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FLAMES

SMARTSTUDY ENGLISH TEXT GUIDE

by Leon Furze

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Introduction

In Tasmania, giant tuna are hunted by fishermen and their sidekick-seals; gods take on human form and fall in love; women die and are reborn, decorated in the flora and fauna of the island. Robbie Arnott's Tasmania is not entirely of this world. *Flames* leaps from one point of view to the next, first told through the eyes of a son who has lost his mother and fears losing his sister, and moves chapter by chapter through the strange and wonderful denizens of the mysterious island.

As Arnott's story unfolds, a web of connections is formed between humans and gods, blurring the line between reality and unreality. The grieving son builds a coffin for his sister who, in perfect health, runs away to the deep south of the island. She crosses paths with an angry river god, a man possessed by an evil cormorant spirit and the detective her brother has sent to hunt her down. In each encounter, Charlotte McAllister is pushed further away from normality and the true strangeness of her own life is revealed. Her powers are wild and untamed, and ultimately threaten all of the characters.

Throughout *Flames*, Arnott uses his wry humour, strange characters and the fantastically detailed backdrop of the island he grew up on to weave a story that is by turns funny and sad, light-hearted and critical. Commenting on climate change, natural disasters, and the European colonisers' treatment of the First Nations peoples of Tasmania, *Flames* is a story that captivates and intrigues.

denizen:

a person, animal or plant found in a particular place

cormorant:

a large diving bird with a long, hooked bill and dark feathers

intrigue:

to fascinate or interest

About the Author

copywriter:

a person who writes text for advertisements and other publicity and marketing materials

Robbie Arnott is a Tasmanian author. Born in Launceston in 1989, he lives and works in Hobart as a copywriter, and writes short stories and novels. He was named as a 2019 *Sydney Morning Herald* Best Young Novelist and has won a number of awards, including the 2019 Margaret Scott Prize, the 2015 Tasmanian Young Writer's Fellowship and the 2014 Scribe Nonfiction Prize for Young Writers.

Arnott is the author of numerous short stories. His works have appeared in *The Lifted Brow*, *Island*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *Meanjin* and the anthology *Seven Stories. Flames*, published in 2018, was his first novel and features ones of Arnott's previous published short stories as the first chapter. Speaking to the Examiner, Arnott described the process of writing his novel:

I wanted there to be a blurred line between what is real and what isn't ... I think that's why we often read a book – to experience something outside of our normal lives ... In late 2016 I was trying to write a really normal Australian novel: a really realist book ... I didn't think anyone would enjoy reading it – this boring, typical Australian novel. So I decided to try and write something interesting and imaginative and different ... (Vinall 2018)

Arnott draws inspiration for his magical and mythical characters from the everyday world around him in Tasmania. From the relationship between the Oneblood tuna fishermen and their seals – drawing upon the bond between a farmer and his kelpie – to the lush descriptions of places in the text, such as Notley Fern Gorge, Arnott's text is rooted firmly in reality but suffused with his imagination. In an interview with *TasWriters* Arnott stated that great writing features "a tight, focused narrative that somehow speaks to you, creating an [sic] profound emotional response in just a few pages" (Stoneman 2018). The emotional punch of *Flames*, driven more by the relationships between the characters than their fantastical settings, is apparent throughout.

Tasmanian readers, authors like Richard Flanagan, and Tasmanian bookshops have been supportive of Arnott's novel since its launch (Stoneman 2018). Arnott's next novel, *The Rain Heron*, was released by Text Publishing in June 2020.

suffuse:

spread throughout

Synopsis

Following the death and cremation of their mother Edith, the McAllister children – Levi and Charlotte – find themselves confronted by her again, reincarnated and fern-covered. The McAllister women have a history of supernatural reincarnation and Levi, concerned that his sister will share their fate, begins plans to spare his sister by building her a coffin rather than committing her to the flames of cremation. Charlotte, concerned more by her brother's plans than her own likely fate, runs away.

Karl, a tuna fisherman, reflects on his partnership with his trusted seal, and suffers the tragic death of his beloved animal companion. Charlotte journeys across Tasmania, encountering a pair of sleazy miners along the way, and eventually makes her way to a remote farm at Melaleuca. A rakali – a native water rat – is revealed as the River God of the Esk. In the Esk God's tale, we are confronted with the conflict between man and nature, culminating in the rakali's murder.

Levi pursues his quest to build a coffin for his sister, enlisting the help of Thurston Hough. Hough is a renowned coffin maker and an eccentric who resents being disturbed. Haunted by the murder of the rakali – after it is revealed Hough killed the Esk God for its fur – Hough gradually becomes more and more detached from reality and instructs Levi to complete the coffin himself.

Meanwhile, a detective hired by Levi traces Charlotte's steps across the island and is confronted by the intimidating and unsettling Jack – Levi and Charlotte's father.

The events at the Melaleuca wombat farm are recounted in a self-enclosed gothic tale from the diary entries of the increasingly unstable farm manager, Allen Gibson. The story follows Charlotte as she and another farm hand, Nicola, are attacked by Gibson, possessed by the cormorant spirit, and are forced to flee. Charlotte discovers strange and terrifying powers as flames leak from her eyes.

Passing through two short chapters, which reveal Hough's grisly death and the story of the ranger called to attend to the events at Melaleuca, the narrative continues with Charlotte and Nicola's stay at a remote cabin on Cradle Mountain. Nicola attempts to help Charlotte control her powers, and the pair begin to fall in love.

Finally, Charlotte, Nicola, and Levi's stories merge as the three meet in the gorge where Edith was reincarnated. Levi – possessed through the fur of the Esk God – is manically cutting down a tree to finish the coffin. Charlotte confronts him, and after a violent tussle she unwittingly unleashes her powers and starts a bushfire that rages through the gorge. A violent storm – personified by the grieving cloud god, who is distraught at the loss of the river God – washes over the island and brings the narrative to a close.

Historical and Cultural Context

Tasmanian Literature

beguiling:
charming and
enchanting

Tasmanian literature often draws on the island's unique geography, featuring complex and beguiling settings that move from mountain, to river, to forest, to bush. These settings can be open and airy, or dark and claustrophobic. The environment can be both beautiful and harsh. Tasmanian texts are also frequently concerned with the island's bleak colonial past, and the genocide of the First Nations Australians by European colonisers. Both of these aspects – the sometimes-threatening landscape and the brutal history – contribute to a genre often labelled as 'Tasmanian Gothic'.

Haunted by ghosts of the past, including the extinct Tasmanian tiger that features both in *Flames* and in texts such as Daniel Nettheim's 2011 gothic film *The Hunter* (AustLit n.d.), Tasmanian Gothic is macabre and filled with anxiety. Like its Gothic fiction of the Victorian era counterpart, Tasmanian Gothic features claustrophobic and bleak settings filled with characters who are sinister, unstable and unpredictable. The Gothic mode allows authors to exploit "myths, tropes, stereotypes, jokes, clichés and distortions" (AustLit n.d.) in a way that highlights both the flaws and the beauty of Tasmania.

However, the label of Tasmanian Gothic is problematic for some authors. For Richard Flanagan – one of the most famous of the island's authors – characterising Tasmania as a "'Gothic horror land' [turns the island] into a caricature or freak show" (AustLit n.d.). Certainly, there is more to Tasmanian literature than just the tensions and anxieties of the Gothic form. The introduction of the Tasmanian Young Writer's Fellowship in 2015 – which Arnott won – exemplifies how Tasmanian authors are celebrated. While Tasmanian literature does draw inspiration from the unique setting and troubled history of the island, Tasmanian authors are not limited or bound by these constraints.

The 2013 Bushfires

unprecedented:
never before
seen, known or
experienced

In the author's note at the end of *Flames*, Robbie Arnott mentions that certain parts of the text were inspired by real-life events. One such event was the disastrous 2013 Tasmanian bushfires; the township of Dunalley to the east of Hobart was one of the most damaged areas. In January 2013, an unprecedented combination of hot windy conditions and excess fuel contributed to around 40 fires around the island. In Dunalley, "more than half of the town's buildings and a primary school were destroyed" (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience n.d.). Though only one life was lost in the fire, there was over \$89 million dollars' worth of damage (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience n.d.).

The fires were described as “the worst in over half a century” (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience n.d.). The recovery taskforce estimated that it could take up to two years to repair the damage caused to the town, electricity poles were burned down, and the two major businesses in the township – a timber yard and an abalone business – were significantly impacted (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience n.d.).

In *Flames*, Arnott personifies fire through the character of the fire spirit, Jack McAllister. Jack is selfish and proud; unconcerned for human life when it comes to the colonisers moving to the island and beginning to eradicate the First Nations peoples. Like fire itself, Jack does not discriminate between one human life and another and burns across the island as he pleases.

eradicate:
to destroy or get rid of something completely

The 2016 Launceston Floods

Another natural disaster mentioned in the author’s note is the Launceston floods of 2016. On 7 June 2016 the local government advised around 3000 residents and 800 businesses to evacuate the low-lying suburb of Invermay as “2375 cumecs of water from the South Esk River and approximately 800 cumecs from the North Esk River” led to the “largest flood since 1969” (City of Launceston n.d.). Labelled as “unprecedented” by the Bureau of Meteorology (Gelston and Richardson 2018), all six of the island’s major rivers were placed on flood alert. Relying on social media for communication, the City of Launceston managed the floods with evacuation notices and communication, but homes in the Tamar Yacht Basin, Newstead, St Leonards and Nunamara were damaged.

Echoing these floods, the penultimate chapter of *Flames* features the Cloud God unleashing her fury and grief on the island in response to the death of her beloved, the Esk God. As the Esk God’s pelt burns and the smoke reaches the Cloud God, she releases a furious storm that threatens to wash away the entire island. As with the reference to real-life bushfires, Arnott again personifies the terrifying forces of nature and comments on humanity’s frailty in the face of the natural world.

Tasmanian Icons

The characters throughout *Flames* are varied and complex. From the main characters – Levi and Charlotte McAllister, descended from the fire spirit Jack and a woman who returns from the dead – to the supporting cast, every character is carefully crafted and has their own idiosyncrasies. In his author note, Arnott states that several of these characters, and possibly component parts of all of the characters, are influenced by real-life Tasmanian icons.

idiosyncrasy:
a way of behaving that is unique to an individual

Melaleuca:

an area of Tasmania popular with tourists due to its varied natural habitats and Aboriginal heritage

Country Women's Association:

the largest women's association in Australia, established in 1922, with the goal to make life better for women and children

magical realism:

a literary style in which elements of reality are combined with the magical and supernatural

Allen Gibson, manager of the Melaleuca wombat farm and unwitting victim to the evil spirit of the cormorant that nests in the blackwood tree at the heart of the property, reflects many of the characteristics of the real-life Deny King. King was a bushman and tin miner who lived in remote Melaleuca from 1945–1991 with his wife Margaret and their children. He was a military man and used the skills he learned serving at various posts to build Melaleuca's first airstrip, the Bathurst Harbour Landing Area, in the 1950s. This opened up Melaleuca to the mining industry and tourism, and King built huts for bushwalkers in the remote bush (Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service 2014).

The chapter 'Cake' is written as an excerpt from the book "*Cream, Butter and Small-Town Nutters: The Life and Times of an Avoca Matriarch*, by Mavis Midcurrent" (p. 119). Midcurrent, with her secret recipes and small-town gossiping, is depicted as the stereotypical Country Women's Association celebrity. Tasmania's real-life 'matriarch', Marjorie Bligh, was well known for her household hints and tips; recipes; and cooking, gardening, cleaning and relationship advice.

Arnott also refers to Taffy the Bee Man; a 1930s beekeeper who installed numerous hives and made a living selling leatherwood honey in Mount Arrowsmith and the Huon Valley. He was murdered in 1962, aged 78.

Using the real-life icons of the island, Arnott is able to blend reality into his text, creating the sense of magical realism that pervades the novel. The supernatural powers – such as Charlotte's flames or Edith McAllister's reincarnation – are found side-by-side with vivid descriptions of real Tasmanian landscapes. Strange as they are, these characters have their counterparts in the real world, making them both relatable and often humorous despite their strangeness.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- Why does Arnott use real-life events such as natural disasters as the backdrop for his text?
- "I have made up a lot of strange things here" (p. 229). How much of *Flames* is "strange", and how much is based on reality?

Chapter Summaries

Ash

We are introduced to the McAllister family, and Levi decides to build his sister's coffin.

The first narrator, Levi McAllister, begins with an unsettling recount of his mother's reincarnation two days after her ashes were spread over Notley Fern Gorge. The description of his mother – fern covered and trailing leaves – leads Levi to reflect on other women in his family who have reincarnated. According to the narrator, roughly a third of the McAllister women return in this way. Detailing his mother's return, the narrator describes how she silently re-entered their lives for three days, and on the fourth walked to their estranged father's house. After another two days, her foliage wilting and browning, the mother burst into flames upon the father's arrival. The narrator becomes concerned for his sister, Charlotte, who appears to be struggling to move on, and decides that he will "bury her whole" (p. 4) in a coffin rather than cremating her.

estranged:
to no longer be
close to someone

KEY QUOTATIONS

Our mother returned to us two days after we spread her ashes over Notley Fern Gorge. (p. 1)

This strange tale begins with an unsettling sentence that immediately establishes the premise of the McAllister women returning from the dead.

... around a third of McAllister women returned to the family after they'd been cremated. The men never did. (p. 2)

After detailing some of his reincarnated relatives, the narrator states this fact about the difference between men and women in his family.

