see what happens."

Winton struggled with the requirements of his new role as playwright while *Rising Water* made the transition from page to stage.

"It's all very new and I'm learning a lot on the job," he said.

"The other simple thing is just, actually dealing with other people, which is not what I – in terms of the work – a work day's all very solitary, you know? Thirty-something years of just working off my own bat. I can't even barely collaborate with myself."

The play focuses on one Australia Day in the lives of three live-aboards calling their seafaring vessels home, tethered to a Fremantle marina. →

← It is an exploration of secret pasts and new lives set against a growing cultural landscape, with Winton's favourite setting, the sea, resurfacing once again.

"It's about people who are having to live so close to each other," Winton explained. "(Who are) having to maintain a very heightened form of... Well, a social code about privacy and discretion and all those kinds of things, partly because some of the sorts of people who are living on boats are on the lam or on the run or on the quiet."

For Winton, this "enforced intimacy" is at the heart of the play, while the setting is largely inspired – like much of his work – by his adolescence.

"I guess it goes back to the days when I was a kid in Albany," he said. "Where there's so much life centred around the harbour, you know, when the deep water jetty was still happening and the town jetty was working and you'd hang around Emu Point a little bit and there were fishing boats and that."

"We were never pushy enough to have



a boat – I didn't even know people who had boats around at the Princess Royal Sailing Club – but I used to go spearing cobbler around there at night and watch all the people on their boats, and I was always interested in how people were living.

"It's quite like the suburbs, in a sense. People are living on their boats, it's just that you don't have fences, you just have ropes. And people really are cheek-and-jowl, as they say."

Presented by the Black Swan State Theatre Company and directed by Kate Cherry, *Rising Water* later played two dates at the Albany Entertainment Centre – something Winton was particularly excited about.

"Apart from anything, the play's set in a harbour and Albany people get that," he said. "Albany is the greatest harbour in Australia except for Sydney, and as we know, it should've been the capital of WA," he chuckled. "The damn theatre's in the harbour. It's great. So it'll be the only harbour theatre apart from the Sydney Theatre Company. I

suppose, in Australia. Where else can you actually go and see a play where you're more or less on the water? That's an incredible thing."

IN HIS 1980 COASTAL MEMOIR, *Love's Edge*, Winton fondly reflected on a life largely lived by the sea.

His exploits as a child and young adult involved family holidays to a shack on the mouth of the Greenough River, camping trips with friends to Cheynes Beach, Pleydinkup or Cape Riche (where he later honeymooned) and fishing trips with his father to Gull Rock.

But it was his time in Albany, when the whaling station was in full operation, that cemented his love for the environment, and the passionate desire to work in the aim of conserving and preserving all natural beauty.

"I have a soul-biding affection for Albany... The years of your early adolescence and formative time, whatever you were then, good or bad, it's imprinted upon your mind, and

← *Apart from anything, the play's set in a harbour and Albany people get that. Where else can you actually go and see a play where you're more or less on the water? That's an incredible thing.*

for me it's almost an endless source of inspiration, in my work and also just in my life."

Further exciting things are appearing as flicks on the horizon for Albany's most successful export. After adapting his 1991 release *Closedown* into a screenplay for a television miniseries, *Shallow* has been taken up by producer Stephen Van Mill at Impian Films and McGibson's Icon Productions, with Peter Weir (*Gullipoli*, *Picnic At Hanging Rock*) in talks to direct. *The Riders*, *Out Music*, *The Raising and Breach* and also in various stages of pre-production.

And Winton, it seems, has been bitten by the playwriting bug.

"It would certainly be nice for Black Swan and me to bring other shows to the Albany Entertainment Centre," he said.

"I've written some other things and we would certainly like to bring a show back to Albany in the near future, something different, so watch that space." ☺