I started looking for a coffin, and I swore to bury her whole and still and cold. (p. 4)

The chapter ends on this macabre note, with the narrator swearing that he would rather bury his sister whole than have her cremated and return from the dead. He appears to be thinking this out of concern for his sister's wellbeing.

FOCUS QUESTION

- How does Arnott quickly establish a strange, almost mythical quality in his story?

Salt

Kyle and his seal hunt Oneblood tuna until his seal is tragically killed.

The second chapter introduces Karl, the retired fisherman. We are introduced to the idea of the fisherman–seal bond that allows the men of the area to hunt the enormous and violent Oneblood tuna, and learn how Karl met and bonded with his own New Zealand seal. A fast-paced description of a Oneblood hunt in which the bond between fisherman and seal is strengthened is followed by a description of Karl’s relationship with his wife Louise.

In a poignant scene, after many years of hunting together, Karl’s seal was killed by a pair of orcas. Karl is haunted by the clicking sound of the orcas and retires from Oneblood fishing. The narrative returns to the present, and Karl walks across a wind-swept beach to find Levi searching the coastline for driftwood. In a disconcerting conversation, Karl learns that Levi is looking for wood to build a coffin for his still living 23-year-old sister.

poignant:
evokes a sense
of sadness

KEY QUOTATIONS

The sand was hard and sharp and blowing up into Karl’s shins, whipped cruel by the dead northerly coming in over the white-chopped sea. (p. 5)

Arnott’s description of the natural environment is poetic and detailed, and often shows both the beauty and destructiveness of nature.

In spring the young northmen would row out to [the rocks] ... to find the half of themselves they had been born without. (p. 6)

The bond between the fishermen and seals has a mythical quality, recalling ancient Greek mythology.

... it was lodged in a hole between his ears, a backdrop to his days that he feared and hated but could not escape. (p. 19)

The sound of the orcas haunts Karl, and he never considers finding a new seal. The death of his seal means the end of his career as a Oneblood fisherman.

In Greek mythology, humans were originally two people combined. Soulmates are the two separated halves of a person, destined to spend their entire life trying to find each other.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- How does Arnott show the bond between humans and nature?
- What evidence in this chapter shows that family is important to the characters?

Sky

Charlotte runs away from her brother and escapes to the south of the island.

Switching to Levi's sister's perspective, 'Sky' begins with Charlotte running away after finding Levi's book on coffin making and a notepad with her measurements in it. She hitches a ride and arrives at the waterfront where she crawls under a dinghy to sleep. After a restless night filled with strange dreams, Charlotte wakes. She finds herself curled up next to a rakali – a native water rat. Taking the Redline bus to Kingston, Charlotte arrives in Tunbridge when the bus breaks down. She drinks a few beers with a couple of miners, who begin to make advances towards her. When she sees one of the miners wink, she realises that they have accosted women this way before, and the realisation snaps her back to sobriety. She roars into fury and attacks the men, causing them to flee. Back on the repaired bus, Charlotte travels straight through the capital and arrives in Kingston, where she transfers to Franklin. As soon as she arrives at the South Esk River, Charlotte finds herself feeling calmer. She asks for directions to Melaleuca and finally secures herself passage on an old man's yacht.

accost:
to approach
someone
aggressively

KEY QUOTATIONS

All she has left of her mother are photos and memories and a family tradition of flames, and she won't let him take them from her. Charlotte will burn, tomorrow or in half a century, but she will burn. And she might return. Though that isn't the point. (pp. 26–7)

Charlotte flees from Levi because he plans to bury her. Even though he thinks it is for her own good, he is missing the point as Charlotte is ambivalent towards her fate and does not seek his help.

She roars back into the physicality of her body ... then the soft warm vessel beneath their touch becomes a spinning top of knees and elbows and nails and teeth, and somewhere she feels a burst of heat that blazes for a volcanic moment before disappearing. (p. 33)

The miners' actions and Charlotte's realisation they have done this to other women sparks a fury that foreshadows her powers.

The wide river beyond the street is steely, placid and unstoppable ... calm. And Charlotte is calm too, just for being here. (p. 36)

Being near to nature – particularly water – often calms Charlotte and other characters throughout the text.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- What does this chapter reveal about Charlotte's personality?
- Why do you think Charlotte wants to burn?
- "She does not trust her father" (p. 27). What information about Charlotte and Levi's father has Arnott provided the reader so far?

Iron

The Esk God struggles against humanity, and is trapped and killed in his river.

'Iron' adopts the perspective of the rakali. The water rat wakes and, referring to himself as the Esk God, decides to spare Charlotte's life. He dives into the river to survey his kingdom. As he journeys through the water, the Esk God reflects on humans and the impact that their industry has had on the environment. The rakali then shifts his attention to thinking about the Cloud God, whom he loves. As the Esk God enters a human-made dam, he becomes tense and angry, outraged at the human intrusion into the natural waterways. The Esk God muses on other gods who have been adversely affected by humanity. While feasting on a yabby, the Esk God is caught in a trap and scooped out of the river. The Esk God's captor pulls out a knife and slits the water rat's belly, and the essence of the Esk God floats up towards the Cloud God, taking one final look as a bushfire rages towards the river below.

KEY QUOTATIONS

With his blunt nose he could smell their foul industries; with the balanced tip of his tail he could feel their intrusions in the water; with his black eyes he could see the iron they sunk into his rivers, building dams, dropping anchors, hooking fish. He had learned the colour and shape of their callousness, but he could not stop them, for his power was limited to the rivers, while they swamped over everything. (p. 39)

This is the first chapter in which a natural element is given a voice; it establishes a disdain for humanity's impact on the natural world.

Plus: he knew her father. And as powerful as the Esk God was, he didn't want to pick a fight with him. (p. 41)

Arnott continues to foreshadow the power and malevolence of Charlotte and Levi's father.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- Why do you think Arnott chooses to give the rakali a voice in this chapter?

- Can you identify more evidence in this chapter that shows the Esk God's displeasure with humans?
- "He dived underwater to snap the neck of an ape-introduced trout (something he did as often as he could)" (p. 43). In what ways is nature able to fight back against humanity in this text?

Fur

Levi and coffin-maker Thurston Hough exchange letters, and Hough reluctantly starts work on Charlotte's coffin.

Written as a series of letters between Levi McAllister and Thurston Hough, this chapter begins with a plea from Levi to Hough for help to build Charlotte's coffin. Hough's response is angry and rude. Levi persists, and Hough accepts due to his financial strife over unpaid taxes. Hough responds with a long letter in which he explains that the type of wood used to build a coffin must reflect the "condition of the subject at the time of their death" (p. 55). He details the various properties of Australian native woods. Ending this letter, Hough alludes to the hide of an exceptionally large water rat with a "glowing golden belly" (p. 58), referring to the Esk God he killed in the previous chapter. Levi sends a letter confirming the snowgum wood for the coffin, and then sends a follow-up after not receiving a response from Hough in a fortnight. Hough's eventual reply is frantic; he is being attacked by river creatures day and night but is continuing work on the coffin. Hough's final letter is filled with fear and paranoia and describes in more detail the river creatures that have been harassing him. He is unable to finish the coffin and believes his death is imminent. Hough informs Levi that he will leave the unfinished coffin in his workshop and instructs Levi to collect it and attempt to complete it himself.

KEY QUOTATIONS

For example, a coffin made with blackwood panels will ensure that no trees can grow within a fifty-metre radius of the plot where it has been buried – no trees, that is, other than the single blackwood that sprouts directly from the coffin's heart. (p. 55)

Hough's descriptions of the properties of various native woods are detailed and quasi-magical, tying in with the other fantastical elements in the text.

For some unholy reason the denizens of this accursed stream have taken to harassing me whenever I go to the water's edge. Water rats, eels, blackfish, herons, frogs, even the occasional platypus – they are all trying to kill me! (p. 61)

Hough's increasingly panic-stricken letters reveal the response from the wild to his killing of the Esk God. The creatures of the river are intent on revenge.

cosmic irony:
a sense that the universe has stepped in to balance the scales of a previous injustice. Also sometimes referred to as poetic justice.

But you shall not be taking the glorious water rat pelt with you; it has become my sole comfort in these troubling times ... The only grave it shall adorn is my own. (p. 64)

The ending to this chapter is ironic – we next see Hough with the pelt draped over him like a funeral shroud, while he was responsible for the Esk God's death. This reveals the magical properties of the Esk God's pelt.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- This chapter features many of the fantastical elements that Arnott weaves through his novel. Identify other fantastical elements in the chapters you have read so far.
- Why do you think the native plants have special properties?
- 'Is nature a friend or foe to humanity?' Discuss using evidence from this chapter.

Ice

The detective begins her search for the missing Charlotte.

'Ice' is told in the first-person from the perspective of the detective Levi has hired to find Charlotte. It begins with the detective's initial descriptions of Levi and his home, and her reflections on the wide variety of strange jobs she has accepted, including "blackmailers who'd stolen souls ... thieves who'd sold their shadows ... adulterers who'd swapped faces with gargoyles" (p. 67). Her first stop is Charlotte and Levi's father's house, but all she finds is the charred circle of grass from their mother.

Visiting Senior Detective Graham Malik, the detective learns little more but does get an unsettling feeling about the father. She journeys to Tunbridge, following Charlotte's trail, and tracks down the two miners who had attempted to have sex with Charlotte. She drinks and flirts with them to get details about Charlotte's whereabouts, and while one of the men is "rummaging around for dirty talk" (p. 82) she assaults the two of them and leaves. She calls in a favour from Cindy, a pilot friend, and flies to Melaleuca. The detective is confronted by the father, who is walking through a burning field. She finds it impossible to remember or describe his features, and the experience leaves her hollowed out and exhausted. Craving a gin, the detective admits defeat.

KEY QUOTATIONS

You shouldn't drink gin before you drive a sedan. But you also shouldn't talk back to your mother, wear black with blue or sleep with loose men, and I'd done all those things plenty of times, so I didn't hesitate when I soaked my throat with a thick finger of Tanqueray before I hit the road. (p. 65)

This chapter begins in the voice of the detective. There is a clear noir style to the writing, which is reminiscent of noir pulp detective fiction.

When the Last Graham told me about Jack McAllister, I twinged. I twinged so hard I thought I was going to fall through the window. (p. 76)

The detective's 'twinges' are her hunches, her suspicions. They have a full, physical effect on her, and she has learned to trust them over the years.

... I find it hard to describe him. Even now, after all I've seen this man do, after all I know he's capable of, I can't put my finger on his features. (p. 91)

The detective, despite her obvious powers of observation, is unable to clearly recall Jack McAllister's features. Once again there is clearly something strange and disturbing about the father.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- How is Jack McAllister described in this chapter? Identify quotes that describe him.
- Do you believe that the detective will be successful in locating Charlotte? Or is her search doomed to fail?
- "The story wasn't as unusual as he thought it was" (p. 67). The detective is fairly blasé about this case. Why do you think Arnott made the detective react in this way?

Feather

A series of diary entries reveals the dark tale of the wombat killings on the Melaleuca farm estate.

Serving as a self-contained gothic story, 'Feather' is written as a series of diary entries by Allen Gibson, manager of the Melaleuca farm estate. The first entry reveals the wombats have been getting killed and mutilated, possibly by a bird. Gibson writes about his farmhands: Nicola and Charlotte. Nicola has worked there for two years, and Charlotte recently arrived, but he trusts both of them and sees the care and compassion they have for the wombats. Gibson and the farmhands decide to sleep among the wombats in shifts to catch the culprit.

noir style:

a style of literature and film associated with crime and detective fiction, often associated with melodramatic themes and dialogue

pulp fiction:

a style of cheap, mass-produced crime or detective fiction, popularly characterised by a noir style, and sometimes gratuitous violence

Gibson's dreams have become increasingly disturbing, and there is a growing sense of disquiet in his diary entries. He finds black feathers, confirming his suspicions that the culprit is a cormorant. Gibson decides to kill the cormorant. By the third diary entry Gibson is becoming paranoid about the farmhands, believing they are gossiping about him. Gibson ventures out into the fields with a shotgun but is unable to hit the large black cormorant that roosts in the blackwood tree that adorns Mr Quorn's burial site. His sleep improves, and in his dreams, he feels that the cormorants are welcoming him. The sixth diary entry begins with the exclamation "damn these women!" (p. 107). The farmhands have contacted the ranger, who comes to tell Gibson that the women are leaving and to order Gibson to deal with the chaos on the farm. Gibson grabs his shotgun to chase the ranger off and decides to seek out the "leader of the cormorants" (p. 109). Failing to find the cormorant, Gibson falls asleep and later wakes to find himself being nuzzled by a wombat. He becomes filled with rage and in a graphic and disturbing scene he kills the wombat, triggering the memories of all the times he has done it before. Feeling the spirit of the cormorant surging within him, Gibson stalks to the burrow and begins to massacre the remaining animals. Nicola, seeing Gibson from a distance, screams. Gibson turns his fury on her and approaches her with his knife, but Charlotte intercepts him. Blue liquid begins to leak from Charlotte's eyes. By the time Gibson realises the liquid is actually fire, flames are already spreading around her feet and Gibson is forced to run. Burned and injured, he throws himself into the old tin mine.

In the final diary entry, Gibson writes about his physical transformations. The flames have fused the black cormorant feathers to his skin, and his nose has become long and bonelike. The cormorants bring him fish daily, and he awaits the day the leader of the cormorants will come for him for "more blood, more death, more warmth sucked up by the coldness of the night" (p. 118).

KEY QUOTATIONS

Floods, fire, pestilence, disease; yet farmers always find a way to push on. I will not let a few dead marsupials conquer my spirit. (p. 100)

Gibson reflects the stereotypical image of the farmer who rallies against the elements to overcome any hardship. Given his ultimate fate, however, there is an irony in the statement that his spirit will not be conquered.

There is a calculated wisdom in its black stare; or if not wisdom, a depth, an intensity, a kind of primitive understanding of things; and my respect for it grows each day. (p. 104)

By the fourth diary entry, Gibson's perspective on the cormorant – and on its wombat prey – is beginning to shift. The understanding of the "wisdom" and "depth" of natural elements once again becomes a key feature in the text.

A knocking. A scraping. A needling, pointing dig of a bill at my chest, not on the outside of it but from the inner walls, behind my skin and sternum. (p. 111)

In the penultimate entry, Gibson's transformation is almost complete. He has been possessed by the cormorant spirit's dark lust for violence and seeks out the remaining wombats to finish the massacre he has started.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- Arnott adopts many different forms and styles of writing in the novel. On its own, this chapter could be read as a short story. Why do you think Arnott chooses to write this chapter in this form?
- Draw a plot diagram (such as a flow chart or story mountain) that charts the progression of Gibson's transformation into a vehicle of the black cormorant's rage.
- "He has been healing me from within, taking care of my unworthy body" (p. 116). Does nature hurt or heal Gibson?

Cake

Mavis Midcurrent dishes out gossip about the residents of Avoca, including Thurston Hough.

Breaking the tension of the previous chapter, 'Cake' is written as an excerpt from a humorous book titled *Cream, Butter and Small-Town Nutters: The Life and Times of an Avoca Matriarch*, by Mavis Midcurrent. After detailing some of the Avoca locals, Midcurrent launches into a character assassination of Thurston Hough. Detailing a litany of offences against the town, including abusing postal workers and the Country Women's Association, Midcurrent reveals details of Hough's grisly death but expresses that the town will not miss him. The chapter ends with a brief description of Levi McAllister's visit to the town to collect the half-finished coffin, before segueing into details of Mavis's famous lavender icing recipe, which contains no lavender but "purple food colouring and marijuana that Larry grows in his backyard" (p. 125).

KEY QUOTATIONS

He fell into the South Esk and tried to sue the water company; he got into arguments over the price of potato cakes at the fish-and-chip shop; he challenged the milkman to a duel at high noon ... (p. 123)

Midcurrent's description of Hough adds to earlier impressions of him as a bitter and petty man.

The local wildlife had broken into his house and gnawed upon his body – water rats, in particular, had taken a liking to him, feasting upon his toes, fingers and face. (p. 124)

The grisly description of Hough's body after death confirms his earlier paranoia that the animals were out to get him.

He also took a golden-brown pelt that had apparently been clutched by what was left of Mr Hough's fingers. (p. 125)

Levi leaves with the half-finished coffin and the pelt of the Esk God – the same pelt that drew the animals of the river to Hough in revenge for killing the rakali.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- Why did Arnott include this chapter in the novel? What is its purpose?
- Is *Flames* meant to be serious or funny? Dark or light? What evidence is there in the text that enables it to be read in different ways?
- Does Midcurrent's description of Hough match the impression of him given in the chapter 'Fur'? Find evidence to support your response.

Grass

The ranger reflects on his youth and revels in the wonder of the island's natural world.

This chapter is narrated in third person, focusing on the ranger who arrives at the Melaleuca farm estate to speak to Allen Gibson. It begins with a recount of the ranger's early life, when he spent his time immersed in nature. His experiences of the wonder of nature become even more grand as he moves southwest and witnesses the majesty and complexity of the natural world around him, but nothing shocks him as much as the sight of a woman leaking fire from her eyes. After checking on Gibson, the ranger stays the night on Melaleuca and is woken by flickering blue flames across the farm. Racing out to find the source of the flames, he sees Nicola trying to soothe Charlotte

and realises that Charlotte is the source. With Charlotte's flames quenched by Nicola, the three of them board the plane and leave Melaleuca.

The ranger takes the farmhands to the police office. While he waits for an officer to handle the case, he tries to think up a story that will not incriminate the women. He reflects at length on what Melaleuca will look like after the flames have died and nature begins to return from the ashes. He decides to forget about the farmhands and immerse himself once more in the wonder of nature.

KEY QUOTATIONS

For two and a half hours every afternoon he'd climb trees, follow tracks, build shelters and swim through the dense green, always feeling a buzz of belonging in his throat and chest. (p. 127)

From an early age the ranger, feels an affinity with nature; a feeling that follows him into adulthood and increases as he moves to the Southwest National Park.

As a fat globule of blueberry fire welled from Charlotte's right eye, Nicola reached out and touched her cheek. The ranger was sure she would be burnt, but at the touch of skin on skin the drop of fire fizzled out. (p. 132)

Nicola's touch stems the flow of fire from Charlotte's eyes and also has the effect of bringing Charlotte out of the trance-like state she is in.

How the charred humps of buttongrass would already be gleaming with morning dew, hours after burning to their roots. How new shoots would spring forth, green and vital, stronger than before. How these bright blades would summon wallabies and potoroos, and with them would come wombats ... (p. 134)

The ranger reflects on the capacity of nature to recover and, in particular, the way Australian flora and fauna can re-emerge in the aftermath of fire.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- 'The importance of nature in this novel cannot be understated.' How does the ranger reflect this idea?
- Which characters from this chapter appear to work with nature, and which against? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
- Why do you think the ranger decides to forget about the farmhands rather than reporting them to the police?

Snow

Nicola and Charlotte retreat to Oshikawa's cabin on Cradle Mountain.

Beginning with Nicola's memories of her youth and her father, the chapter reveals that Nicola never felt anything like the love of her father until the first time she touched Charlotte McAllister. This chapter picks up from the moment Nicola quells Charlotte's flames and the two go with the ranger to the police station. On Charlotte's suggestion, they flee the station. As Nicola reflects on Charlotte's early days on the farm and Allen Gibson's violent actions that brought them together, they drive across the landscape in Nicola's station wagon to Cradle Mountain. Nicola leads them to Crater Lake, to a large stone hut owned by Oshikawa, her father's Oneblood tuna client. Nicola intends to keep Charlotte somewhere safe and fireproof while they figure out what to do next.

Charlotte begins to leak fire in her sleep, and Nicola once again stems the flow of the flames with her touch. The pair go hiking and try to think of a plan but come up with nothing. As Charlotte's night-time flames continue, Nicola begins sleeping next to her and helps to control the droplets of blue fire. Charlotte attempts to control her flames during the day and makes some progress, and the two settle into a routine. After another lapse and a troubled night leaking fire, Nicola touches Charlotte's mouth, and the pair make their relationship physical. In the morning, they look out of the hut to see an unfamiliar car parked next to their station wagon. They wait for the traveller to arrive. It is the detective.

KEY QUOTATIONS

Flat ponds of standing winter water were scattered among the rocks, along with stubbled bushes and pale deadwood, and everything was smattered with drifts of bright snow. It took them both a few minutes to adjust to this strange, muted landscape. (p. 142)

As Charlotte and Nicola arrive at Cradle Mountain, the vivid descriptions of the natural environment change once again. Arnott is able to condense whole, expansive vistas into a few paragraphs of detailed prose.

It wasn't pure selflessness; she drew pleasure from how she could affect others, and when they showed her gratitude she bathed in it, glowing in the knowledge that she, and only she, had made them feel that way. (p. 145)

Nicola revels in helping Charlotte control her mysterious abilities and continues to fall more deeply in love with her.

Sometimes she could click her fingers and a perfect lick of fire would snap out of her thumbnail, like a fleshy Zippo lighter. Other times she would hack and cough for hours with no results, only to get the hiccups later on and accidentally spit fire all over her lap. (p. 152)

Charlotte's powers remain out of her control, but she does show some progress after days of practice. There is still no explanation for her abilities at this point.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- Why do you think Nicola has the ability to calm Charlotte's powers?
- What is Charlotte? Why does she have these abilities?
- 'The relationships between characters in *Flames* are complex.' Discuss, using evidence from this chapter to support your response.

Wood

Levi finds Hough's body and retrieves Charlotte's half-made coffin and the Esk God's pelt.

Levi McAllister arrives at Thurston Hough's house to the stench of death and decay and finds Hough's mutilated body. As he grabs the Esk God pelt from Hough's fingers, a sense of calm washes over Levi and he retrieves the half-finished coffin and heads home. Driving back to Tamar Valley, Levi reaches for his father's sunglasses from the glovebox and is filled with a burning rage that seems to stem from the pelt still clutched in his hand. He throws the glasses away and drives on.

When Levi arrives home, he remembers playing on the coastline with his sister and how he was always afraid of the ocean. He notices that a light is on in his house. As he enters the house, he sees his father, Jack McAllister. They argue; Jack cautions Levi about his confused mental state. The pelt once again fills Levi with anger and resolve, and Levi storms out. He decides to leave to find something more personal than the cold snowgum to finish Charlotte's coffin.

KEY QUOTATIONS

The richness of its touch is shaving the edges off his anger, giving him room to think, and at the forefront of his thoughts is the snowgum coffin he is hauling. The coffin that is incomplete. (p. 159)

As with Hough, the mere touch of the Esk God's pelt is enough to overcome Levi's sensations and change his thoughts. The pelt will later influence Levi in a different way, making him angry and steeling his resolve to complete the coffin.

Levi is reminding himself of his resolve: to show Charlotte that she wasn't condemned to rise again, changed and ghostly, after she died. (p. 159)

Levi and his sister hold very opposing views on death. Charlotte wishes to burn like her mother and other women in her family before her. That Levi cannot see this speaks to his own self-centred nature.

Levi is not well. Levi is not realising: he could have just spoken to her. In a mind like his, grand acts will always trump honest words. There was a chance he'd understand this ... the moment he saw the coffin ... But this chance was destroyed the moment Levi picked the golden-brown pelt from Hough's nibbled fingers. (p. 160)

The narrative shifts out of Levi's third-person limited point of view to directly comment on his state of mind, and to reflect that any chance he had of doing the right thing was destroyed as soon as he touched the Esk God's pelt.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- Why is the Esk God's pelt so powerful? Is it a good power or a harmful one?
- Levi believes he is doing the right thing. Find evidence that this is not the case.
- Why do you think Arnott chooses to break the narrative voice to comment directly on Levi's state of mind?

Coal

The story of Jack McAllister is told – from his birth as the fire spirit, to his transformation to human form and his attempts to have a family.

'Coal' begins with the birth of a fire spirit, brought to life by a woman clashing two stones together and feeding the sparks. The elemental spirit becomes aware of the natural world and of the humans who feed and tend it. It is quenched with water and shrivels to coal. The spirit comes to know the limiting power of water – both at the coastline that borders the island and in the combined force of millions of raindrops. When it awakens once more, the humans have learned how to control and tend the flames, and how to use fire as a tool for managing the land. The spirit learns to cast its consciousness from

one fire to another, ranging across the land and observing other gods. It decides that it cares more for people than other gods as it is people that give it purpose and meaning.

Eventually the spirit learns it can take on a human form and lives as a man for a while among the humans. He is, however, dissatisfied, as the humans around him age and die. Returning to his elemental form, the fire spirit watches dispassionately as “pale people” (p. 176) invade the land and hunt and kill the First Nations Australians who brought him to life. Justifying it to himself as not wanting to “impose his ideas on these short, flickering human lives” (p. 176), he decides not to intervene but he understands that his actions are selfish; he revels in the new powers of industry that the colonisers have brought with them. Taking the form of a First Nations Australian again, he walks among the colonisers and suffers their taunts and attacks, learning that he can light “tiny sparks in their minds” (p. 176) that alter their perception of him. Being selfish and inhuman, he does not realise the potential of this power, and uses it only to his own ends.

The elemental spirit sees a woman in a fern-filled gorge, and instantly curiosity and passion are aroused in him. He finds Edith McAllister again by the coast; he knows her family, the way the women burn and are reborn. He spends a year watching her, then makes several failed attempts to impress her. Finally, in the form of Jack, he experiences success, but only by using his power to “burn out the ill feeling she’d formed of him” (p. 181) five times. Though he never lights a spark in Edith’s mind from that moment on, he frequently uses his powers to alter the perceptions of her family and friends. Eventually, the pair fall in love and marry. They have two children. The first is Levi, to whom Jack struggles to relate because they are too similar in temperament. The second, Charlotte, inspires a blind love and devotion in Jack. In the hospital, leaning over the cot, a single tear of blue flame falls from Jack’s eye into Charlotte’s open mouth, and she swallows it. Edith witnesses the flame, but the new knowledge of Jack’s elemental nature brings them together rather than forcing them apart. Only when Edith sees his ability to alter people’s minds does their relationship begin to unravel as Jack inadvertently reveals he has done it to her. Their marriage dissolves, and on Edith’s death the last of Jack’s humanity dies with her. He goes back to his elemental self and watches on dispassionately as his children’s lives begin to unravel.

KEY QUOTATIONS

It was people, always people; only people that he really cared for. He had helped them cook, create, shape and heat themselves, and had come to think of them as not so much as a family but as part of himself. (p. 172)

Jack claims to care for people yet, given later events in the chapter, it seems that his love for people was always selfish: they brought him to life, fed him, and taught him lessons, but he does not truly care whether they live or die.

They brought pain to the people he'd been helping for centuries – pain that he initially responded to by burning down their buildings, their docks, their great bird-like ships – but they also came with a vast multitude of new purposes for him. (p. 175)

The “new purposes” (p. 175) that the colonists bring are, for Jack, much more impressive than the lives of the First Nations Australians he has lived amongst since his creation.

From his right eye a drop of fire descended, globular and hot, straight into the gurgling mouth of his daughter. He saw it falling at the last moment, but it was too late – straight onto her fat tongue it landed, sizzling against the saliva. Charlotte blinked. She swallowed. (p. 184)

This moment explains Charlotte’s strange powers and is also witnessed by Edith. It marks the beginning of the end for Edith and Jack’s relationship.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- What are the gods in this novel? Are they natural spirits? Are they like the gods of Greek or Roman mythology? Where do you think Arnott gets his inspiration for the gods?
- Do you think Jack is evil?
- “If he had been closer to being human, he would have realised that these little sparks were a greater source of power than even his hugest land-scouring flames” (p. 177). Why do you think Jack’s power to alter perceptions is greater than his power to create flames?

Grove

Charlotte, Nicola and the detective track Levi to Notley Fern Gorge and confront him in his madness.

‘Grove’, narrated in first person from Charlotte’s perspective, rejoins Charlotte, Nicola and the detective as Nicola tells their story to the detective. Charlotte decides to end her relationship with Nicola but does not say anything about it. The detective reveals that Levi hired her, and Charlotte thinks about her relationship with her brother and the real reason she ran away: if she had stayed, she would have ended up hating Levi. As they drive, Charlotte imagines the confrontation she is about to have with her brother and thinks about their absent

father. They arrive at Charlotte's home, but Levi is not there. Nicola finds the ghost of a note on a notepad, and Charlotte realises that Levi has gone to Notley Fern Gorge – the spot where their mother's ashes were spread.

They find Levi at the bottom of the gorge, attacking a tree with an axe. He is manic, emaciated and unwashed. Charlotte tries to talk him down, but he is fixated on completing the coffin, and wholly possessed now by the fury that is imbued by the Esk God's pelt still clutched in his grip. As he continues to speak to Charlotte about the coffin and their mother's death, Charlotte starts to lose control. The two argue, then fight, and Charlotte grabs the pelt, setting it alight. Levi is filled with rage, and in the ensuing scuffle Nicola is knocked unconscious. Charlotte's blue flames begin to leak from her eyes, ears, nose and mouth, setting the gorge on fire. Nicola regains consciousness and tackles Charlotte to the ground, ignoring the flames licking at her body and holding Charlotte long enough to quench the blue flames. By now though, the gorge is filled with the orange towering flames of a bushfire, and the four are trapped. As the fire rages around them, Charlotte sees Jack emerge through the flames. He sighs and looks up towards the sky, and rain begins to pour down.

KEY QUOTATIONS

I have met siblings with almost unconscious understandings of each other ... It is like meeting aliens. Levi and I have never understood each other. (p. 192)

The two McAllister siblings are very different in temperament and in action. Their love for one another has pushed them apart rather than bringing them together.

The tree ferns blotted the sky and pawed at my face. Worms and beetles churned across the bracken floor. Water throttled in a stream; I was used to it crashing in waves. My mother found calmness there, down in the reaching, shading fronds, but all I found was a lingering distaste for wet soil. Give me white-chopped seas of salt and fury. (p. 201)

Each character in *Flames* has a very different relationship with nature. Despite her fiery temperament and the strange abilities inherited from Jack, Charlotte identifies with the crashing waves of the ocean. She is also unlike her mother, who prefers the gorge, and her brother, who is afraid of the sea.

Levi looks down at Nicola as she clutches the axe. He swings the handle with a strength that belies his hungry frame, and Nicola is thrown backwards ... I rise; I roar; I rip the fur from Levi's hand. (p. 208)

In this climactic scene, Levi's attack on Nicola fills Charlotte with rage and she rips the Esk God's pelt from him, setting it alight and destroying it and, ultimately, the power it holds over her brother.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- Why do you believe Charlotte prefers the crashing waves of the ocean to the throttled slow-moving water of the gorge?
- In this chapter, do you believe Levi and Charlotte come closer to understanding one another? Explain why or why not using evidence from the text.
- Does Charlotte finally accept her feelings for Nicola in this chapter, or is she still reluctant to commit to the relationship? Find evidence to support your response.

Cloud

The Cloud God weeps over the death of the Esk God, and storms rage across the island.

This brief chapter offers a respite from the action of the climactic 'Grove'. The Cloud God unleashes her sorrow and fury through the storm, centred at first on Notley Fern Gorge. Launceston is flooded, and the rain moves south, pushing past Kingston and Melaleuca. The twisted form of Allen Gibson – half-man, half-cormorant – is washed out of the tin mine and drifts out to sea. The Cloud God is weeping over the death of her beloved Esk God. Her sorrow is overwhelming, and her grief consumes the island.

KEY QUOTATIONS

The storm kept raging, the river kept rising, and the rest of the city soon gave way to unwelcome wetness as well. (p. 214)

In his author's note, Arnott writes that some of the events in the text – including this flood – are based on reality. In this case, Arnott uses the Launceston floods of 2016 as inspiration.

... it was the smoke that fizzed out of a small, golden-brown pelt in the heart of the fire. A special pelt: a river pelt. A pelt that had belonged to the other half of the cloud's heart. (p. 215)

Mirroring the earlier connection between Karl and his seal, the Esk God is referred to as the "other half of the cloud's heart" (p. 215). The smoke reaches the clouds, and a torrential storm is unleashed out of grief and a sense of loss.

A cloud's sorrow: you cannot imagine it. But you can feel it, whenever a storm hits the world with uncommon force. When mountains crack and forests flood. When rivers surge and oceans bloat. When there is no true shelter left in the world. For the hardest storms are made of sorrow. Such sorrow came to the island, and tried to drown it. (p. 216)

The loss of the Esk God causes the Cloud God to weep uncontrollably, flooding the island below.

This poetic ending to 'Cloud' – once again personifying the natural elements – completes the main narrative and leaves the final chapter as an epilogue to the novel.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- How does Arnott use features of his story to explain the natural disaster of the flood? Use quotes from the chapter to support your response.

Sea

Levi is taken to Nicola's home and made to overcome his fears and enter the sea.

'Sea' is once again told from Levi McAllister's point of view. Waking up the morning after the events in Notley Fern Gorge, Levi hears from Charlotte how the detective dragged him to safety and the skies opened and flooded the land. His body burned and aching, Levi lies in his bed and reflects on the influence of the Esk God's pelt on his sanity. He acknowledges that his problems began long before that and admits he has been selfish and weak. Nicola suggests Karl's dinghy, and they go to her family home. Both Levi and Nicola's family can see the love between Nicola and Charlotte. Levi tries to apologise to Nicola but collapses in a flood of tears. Two days later, he is in Karl's dinghy wearing a wetsuit and – with much trepidation – ready to swim in the ocean. Karl instructs him to swim out to a spot away from the boat and wait, and Levi treads water until he is exhausted. Just as he is ready to give up, he sees a dark shape approach him under the water. Karl tells Levi to hold out his hand to the seal pup. As the pup nuzzles Levi, he is filled with an overwhelming feeling that expands in his chest and lifts him up.

KEY QUOTATIONS

Thinking about it was confusing, and filled me with a sickening shame. I tried telling myself that even though my behaviour was wrong, my intentions were right – but was that even true? (p. 219)

Released from the grip of the pelt and his own obsession over the coffin, Levi comes to doubt everything about his actions.

I had not cried since I was a small child – not even at our mother's cremation. But now my howl was joined by a rapid gurgle of other sobs, and tears, and the occasional moan. (p. 222)

Levi finally releases his grip on all the grief and sadness that he has held onto since his mother's death.

And in that rising moment I held on to the seal, and kept my eyes locked on his, and waited to fall back beneath the waves. But out there in the salt, that something kept swelling. It has kept me afloat ever since. (p. 226)

In the closing lines of the novel, Levi has found something to hold onto that will carry him and complete him for the rest of his life.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- 'Flames is a novel of strangeness and unreality.' To what extent do you agree?
- Why do you think Arnott chooses to come full-circle and end the novel with a chapter set in Karl's dinghy out on the ocean?
- There is a joy and a sadness in the novel, and both emotions are expressed in the final chapter. Find evidence of both joy and sadness in the chapter.

Main Characters

Levi McAllister

Levi McAllister is the elder of the McAllister siblings and the first narrator of the novel. In the opening chapter, 'Ash', Levi recounts the death and reincarnation of his mother. His telling of how both his mother and other women in his family have returned from the dead is surprisingly dispassionate and gives initial insight into this character. Levi is described by Karl as, "not quite six feet tall, with milky skin and sharply dark hair" (p. 22). These physical characteristics, including his "underfed angles [that] jutted out from his chin, cheeks, collarbone" (p. 22) reflect Levi's grave, humourless nature. Later in the text, Levi's father the fire-elemental Jack, recalls how Levi was "a skinny, serious youth, with little sense of fun but a huge sense of responsibility" (p. 183).

It is this sense of responsibility that initially drives Levi. Reflecting on his mother's death and reincarnation, he comments that "while this event upset us ... I quickly got over it" (p. 3). What he does not get over, however, is the concern he has for his sister's wellbeing. He believes that Charlotte has become fixated on their mother's death because she is afraid of returning from the dead herself. At the end of 'Ash' Levi is resolute that he will not let that happen and will instead "bury her whole and still and cold" (p. 4). Levi's desire to build the perfect coffin for his sister, driven by his genuine devotion to her, is the catalyst for most of the action in the novel. He seeks out the cantankerous and belligerent coffin-maker Thurston Hough, telling him, "I will spare no expense in making sure that [Charlotte's] final resting place fits her as comfortably as her own skin" (p. 49). When Hough declines his offer, Levi tells him he is "desperate" (p. 51) and pleads, "I don't need this coffin to bury her in; I need it as physical proof that she won't be cremated" (p. 54). His desperation to build a coffin for Charlotte builds throughout the text.

When Levi reaches Hough's home after a period of unresponsiveness from the coffin-maker, he finds Hough dead and partially devoured by the creatures of the river. Grasping the pelt of the Esk God, "it slides snugly into his palm, warm and plush, and suddenly he no longer feels ill" (p. 158). However, this marks a transitional point in Levi's character as his desire to build the coffin turns into a dangerous obsession. Filled with the "confidence and ... renewed sense of purpose" (p. 158) that the pelt imparts, with the "richness of its touch ... shaving the edges off his anger" (p. 159), Levi turns back towards home with the idea to finish the coffin by himself. During this period, there was a chance that Levi could have redeemed himself, returning home and dispensing with his morbid obsession. Levi is unable to escape

Levi is:

- stubborn
- serious
- misguided

cantankerous:

bad-tempered and argumentative

the growing insanity that has gripped him, however, and the magical powers of the pelt continue to exacerbate the problems. His claims of duty towards his sister do not change:

That ... he had gone to great lengths to have [the coffin] built; that he couldn't go another day knowing she was in such pain; that he cared for her this much; that he loved her more than he could ever show with words ... (pp. 159-160)

But the cadence of his speech – the long, rambling sentences broken with frequent semi-colons – indicates that he is coming undone. By the chapter titled 'Wood', the narration states the issue plainly: "Levi is not well" (p. 160).

While there is little exploration of Levi's childhood, and his reasons for his behaviour can be largely traced to the effects of the Esk God's pelt, there are other factors that clearly influence his personality. Upon deciding to finish the coffin by himself, Levi thinks, "He is a man; he is capable; he can do this" (p. 160). The societal and gender expectations placed on Levi as the single male in the household after their father's departure clearly weigh on him. Since he sees himself – both as older brother and surrogate father – as responsible for Charlotte's wellbeing, there is an obvious truth to his belief that he is doing the right thing. When Charlotte finds Levi in the grove chopping trees, manic and malnourished, she offers to help him. His response is abrupt: "I don't need help. I'm helping you" (p. 207). Despite their father's absence, his impact on the children's lives also cannot be understated. Even though "Jack found less and less he could relate to" in his son, the distance grew between them "because they were so alike – flames or not" (p. 183). Like his father, Levi has a stubborn and sometimes self-absorbed worldview.

Levi differs from his father, however, in the self-realisation he achieves in the final chapter 'Sea'. Recovering from the fight in the gorge and the subsequent flooding, Levi begins the narration of this chapter with an admission: "I have always been afraid of the ocean" (p. 217). This is another trait inherited from his fire-spirit father, but fortunately for Levi, it is one he learns to overcome. In a moment of clarity, Levi realises that his intention to build his sister a coffin was not, in fact, an act of love:

I consider myself a rational person, but my actions since our mother died weren't all that rational ... I tried telling myself that even though my behaviour was wrong, my intentions were right – but was that even true? ... The truth: I had been erratic, selfish and weak. (p. 219)

Ultimately, this clarity leads Levi to accept Nicola's offer. He accompanies her father, Karl out onto the water in his dinghy and follows Karl's instructions, jumping into the ocean despite his fear. After a long time, and on the point of exhaustion, Levi is ready to quit when he is visited by a seal cub in the water. Ending the novel on

a poignant note, Levi is filled with *something*, an unknown joy that echoes Karl's relationship with his seal in the chapter 'Salt' and the ranger's "wonder" (p. 127) in 'Grass'. In the closing line, Levi reflects that "out there in the salt, that something kept swelling. It has kept me afloat ever since" (p. 226).

Charlotte McAllister

At twenty-three, Charlotte is the younger of the two McAllister siblings. Physically, she is "a jangle of loose limbs" (p. 25), but "behind her pale face there lurks a curious ferocity" (p. 97). Charlotte is a character of contrasts. Though she seems to have been deeply affected by her mother's death, it is not the cause of her leaving. Nor, according to Charlotte herself later in the text, is Levi's plan to build her a coffin the sole reason for her escape; she claims, "Even before I found what he'd written, I was dreaming of leaving". (p. 193) It is this sense of independence that truly defines Charlotte, and the story of her flight from the family farm, journey to Melaleuca and subsequent discovery of her unusual powers dominates much of the narrative.

There are indications early in the text that Charlotte is not entirely 'normal'. She has strange dreams, in which the "thistled fields of her farm are melting into vast squares of green lava, flowing down to the pebbled beach" (p. 28). Her brother Levi "thinks she's gone crazy – he's been throwing that jutting look at her every time he's caught her sobbing in the gullies, flinching at the wind and throbbing in the fields" (p. 30). Yet to Charlotte, it is not she who needs help, but her stoic, seemingly unmoved brother. After witnessing their mother's death, cremation, and reincarnation Charlotte believes that she too will return from the flames after her death; however, the idea does not bother her as much as it does Levi. So, when Charlotte discovers Levi's letter, with her measurements on it for the planned coffin, she follows her desire to leave and begins a journey of self-discovery that brings her powers to the surface.

Other than Charlotte's dreams and the acknowledgement that she will probably return from the dead, the first real indication of her mysterious powers come as she is stranded en route to the south and gets drunk with a pair of miners. As the miners' advances become increasingly distasteful, and she realises they have planned this move and done it before to other women, "somewhere she feels a burst of heat that blazes for a volcanic moment before disappearing" (p. 33). She does not know it at this stage, but she has physically burned one of the miners. Similarly, when she makes her way to Melaleuca and the wombat farm, the owner Allen Gibson records in an early entry in his diary that "she occasionally seems to lose control of herself in fits of quiet emotion, eyes closed, hands clenched, small noises leaking through her gritted teeth" (p. 97). But it is not until Gibson reveals

Charlotte is:

- hot-tempered
- independent
- powerful

himself as the wombat killer and threatens Charlotte's colleague and friend Nicola that Charlotte's powers truly come to the fore. The event is recorded with Gibson's typically uncanny attention to detail:

... as Charlotte yelled, a blue light began leaking from her eyes. Her ears, too – and her nostrils ... These streams began falling to the ground, and I saw that ten more lines were also cascading out of her hands from beneath her fingertips. Blue, hyper-blue, and when all these too-blue trails hit the buttongrass it took only a few seconds for the acrid smell of smoke to reach me. I realised, too late: it was not liquid leaking from Charlotte McAllister; it was fire. (p. 114)

Arnott builds tension throughout the passage, adding layer upon layer of detail but never identifying the strange blue liquid as fire until the final sentence. The significance of Charlotte's power is in its connection to both her family's strange reincarnations after burning, and to her fire spirit father. Charlotte does not understand her powers and, despite her mother's obvious supernatural qualities, it is unclear to her that her abilities are connected to her mysterious father. Like Levi, "she does not trust her father" (p. 27) and the "idea of him has turned her red and bitter ever since he left them" (p. 27). By the time the novel takes on their father Jack's perspective in the chapter 'Coal', Charlotte has escaped Melaleuca and, with Nicola's support, has been "trying to summon her flames. Trying to control them" (p. 152). In Jack's narrative, it is revealed that the power of the flames reaches back all the way to her birth when Jack, overcome with fatherly love, let drop a tear of fire that "descended, globular and hot, straight into the gurgling mouth of his daughter" (p. 184). The flames, however, are more than a literal power that stems from the McAllister siblings' fire spirit father: they are an expression of Charlotte's emotions – from grief, to loneliness, to rage. Charlotte acknowledges that "while the flames only began leaking out of me in Melaleuca, I could already feel them crackling inside me back home ... I'd been burning ever since our mother had" (p. 193). They are a reflection of her "hot temper" (p. 192) and they also trigger in her a recognition of similar traits in the detective when she observes "the flames of rage and loneliness that burn through her smirk: flames that can't be put out. She is just like me" (p. 190).

Charlotte is more than just a physical vessel for the symbol of flames in this novel, however. She is also a character with a deep affinity with nature. As she first leaves her home and journeys south, she comments on the barren landscape of the island, thinking "it isn't right. This dryness. This beigeness" (p. 34). But as she ventures further, she reaches the water, and it soothes her temper: "The wide river beyond the street is steely, placid and unstoppable ... calm. And Charlotte is calm too, just for being here" (p. 36). Contrary to her fiery nature, and inherited from her mother rather than her father, is a love of water. While Levi shares his father's fear of the ocean, Charlotte revels in the ocean. Not only does she claim, "I am a coast person" (p. 194),

she also differentiates between the “water throttled in the stream” of Notley Fern Gorge and the “white-chopped seas full of salt and fury” (p. 201), which are her preference. Charlotte’s affinity with ocean waves partially explains her attraction to Nicola, as she finds in the other woman a perfect counterpoint to her fire-elemental side.

Despite being a fiercely independent character, Charlotte is also defined by her relationships with others. Not only Nicola, whom she comes to love over their shared time in Oshikawa’s cabin, but also her brother. Before returning to the farm to find Levi, Charlotte acknowledges a deep love for Levi: “between us there is love. Not warm love, not vocal love, but love nonetheless. Love built with ... all the care our mother poured into us” (p. 192). When she finally sees Levi chopping trees in the gorge, she feels “a rushing tide of worry” (p. 205). Though they fight, and she lets “the flames fly from beneath [her] nails” (p. 208), burning Levi’s precious Esk God pelt in the process, in the final chapter she is found at his bedside while he recovers from the aftermath of the events in the gorge. Ultimately, it is Charlotte’s mother’s influence on her that wins out, and not her father’s terrifying power.

Jack McAllister

From the outset of *Flames* the McAllister father, Jack, is surrounded by mystery and tension. While Senior Detective Graham Malik suggests that Jack “seemed like a nice guy” (p. 75) to the locals, his children are obviously estranged from him, and something drove his reincarnated wife to return to his house before finally and deliberately bursting into flames. There is something deeply unsettling about Jack McAllister that brings on a “twinge” (p. 76) for the detective attempting to track down Charlotte. She “twinged so hard” that she “thought [she] was going to fall through the window”, her twinges “foretelling a threat that was not yet obvious” (p. 76). Perhaps it is the fact that Jack has “no birth certificate, no listed parents or siblings, no work history” (p. 86) or that anyone who has met him will “say how good a bloke he is, but ... they can’t say anything concrete about him” (p. 87). Certainly, Jack has a similar strange effect on the detective when she finally sees him. She finds herself only able to remember him in vague terms like “average height, average size” and “his eyes were definitely blue when they weren’t green or grey” (p. 91). In trying to recall his physical features more clearly, the detective stumbles, reflecting, “Even now, after all I’ve seen this man do, after all I know he’s capable of, I can’t put my finger on his features” (p. 91).

The reason for all this confusion and mystery is not fully explained until the chapter ‘Coal’, at which point the truth is revealed: Jack is not human. A spirit of flame, “he was born in the instant a woman, crouching by the curl of a cold river, smacked two smooth stones

Jack is:

- inhuman
- selfish
- lonely

together" (p. 166). In a parody of the mother–child relationship, the flame spirit continues to grow as "the most obvious and important life in his new world was now feeding him, her creased brown fingers poking dry sticks into his dancing maw ..." (p. 167). As the woman feeds the fire the god finds himself becoming more aware, and "as the flame expanded, so did his mind" (p. 167). Finally, just at the point when "he realised he had a purpose ... that he could do so much more than eat and grow" (p. 167), "his mother taught him fear" (p. 168). Dousing the flames, reducing the fire to nothing more than a glowing coal, the elemental spirit that eventually becomes Jack is sent back into nothingness.

From the first awakening, the fire spirit returns again and again, sometimes as a result of natural causes such as lightning strikes, and sometimes after being summoned by humans. Though vulnerable to water – even the rain is capable of beating down his "immense frame" to an "angry crouch" (p. 169) – the spirit learns he was capable of surviving and growing, particularly when nurtured by people. He also learns that "his heat not only ended life: moderated carefully, it could nourish it" (p. 169). The First Nations Australians who first summon the fire spirit use him in land management, burning off great swathes of dry grass on an approach to the water's edge. The spirit learns that "with a simple act of will he could transfer himself into any fire across the island" (p. 171) and in doing so "met others like him" (p. 172) such as the other gods of the land and the waters. But for the fire spirit, it "was people, always people; only people that he really cared for" (p. 172).

While the spirit learns he is capable of taking on human form, he discovers that "talking to them ... only heightened the truth that he was not one of them" (p. 174). It is this tension between his reliance on humanity and his alienation from them that truly defines Jack throughout the text. It causes him to act rashly and impatiently, and also highlights his selfish, stubborn temperament. When "paler people" (p. 175) arrive on the island, disrupting centuries of peace with the First Nations peoples who created him, the fire spirit proves fickle, quick to align himself with the newcomers:

They brought pain to the people he'd been helping for centuries – pain that he initially responded to by burning down their buildings, their docks, their great bird-like ships – but they also came with a vast multitude of new purposes for him. (p. 175)

His reliance on humanity seems only to extend as far as getting what he wants, and not to protecting the people whom he supposedly relies on. Moreover, as he further involves himself in the lives of the humans he coexists with, the spirit discovers that it has the power to alter their perceptions of him by "lighting tiny sparks in their minds, sparks that persuaded them to look upon him favourably" (p. 176).

At this point, the narration points out one of the fire spirit's greatest flaws – his hubris and inability to see beyond himself – stating, "If he had been closer to being human, he would have realised that these little sparks were a greater source of power than even his hugest land-scouring flames" (p. 177).

Though obviously not human, and despite deciding that being fire is "more fun" (p. 175), the fire spirit finds himself entranced by a human when he sees Edith McAllister for the first time in Notley Fern Gorge. He questions why love would "bloom in him, so many centuries after he first met a woman" (p. 178) and tells himself that the fact that "the day would come when it was her turn to burn ... connected them" (p. 179). After a few failed attempts at winning her trust – once again displaying his crucial misunderstanding of human nature – the fire spirit adopts his final form of Jack. Edith continues to reject Jack's advances, until "he made the worst mistake of his long life ... with a hot snap of his fingers he threw a tiny spark deep into the crinkles of her brain" (p. 181). Jack manipulates Edith in this way five times, until she finally succumbs to his advances and they begin dating and ultimately marry.

Jack is offered a chance at redemption when his children are born. Edith has not discovered his nature up until this point, and they have had a son, Levi, and a daughter, Charlotte. Although Jack finds it hard to identify with Levi, "his feelings for [Charlotte] were of the purest, awe-blinded kind of devotion" (p. 184). When the tear of blue flame drops from his eye into her infant mouth, and Edith sees, Edith does not react with fear but with wonder, and "it began a new phase of their life together" (p. 185). However, at a parent-teacher interview, Jack inadvertently reveals to Edith his power of mind control and is not quick enough to lie about having used it on her. She leaves him immediately, and Jack does not see her or their children again until Edith's return after her death to burst into flames on his lawn – "she burned out, bright and loud and then gone. Gone forever. And she took with her the most human parts of him" (p. 189).

In the closing, climactic chapters of the novel, Jack makes a final return. He has deliberately and selfishly distanced himself from his children, knowing that he is immortal and that one day, like their mother, "they would eventually die" (p. 189). Both Levi and Charlotte resent his absence, despite not knowing Jack's true nature. When Charlotte discovers her strange power, Jack remains distant, following her to Melaleuca but not acting on the opportunity to reconnect with her. It is not until the fire traps the McAllister siblings, Nicola and the detective in Notley Fern Gorge that Jack intervenes. When he steps out of the flames, Charlotte sees "the sadness in [his] eyes: sadness that touches despair" and realises that he is "lonely in the flames" (p. 212).

Jack is a complicated character; he is selfish and stubborn but has a human side that even he does not fully understand and that sometimes causes him great pain.

Nicola is:

- affectionate
- altruistic
- reliable

Nicola

Nicola's character acts as a counterbalance to Charlotte. Where Charlotte is rash and hot-headed, Nicola is "always so measured, so thoughtful, so full of plans and logic and duty" (p. 138). When she is first introduced in the text, in Allen Gibson's diary entries, the manager describes her as "the most reliable hand the farm has ever hired" (p. 96). From an early age, Nicola's purpose in life was to make others happy. Starting as a child with her father, Kyle, she would welcome him back from his trips out to sea, and as she "drew his love towards her" she also drew from him "the smile that cracked the salt" (p. 137). As far as Nicola was concerned, there is nothing that could match the feeling she got from her father's smile "until the burn that spread from her stomach the first time she touched Charlotte McAllister" (p. 137).

As Charlotte and Nicola become closer, drawn together by the horrific events unfolding on Melaleuca as Gibson succumbs to the spirit of the cormorant, Nicola begins to fall in love with Charlotte. "The urge to reach and touch" (p. 140) is almost overpowering, and at the time of their flight from the island as Charlotte begins to inexplicably leak flames, it is Nicola's touch that ultimately "quenched the rage; she had stopped the fire" (p. 137).

As Nicola takes Charlotte into the mountains "to bring Charlotte somewhere fire-proof" (p. 145), her love continues to deepen, and it is clear that Nicola is struggling to avoid letting her feelings show. Charlotte at this point has made no signs of returning her affection – in her typical, stubborn way she is much more focused on controlling her flames than recognising the feelings of her companion. Nevertheless, Nicola, staying true to her character, feels duty-bound to help Charlotte by quelling the flames as they rise up unannounced while she sleeps. While Nicola's "first instinct" is to help people, she also acknowledges in 'Snow' that this feeling isn't "pure selflessness" and that she "drew pleasure from how she could affect others ... glowing in the knowledge that she, and only she, had made them feel that way" (p. 145). Where Charlotte is concerned, those feelings are amplified:

Nicola was being driven by something more powerful than a desire to help, more urgent than a taste for gratitude. Something red and foggy. It knocked, fast and firm, through her veins. (p. 146)

Eventually, after another tumultuous night where Charlotte is unable to control the unconscious leaking of flames from her eyes and ears, Nicola joins Charlotte in bed and they sleep. Nicola "didn't want to let

go" (p. 147), and after several nights she draws her hand sensually across Charlotte's mouth, and the two make their relationship physical. In the final moment of their stay at Oshikawa's cabin, upon the arrival of the detective, Nicola is overcome with a fear of losing Charlotte. Nicola feels that "she didn't want all this taken away from her. She wanted it with an intensity that she couldn't remember before: a white-churned feeling of fear and sorrow and urgency" (p. 155). Interwoven into this knowledge is a subtle image of the ocean in the "white-churned feeling", and perhaps it is this part of Nicola's nature – inherited from her seagoing father – that responds so perfectly to Charlotte's fiery spirit.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- Each of the main characters in *Flames* seems to align with a particular element of nature, such as fire, water and earth. Find evidence from the text that associates the four main characters with elements of nature.
- Does Levi act out of brotherly concern when he decides to build the coffin? Or does something else influence him?
- Create a table with two columns: Character's abilities, and Analysis. In the first column, write details of each character and any special or supernatural abilities they have. In the Analysis column, write a statement explaining the importance or underlying meaning of each character's powers.

Secondary Characters

The Gods

The gods are:

- proud
- numerous
- diminished by humanity

The gods in *Flames* add a layer of mysterious and often surreal tension. From the outset of the novel, when Edith McAllister “returned to [Levi and Charlotte] two days after [they] spread her ashes over Notley Fern Gorge” (p. 1), there is a strangeness to the text. But it is not until the chapter entirely narrated by the Esk God that the gods come to the fore. The Esk God – to all appearances a rakali, or water rat – is small, vicious, and angry. Opening his chapter with the comment that he would happily “have jumped at [Charlotte’s] throat and spilt her life onto the watery boardwalk” (p. 38) had Charlotte not offered him some warmth in the night is an initial indication of his nature. The Esk God continues his narration in a similar vein, reflecting that “everything in [the river] knew who was in charge, who their god was, who would live and rule and smite until the river itself was drained to dust” (p. 39). In the Esk God’s mind, he holds dominion over both humans and the natural world.

However, like many of the gods mentioned in the course of the text, the Esk God is threatened by humans. Over the course of his life, the Esk God has seen humans “grow and die and spread” but “could not stop them, for his power was limited to the rivers, while they swamped over everything” (p. 39). As the Esk God leaves the “placid, hateful” (p. 42) waters of a man-made dam, he observes other gods:

... there were still broad white patches of frozen dew, courtesy of the Frost God ... he hunted for yabbies underneath the workings of the Shale God. The Gum God’s nuts rolled into the water from every direction, the Fur God’s minions thumped beats through the soil ... and the Bark God’s cast-off hides fell from their trunks and floated along the surface of his river. (p. 43)

But even while the island seems populated by various gods, “the Esk God noticed how diminished their presence was ... how the blood-tasting tang of iron had filtered into all that he saw and smelt and touched” (p. 43). Later in ‘Iron’, the Esk God comments on how the Hunt God – seemingly a Tasmanian Tiger – has been eradicated by humans, “its doglike face and black stripes forever gone” (p. 44). This tension between the gods and the humans of *Flames* is furthered in the chapter ‘Coal’, in which Jack McAllister’s true nature is revealed. While it is never explicitly stated that Jack is a god, it is clear that he is like the spirits of the river, sea, land and air that surround him on the island. His relationship with humanity is even more complex than that of other gods and just as destructive. The wrath of the gods is finally released in the penultimate chapter when the Cloud God, from her home atop Ben Lomond, senses the smoke of the burning Esk God’s pelt. “As she smelt the fog her body flinched, her wind voice screamed, her wisp eyes streamed” (p. 213), and the Cloud God

releases her grief and fury upon the island. While the gods in *Flames* seem neutered, stripped of their power by human industrialisation and progress, ultimately the fires and the floods prove that the gods still have power.

The Detective

The detective – whose name is never revealed – begins her narrative with a voice clearly inspired by noir pulp detective fiction:

You shouldn't drink gin before you drive a sedan. But you also shouldn't talk back to your mother, wear black with blue or sleep with loose men, and I'd done all those things plenty of times, so I didn't hesitate when I soaked my throat with a thick finger of Tanqueray before I hit the road. (p. 65)

Her laconic, cynical tone continues throughout. This, for example, can be sensed in her pithy observations of the other characters; her first impression of Levi is that there is some hidden, suspicious quality to him – “his private-school manners were paved over something that had cracked” (p. 65). The reason for this cynicism seems to be from the fact that while she “used to be normal” (p. 83) her life was disrupted by her fiancé cheating on her, and her job as a detective has exposed her to the strangeness of the island. When the detective is unmoved by Levi’s strange story of his reincarnated mother, she reflects that she had “seen stranger things happen to stranger people – blackmailers who’d stolen souls with high-powered cameras; thieves who’d sold their shadows to puppeteers; adulterers who’d swapped faces with gargoyles” (p. 67). The detective herself also seems in possession of some power, evidenced by the “twinge” (p. 76) – a premonitory power that she feels when bad things are about to happen.

The detective is also physically strong, attacking the two miners who had earlier in the text attempted to sleep with Charlotte and reflecting on a similar fight with her friend’s ex-boyfriend. However, the detective, for all her cool, cynical exterior, is a flawed and fragile character. She is an alcoholic, beginning each morning with the same crashing hangover. She observes her own experience with alcoholism when she says, “Gin sneaks into your coffee, first in drops, then in waves” (p. 84). Charlotte observes this fragility in the detective as well, as she sees some of her own personality traits in the detective. Charlotte’s comment that “there is something brittle behind her hard face, her smirked words. Something breakable ... she is not as tough as she would have us believe” (p. 190) reveals that there are two sides to the supposedly unflappable detective.

neuter:

to strip of power or abilities

The detective is:

- cynical
- capable
- flawed

laconic:

using very few words and/or speaking in a dead-pan tone

pithy:

brief and meaningful

Hough is:

- paranoid
- angry
- peevish

litany:

a long list

Thurston Hough

Thurston Hough is the author of a book on coffin-making that Levi uses as a reference in his folly to build a coffin for his sister. From the opening of the chapter 'Fur', Hough is clearly unhinged, as seen in the opening line of his return letter to Levi: "You scum. You ill-mothered baboon. You parasitic swine-herding subhuman mongoloid" (p. 50). Each of his subsequent letters begins with a similar litany of insults. The reason for Hough's venom is that he has retreated to his "quiet life of monastic contemplation in a place of rare beauty" (p. 50) in order to escape the world and, seemingly more importantly, the Tax Department. Hough feels that the world – and more specifically the Country Women's Association and the Tax Department – is out to get him, and his manner in these letters reveal his bitterness. Believing that the "local Country Women's Association ... is actually a terrorist group" that has reported him for tax fraud and placed him in a "precarious financial position" (p. 52), Hough begrudgingly accepts Levi's job.

As the letters between Hough and Levi progress, and Hough details the subtle qualities of different native woods, Hough becomes more and more concerned with his own wellbeing. It becomes clear that it was Hough who trapped and killed the Esk God as he has been running low on wombat pelts – it is later revealed that this is because Allen Gibson has been killing the wombats – and taken to trapping water rats. As a result of his sacrilege, "the denizens of this accursed stream have taken to harassing [him] whenever [he goes] to the water's edge" (p. 61). Ultimately, Hough's fears are proven right; in the darkness of his lonely home, the creatures of the river come and devour him, leaving only his remains and the Esk God's pelt for Levi to discover.

Karl

Karl is:

- strong
- stoic
- reliable

Karl is Nicola's father, and a fisherman of the North coast. His family resides just along the coast from the McAllisters and seems to share some of the McAllisters' mystical qualities but in a different way to the fiery spirit that Charlotte and Levi have inherited from Jack, or the McAllister women's power of reincarnation. Karl's power, and his daughter's, comes from his affinity with the ocean and with its inhabitants – particularly the seal. The Oneblood fishermen have a mystical, spiritual relationship with their seals. Reflecting Greek mythology, the fishermen see the seals as "the half of themselves they had been born without" (p. 6). As he first bonds with his seal, "the true meaning of salt and water and air wobbled inside Karl's mind" (p. 7) and he is able to begin his career hunting the famous and elusive Oneblood tuna.

Though Karl is closely connected to his seal and his life on the sea, he also builds strong relationships with his family. When he first meets his wife Louise, he realises almost immediately that “he needed to do something permanent about her” (p. 12). When his seal is killed, and Karl is scarred by the “clicking sound ... lodged in a hole between his ears” (p. 19) of the orcas, he does not take up another job but instead retires and spends time with his family. The novel finds Karl angling from a jetty, a “banal activity” that he has come to develop an “affection” (p. 22) for after spending hours at it with his two daughters. Finally, at the end of the text, it is Karl who takes Levi out into the waves, brusquely but calmly instructing Levi as Levi slides into the water and waits to meet his own seal for the first time.

The Ranger

The unnamed ranger, who appears at the end of ‘Feather’ at Melaleuca to respond to the mysterious deaths of the wombats, also features in an entire chapter, ‘Grass’. This chapter offers a reflection on the ranger’s life from when he was a child growing up in the bush, to his job as an adult tending for the natural world. Although the ranger possesses no mythical powers, he exhibits a similar bond with the natural world as Karl. The ranger refers to his affinity with nature as “wonder” (p. 135), a powerful force which has been a part of him since childhood.

His vivid descriptions of his childhood – “seeing in the swaying trees the origins of the man he had become, the things that had grown and nourished him” (p. 135) – and of life returning to Melaleuca after the burning from Charlotte’s flames demonstrate that some humans are capable of forming a strong connection to nature. His imagined description of Melaleuca after the fire also reveals the resilience of nature as he reflects on how “new shoots would soon spring forth, green and vital, stronger than before” (p. 134).

FOCUS QUESTIONS

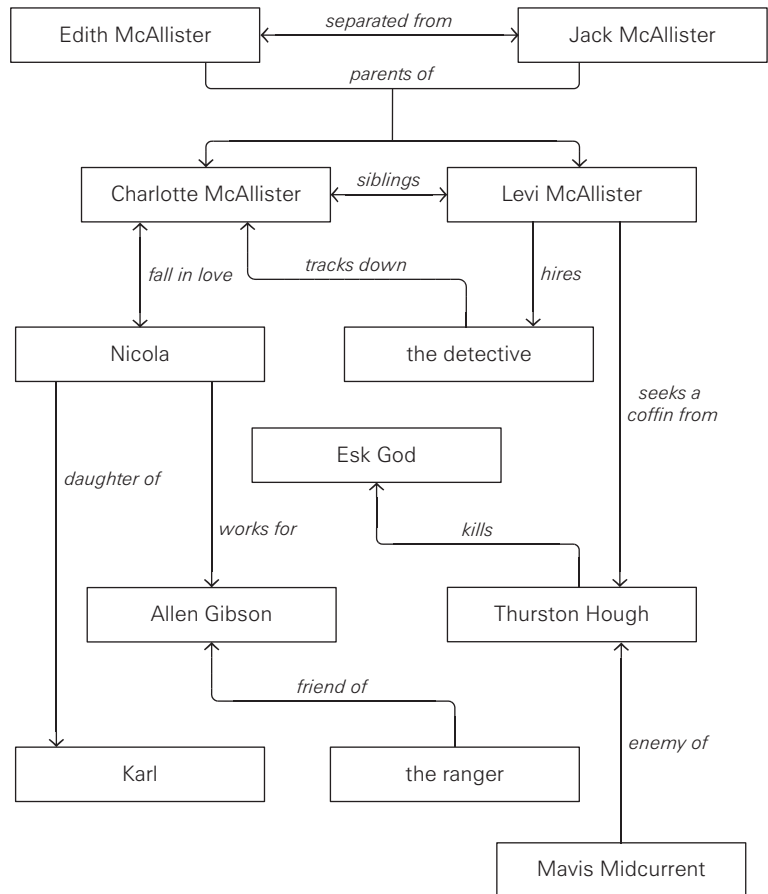
- Why do you think Arnott has chosen to include gods and mythical elements such as the personified natural forces in this text?
- ‘The detective is a tragically flawed character.’ Do you agree?
- Analyse the relationships between the characters and write a short response on how those relationships define them. You may use the character web in the following section to help with this response.

The ranger is:

- caring
- considerate
- attuned to nature

Visual Aid

The following character map shows the relationships and connections between the characters in the text.



Themes

Humanity's Relationship with Nature

The complexities of humanity's relationship with nature are explored throughout *Flames*. In a novel where people live side by side with gods, Arnott raises important questions about how we relate to the natural world and the consequences of our actions. Beginning with an epigraph from Ralph Waldo Emerson – “the air had so much life and sweetness, that it was a pain to come within doors” (p. vii) – it seems as though many of the characters in *Flames* feel more comfortable surrounded by nature than in the confines of their own homes or the major cities of the island. However, nature is not always as welcoming as they would wish and is often destructive and cruel.

From the outset of *Flames*, the characters' affinity with nature is made clear. Edith McAllister, risen from the dead, returns with her skin “carpeted by spongy, verdant moss and thin tendrils of common filmy fern” (p. 1). Levi explains that a third of the McAllister women return in this way, covered in the natural elements of the place their ashes are scattered. In the following chapter, ‘Salt’, Karl relishes in his relationship with the Oneblood tuna-hunting seal, and as he does so “the true meaning of salt and water and air wobbled inside his mind” (p. 7). Charlotte McAllister, a self-professed “coast person” (p. 194), is calmed by the “steely, placid” (p. 36) river as she flees her home for the south. She also comments on her desire for “white-chopped seas full of salt and fury” (p. 201), and this possibly draws her to Nicola, the daughter of Karl the fisherman. Even the secondary characters in *Flames* have close relationships with nature. The ranger, who comes to investigate Melaleuca, grew up surrounded by the natural world and as an adult he reflects on “seeing in the swaying trees the origins of the man he had become, the things that had grown and nourished him” (p.135). The ranger's “wonder” (p. 135), inspired by the awesome natural powers of both the place of his birth and the south of the island where he moved as an adult, is another demonstration of humanity's appreciation of nature. In a descriptive passage after the fire at Melaleuca, he reflects on the power of nature to restore itself after catastrophe:

... he was thinking of what Melaleuca would look like now. How the fire, having razed the vegetation, would have burned itself out on the rocky shores of Bathurst Harbour ... the charred humps of buttongrass would already be gleaming with morning dew, hours after burning to their roots ... new shoots would soon spring forth, green and vital, stronger than before ... these bright blades would summon wallabies and potoroos, and with them would come wild wombats, down from the chalky mountains, which would reinforce any survivors from the farm ... (p. 134)

epigraph:

a quotation at the start of a literary work that gives an idea of the work's theme

Ralph Waldo Emerson:

a popular American poet and author of the mid-nineteenth century, famous for writing on individuality and identity

The ranger's vivid depiction of natural life returning after the fire is a powerful reminder – especially for anyone who has lived through bushfires and natural disasters – of the ability of nature to recover. Not all the characters share the ranger's enthusiasm for the relationship between humanity and nature. The Esk God is a representation of the spirit of the river. He swims the Esk, criticising humanity's intrusion into the waters. He can "smell their foul industries ... feel their intrusions in the water ... see the iron they sunk into his rivers" (p. 39) and resents the ongoing march of industrialisation that has occurred throughout history. At any opportunity, the Esk God dives under the water of his river "to snap the neck of an ape-introduced trout" (p. 43) in minor protest against humanity's treatment of the natural world. Also demonstrating the darker side of nature, Allen Gibson's haunted and increasingly manic diary entries show his twisted relationship with the cormorant. Commenting that "there is a calculated wisdom in its black stare; or if not wisdom, a depth, an intensity, a kind of primitive understanding of things; and my respect for it grows each day" (p.104), Gibson allows himself to be fully consumed by the spirit of the animal, which results in his slaughtering of many of the wombats on Melaleuca farm. Another god in the text, the Cloud God, is so aggrieved by the death of the Esk God at the hands of a human that she unleashes a furious storm on the island, and, in a reference to the real life Launceston floods of 2016, "the storm kept raging, the river kept rising, and the rest of the city soon gave way to the unwelcome wetness as well" (p. 214). The imbalance of the relationships between gods and humans in this text exemplifies Arnott's views on how humanity interacts with nature.

Whether or not humanity's relationship with nature is always positive, it is clear in Arnott's novel that most characters prefer the natural world to the human-made. Charlotte, on arriving in the capital, notices how the suburbs "bunch, how they are squeezed between the wide estuary and the rolling foothills of the city's mountain" (p. 35). This sense of constriction, the city hemmed in by the river and the hills, matches Charlotte's feeling of entrapment as she travels through the city as quickly as she can. The detective too is unenthusiastic about the capital, claiming, "Here's a list of places I'd choose to visit before the capital: hell, anywhere tropical, the Mariana Trench, a deeper pit of hell, my mother's house" (p. 85). For her, it is "people, and the associated greed, horror and dirt of people, in greater numbers than anywhere else within a thousand kilometres" (p. 85) that presents the problem. Even Levi, who claims to be as afraid of the sea as his fire-spirit father, is warmed by a "coming-home comfort" as he returns to the coast and sees the "dark ocean" (p. 162). It seems that in Arnott's narrative many of the inhabitants of the island rely on the natural world to restore them, even if at times they fight against it.

Attitudes Towards Death

While *Flames* is at times a light-hearted and humorous book, there is an undercurrent of morbidity that runs throughout. The novel begins with the death of Edith McAllister, whose son Levi is seemingly nonplussed by her reincarnation and subsequent immolation on his father's lawn. Although his mother's death does not appear to affect him greatly, Levi is stirred into action on behalf of his sister Charlotte, whom he thinks is losing herself to grief and fear over the prospect that she too may return from the ashes after death. As such, by the end of the first chapter, Levi has made his grim decision to bury his sister "whole and still and cold" (p. 4). In his letters to coffin-maker Thurston Hough, Levi states that he will "spare no expense in making sure that her final resting place fits her as comfortably as her own skin" (p.49), and clarifies that his sister is not *actually* dying, stating: "I don't need this coffin to bury her in; I need it as physical proof that she won't be cremated" (p. 54). Later in the text, after the death of Hough and Levi's subsequent journey to Hough's house to collect the unfinished coffin, Levi reminds himself of his resolve "to show Charlotte that she wasn't condemned to rise again, changed and ghastly, after she died" (p. 159). By the end of the novel, however, Levi finally realises that his intentions towards building his sister's coffin were wrong and that he had been "erratic, selfish and weak" (p. 219). Though he had intended to build a coffin to allay Charlotte's supposed fear of returning after death, Levi had failed to see that he had projected his fear upon his sister and that his sister's attitude towards their mother's death was completely normal. As Charlotte herself claims as she flees their home upon finding the measurements for her coffin: "What is she doing but grieving?" (p. 30). The reader is left to decide for themselves whether it is Levi's obvious expression of grief or Charlotte's acceptance of her fate which is more normal.

Over the course of Levi's quest to build Charlotte's coffin, there are other characters whose attitudes towards death fall outside the norm. The coffin-maker Thurston House is an expert on the different materials used to make coffins, and the various properties of those materials. Arnott adds another mythical layer of unreality to his handling of death with Hough's detailed exploration of coffin wood. Hough relates that "a coffin made with blackwood panels will ensure that no trees can grow within a fifty-metre radius of the plot where it has been buried" (p. 55) – an idea that is later picked up in the chapter 'Feather' in Allen Gibson's diaries where a blackwood tree is the home of the evil and murderous cormorant spirit that possesses the farmer. Hough's litany of materials continues with wattle, which "will initially have no discernible affect, but after a week the air around the plot begins to take on an unmistakable odour" (p. 56). Native Myrtle coffins sprout a bush whose fruit induces "an intense desire for red meat" (p. 56) in anyone who eats it. Hough clarifies for

morbid:
a gloomy quality,
often concerned
with death

immolate:
to kill or sacrifice
by burning

nonchalant:
lacking concern

Levi that “it would be erroneous to bury someone who was popular and gregarious in life in a box of blackwood ... It would, however, be seemly to put an axe murderer in a myrtle coffin” (p. 57). Later in the text, the detective points out that Jack’s mansion is made of myrtle. And for Charlotte, Levi’s twenty-three-year-old sister, Hough proposes snow gum, suggesting:

... the most appropriate material for those who have died young is wood taken from the many-hued whorls of an old snowgum. Its hard, cold-to-the-touch timber does not rot or warp or even fade. Instead it fossilises, and so too does the body it contains ... This way the beauty of the young ... is preserved for all time. (pp. 57–58)

In the letters between Hough and Levi, Hough shows an unsettling nonchalance towards death. Even after Levi reveals that Charlotte is not actually dying – and upon clarifying the amount of payment he is willing to provide – Hough is more concerned with choosing the right wood than the welfare of his client’s sister.

Family and Relationships

Flames explores a variety of relationships: familial and romantic, functional and dysfunctional. The story of the McAllister family, beginning with Edith’s reincarnation, is a strange one. Throughout *Flames*, Arnott explores the family members and their relationships with one another, highlighting both their strangeness – the women’s tendency towards returning from the dead, and Jack’s true identity as a god – and their normality. For despite all their mythical and magical qualities, the McAllister family members fight, argue and return to one another as so many families do.

The siblings Levi and Charlotte are left practically orphaned when their mother dies, leaving behind “photos and memories and a family tradition of flames” (p. 26). Their father Jack has been absent from their lives for a number of years, and “the idea of him has turned [Charlotte] red and bitter ever since he left them” (p. 27). Much like *The Last Graham*, who observes that Jack has “no birth certificate, no listed parents or siblings, no work history” (p. 86), “[Charlotte] does not trust her father” (p. 27). This means that after their mother’s death, Levi and Charlotte only have each other to rely on. When Levi’s obsession with coffin-making starts, it drives a wedge between the siblings, which forces Charlotte out on her own. However, as the text unfolds, the story of the McAllister family grows more and more complex, and the siblings are eventually forced back together.

Jack’s story is possibly one of the strangest in the novel. From the outset, he is treated as a mysterious and sometimes unnerving character, but it is not until the chapter ‘Coal’ that it is revealed he is a fire spirit – a god like the Esk God earlier in the text. He is centuries old

and has dabbled with taking human form when he first meets Edith in Notley Fern Gorge. He falls almost immediately for Edith, asking himself, "Why did love bloom in him, so many centuries after he first met a woman?" (p. 178). There is a connection through fire, and he realises from his knowledge of McAllister women that "the day would come when it was her turn to burn", and so he decides to pursue her "to make her love him" (p. 179). After several unsuccessful attempts, Jack uses his power, lighting a spark in Edith's mind to change her perception of him "five times", giving himself "five chances" (p. 181). Though in retrospect he sees that altering Edith's mind was "the worst mistake of his long life" (p. 181), it does work, and the two fall in love. Even after Edith sees Jack's fiery tear fall into the mouth of their baby daughter, the knowledge of what he is does not scare her away; instead, "it began a new phase of their life together" (p. 185). But when Jack's power of influencing minds comes to light at a parent-teacher interview, and he is not quick to deny that he has used this power on Edith, she leaves him immediately. Jack retreats from his family, and when Edith died "she took with her the most human parts of him" (p. 189). Ultimately, Jack leaves his children for selfish reasons, recognising that "just like their mother, they would eventually die. And he did not want to be close to them when they did" (p. 189).

Charlotte and Levi's differences – his sombre mood and intense sense of purpose, versus Charlotte's fiery nature and urge to explore the island – push them apart throughout the text. Similarly, the siblings are kept distant from their father Jack by his self-centred nature and disregard for humanity. However, the siblings, despite being driven apart by Levi's obsession, are eventually reunited. Levi, who was always "a skinny, serious youth, with little sense of fun but a huge sense of responsibility" (p. 183) ultimately acknowledges that his actions after their mother's death "weren't all that rational" (p. 219). Charlotte too admits that "Levi and [her] have never understood each other" but acknowledges that there is love between them: "Love built with his stubborn resolve, with my hot temper, with all the care our mother poured into us" (p. 192). Even Jack redeems himself somewhat at the end of the text as he arrives in Notley Fern Gorge, and Charlotte sees his loneliness as he stands amidst the flames. In her father, Charlotte recognises some of her own differences, and perhaps accepts that he is not entirely at fault, as he struggles to fight against his true nature.

Karl and Nicola have a much stronger relationship as father and child than the McAllister siblings and their father, and their family is built on stronger foundations. Karl realised "he needed to do something permanent about [Louise]", and "when Louise realised there was no uprooting Karl she moved herself into the cottage" (p. 12). Both make a commitment to each other that would outlast Karl's career as a

Oneblood tuna fisherman. When Karl's seal died, Karl retired, and "the family went on holidays, up and down the rocky peaks and dipping valleys of the island" (p. 21). Karl comforts himself after the loss of his seal by sharing the "banal activity" (p. 22) of angling from the pier with his daughters. Nicola has very fond memories of her father. She recalls how he would return from a day on the ocean, and the sight of her would evoke in him "the smile that cracked the salt", claiming that "she split the face he showed the world, and drew his love towards her" (p. 137). Nicola's strong relationship with her father seems to have followed her into adulthood, influencing her personality as a woman who thrives on making others happy. She also believes that "nothing could match the blaze of love in her father's smile ... until the burn that spread from her stomach the first time she touched Charlotte McAllister" (p. 137).

Nicola and Charlotte's relationship develops over time, from slow beginnings on the wombat farm to their eventual coming together in the cabin on Cradle Mountain. Initially, Charlotte is distracted, but Nicola is drawn to her immediately. Though Charlotte does not return Nicola's feelings for a long time, Nicola frequently helps Charlotte to control her newfound and untamed powers. Nicola admits that she "was being driven by something more powerful than a desire to help, more urgent than a taste for gratitude. Something red and foggy. It knocked, fast and firm, through her veins" (p. 146). Eventually the two sleep together and solidify their relationship, and though Charlotte insists to herself that she will break up with Nicola when they return to Charlotte's home – "how I am going to tell her that we have shared a bed for the last time" (p. 191) – they remain together for the duration of the novel.

The Mythical

Among all the strangeness and fantastical elements of Arnott's text, the gods stand out as the most inventive creation. Woven throughout the story and, in some cases like the Esk God, even receiving their own entire chapters, the gods of *Flames* are by turns arrogant and proud, vengeful and wary of humans, and yet weakened and damaged. The rakali water rat with whom Charlotte unknowingly spends a night is revealed as the Esk God in the chapter 'Iron'. He swims the river, revelling in the knowledge that its denizens "knew ... who their god was, who would live and rule and smite until the river itself was drained to dust" (p. 39). Sharing the landscape with the Frost God, Shale God, Gum God, Fur God and Bark God, to name a few, the Esk God has grown wary over the centuries of human progress and industry. In a blunt and critical manner, Arnott uses the Gods to raise questions about humanity's impact on the climate and the environment. The Esk God can see that the Gods are "diminished" and notes "how the blood-tasting tang of iron had filtered into all

Arnott uses the gods as a vehicle for criticising humanity's impact on the natural environment.

that he saw and smelt and touched" (p. 43). Revealing that "the Hunt God was dead – harried, tortured and finally killed by the pale apes, its doglike face and black stripes forever gone" (p. 44) raises further criticism of the real-life extermination of the Tasmanian Tiger. The Esk God's rage towards the humans is obvious, and when he is killed by Thurston Hough, his pelt becomes imbued with all the fury and anger the rakali possessed in life, infecting first Hough and later Levi.

The fire spirit, who later takes on human form and calls himself Jack, also warrants his own chapter in 'Coal'. However, unlike the Esk God, Jack's relationship with humanity is more complex. While the rakali loathes the iron taste of humanity's influence in the waters, Jack revels in the new industry of the island's colonisers, which brings a "vast multitude of new purposes for him" (p. 175) such as burning lamp oil, branding cattle, lighting candles and melting ore from rocks. As with the Esk God's observations as it floats down the river, Jack notices the other gods of the island:

Some wore fur and feathers and watched over the creatures they resembled. Some floated high in the sky and released rain, on a whim, to extinguish him. Some swam through rivers and called themselves gods. Some were kind. Some, like a blood-hungry bird spirit he encountered deep in the southwest, were cruel. Most were calm, seeking only to care for the creatures and land that they felt drawn closest to. (p. 172)

However, unlike the Esk God, Jack feels more of an affinity with the humans he mingles with than with the gods who are like him, and ultimately, he fathers human children with his wife Edith, demonstrating the potential for relationships between natural spirits and humans.

It is not only the gods who add to the mythical qualities of this text. Various humans have magical or mythical powers and use them, knowingly or otherwise, in various ways. From Karl and the Oneblood tuna fishermen, with their quest "to find the half of themselves they had been born without" (p. 6) reminiscent of Greek mythology, to the detective with her "twinge" (p. 76) and powers of premonition, almost all the characters in *Flames* possess some sort of power. The Esk God comments on this too, noticing that some humans "grew horns from their temples (horns their fellow apes could not see), some cried tree sap, some licked lips with bladed tongues" and that some, including Edith and Charlotte, "returned after their ash had been scattered to the winds" (p. 40). Allen Gibson, manager of the Melaleuca wombat farm, is possessed by a spirit in much the same way the Esk God pelt takes hold of Levi. As he begins to feel the sharp point of the cormorant's beak, "knocking ... scraping ... needling" (p. 111) from inside his chest, he eventually gives himself over entirely to the cruel spirit and is rewarded with "unnatural speed" (p. 113) and healing powers. Arnott never explains the source of these powers, adding

a layer of mystery and surreal quality to the text. There is always a suggestion that the people of the island are deeply connected with the land, and that their powers perhaps come from the island itself. Charlotte's powers, the "hyper-blue" (p. 114) flames that leak from her eyes, stem from her father; but her father is also a creation of the island itself, brought to life centuries before by a First Nations woman.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- Explain in your own words why you believe Arnott has included so much of the natural world in his text.
- Do you believe that the mythical elements of this text add to or detract from the overall novel?
- Which theme do you believe is more prominent in this novel: the relationship between humans and nature, or the relationships between each other? Explain, using evidence from the text.

Critical Reception

Since the publication of *Flames*, Arnott has received numerous awards and accolades for his strange and energetic novel. The book was shortlisted for an assortment of prizes, including the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards Prize for Fiction, the Queensland Literary Awards University of Queensland Fiction Book Award, the Kathleen Mitchell Award and the Readings Prize for New Australian Fiction. It was also longlisted for various prestigious Australian and international awards, including the 2019 Miles Franklin Literary Award and the International Dublin Literary Award. In 2019, Robbie Arnott was the winner of the Margaret Scott Prize, a Tasmanian Premier's Literary Award worth \$5000 awarded to the best Tasmanian writer.

Flames' reception in the media has been equally high, with numerous publications from the *Guardian* to the *Sydney Morning Herald* writing positive reviews, a number highlighting Arnott's innovation. In a 2018 Readings review released to coincide with *Flames* being shortlisted for the Readings Prize for New Australian Fiction, Tom Davies comments on Arnott's ability as a writer to take classic tropes of Australian literature like "grief, and obsession" and present them with a "refreshingly new vision" (Davies 2018). This sentiment is echoed in Amy Baillieu's review for the *Australian Book Review* in which she compliments Arnott's debut and calls *Flames* "a story that sparks with invention" (Baillieu 2018).

In August 2019, *Flames* was shortlisted for *The Guardian's* Not the Booker prize. Reviewer Sam Jordison labels *Flames* as "solid, significant and emotionally resonant" (Jordison 2019). Beginning with a claim that any novel with the twists and turns of *Flames* "could be irritating" (Jordison 2019), Jordison goes on to explain how Arnott's innovative approach ultimately pays off. He acknowledges the evocative nature of Arnott's writing, especially when applied to the Tasmanian landscape – a common response across reviews of the novel – but is also critical of aspects of the text: "There are a couple of chapters and characters that feel fleeting. Arnott sometimes pushes too hard for humour ..." (Jordison 2019). Sarah Dempster's review for the *Sydney Morning Herald* comments on the structure of the text, how Arnott handles character perspective. Dempster (2018) also praises the use of different genres in the text: "Arnott ... throws them in the air, and lets the pieces land to form a flaming new world".

Writer Michelle Scott Tucker (2018) refers to the mystical and fantastical elements of Arnott's text as "elegantly drawn" and "full of emotional depth", and, similar to other reviewers, recognises the obvious humour in Arnott's prose. Tucker also notes that Arnott has been criticised for cultural appropriation, and though acknowledging that she cannot make a judgement does state, "There are Aboriginal

accolade:
a special honour or acknowledgement of merit

prestigious:
of great importance and reputation and inspiring respect

Emotionally resonant writing reminds the reader of their own emotions and is a true reflection of emotion.

figures in the novel, but their mythologies and beliefs are not discussed or drawn upon. If the central characters have an Aboriginal background, Arnott doesn't say so" (Tucker 2018).

Ultimately, despite some criticism, the praise for Arnott's *Flames* is overwhelmingly positive. The attitude of book critics and major Australian literary award bodies can be summed up by this comment from the judges' report for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards 2019:

Arnott experiments with voice, character and perspective, as well as form and genre, to craft a powerful debut novel that will ensure its readers never think about Tasmania – or, indeed, fiction – quite the same way again. (The Wheeler Centre n.d.)

Essay Planning and Writing

The keys to a well-written and thoughtful essay are simple and accessible to all.

First, you must have a sound and confident knowledge of the text. Second, you should use the chosen essay topic to guide and direct your ideas. Remember, examiners do not want to confuse or trick you. Topics are constructed to channel your ideas and generate thoughts on the text. Third, take some time to engage with the topic and plan your response in a systematic manner.

Finally, write a cohesive, fluent and relevant essay that engages with the topic throughout.

Planning the Essay

1. Read the topic, underline key words and phrases and, when in doubt, look terms up in the dictionary. Do not be afraid to paraphrase a topic so you can initially comprehend what it is asking you to do. Ask questions of the topic. For instance:
 - Is this the only way this text can be viewed?
 - Why would it be viewed thus?
 - Is there an alternative view?
 - What is the alternative?
 - How can the statement or question be refined or clarified to suit my particular view of the text?

This level of engagement is always a sure sign of a successful writer.

2. Use a dictionary to build up a word or phrase bank that helps to clarify and direct your ideas. You will find this word bank very useful when it comes to planning your essay.
3. Write a formal and considered introduction. This should take the most time and, if done well, can speed up the essay writing process.
4. Take at least 5–10 minutes to plan. The more practice you get at writing under exam conditions, the quicker and more efficient you will become.

Writing the Essay

The Introduction

A well-written introduction is the generator of a successful essay. If you like, its contents can contain a small-scale version of the key points and issues on which your discussion will concentrate.

An efficient introduction should:

- clarify and define key terms and phrases.
- outline (briefly) the main issues that will be tackled.
- articulate your main argument in a confident and assured manner.

Do not:

- simply repeat the topic in your opening sentence.
- simply agree or disagree.
- disregard the topic altogether and rewrite a pre-planned essay that is largely irrelevant to the topic.

A well-considered and thoughtful introduction should contain at least three to four key ideas that can be developed into substantial and intelligent paragraphs in their own right. Also, intelligent discussions explore the topic in depth. In other words, they do not reduce the statement or question to an either/or scenario. Both sides should be developed, explored and discussed in some depth.

Paragraph Two

Develop and expand upon your first key idea. It is often possible to take one key word or phrase in the introduction and make it the focus for the whole paragraph.

Outline your first key idea and engage with the text by using quotes and references. Above all, sustain the connection with the topic and do not deviate from it.

Paragraph Three

Develop and expand upon your second key idea. How does it relate to your first? How does it relate to the topic? Again, back your ideas up by using specific incidents or quotes from the text.

Paragraph Four

Let us assume that you have three key ideas; therefore, this is the last paragraph that makes up the main body of your essay. Develop and expand your idea, link it with your two others and return to the

topic. By slowly returning to the topic at the end of the paragraph, this will provide you with a fluent and cohesive link to your concluding remarks.

The Conclusion

The final paragraph should tie up your ideas and return quite clearly to the initial topic. Do not just summarise your views here. A good strategy is to provide a clear, logical and thorough response to the topic by re-expressing it to suit the way you have developed your argument. Such a strategy assumes that you have clarified, defined and substantiated the issues involved thoroughly in the main body of the essay. Never introduce new ideas in the last paragraph that have not been developed earlier. Finally, remember to finish confidently and assertively.

Do not, in the process of your discussion:

- bombard your reader with too many quotes. Quotes should illustrate an argument or idea rather than act as a substitute for it.
- re-narrate the story. Examiners know the plot and who the characters are. They are interested in your ideas and views.
- simply rewrite an essay that is not relevant to the topic.
- deviate from the topic.

Sample Essays

Sample Essay 1: An Essay Plan and Introduction

TOPIC

Explore the tension between humanity and nature in *Flames*.

Plan

The focus of this essay is to explore the conflict between humans and the natural world.

Key words

- 'explore' – view the text from multiple angles
- 'tension' – conflict, unease, struggle, challenges in the relationship
- 'humanity' – all humans, not just characters in the text
- 'nature' – the natural world, the flora and fauna of the island, the gods

Introduction

Throughout *Flames*, the tension between humans and nature is driven by humanity's disregard for the natural world; however, nature often fights back in this challenging relationship. Humans are frequently criticised in the text for the way they treat the natural world – from the Esk God's distaste for the way humans have treated the waterways and the environment, to Jack McAllister's understanding of the industry the European colonisers brought with them. In Arnott's novel, it is clear that humans on the island of Tasmania – particularly the colonists – have not treated the natural world well. In moments of crisis, the natural world pushes back against humanity, fighting with fire and flood; all of humanity's industry and structures are powerless in the face of the great storm that batters the island. Even so, there are human characters in *Flames* who share an affinity with nature, proving that humanity is capable of resolving its tension with nature and coexisting alongside the natural world.

Paragraph Two

Focus on humanity's disregard for nature.

- The Esk God is highly critical of humanity: consider how it views the various generations of people who have coexisted alongside it on the island.

The **introduction** presents the contention and then signposts the main arguments in the essay.

Paragraph two argues that humanity has a disregard for nature.

- Thurston Hough only values natural materials for their special coffin-making properties. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of the properties of woods and furs, but does not respect them as natural elements.
- Allen Gibson kills the wombats after being possessed by the evil spirit of the cormorant. Perhaps the nature of the bird spirit brings out the worst in Gibson's humanity.
- Jack McAllister understands the colonists and their industry: despite himself being a natural element, he appears to side with the cynical desire for progress at the expense of the natural world.

Paragraph Three

Focus on nature fighting back.

- When the Esk God is killed, his pelt still has power. Both Thurston Hough and Levi are possessed by the pelt and driven to madness, inflicting harm on themselves and others. The pelt also attracts the denizens of the river to Hough, resulting in his death.
- The spirit of the cormorant possesses Allen Gibson and encourages him to unleash his fury on the wombats.
- Jack, as a natural force, is destructive and has a callous attitude towards humans. Even though at times he sides with them, it is always for his own benefit.
- The Cloud God unleashes an unstoppable fury on the island upon realising the death of her beloved Esk God. The natural fury of the storm – a real life event – is captured by Arnott as a moment of the natural world fighting back against humanity.

Paragraph Four

Focus on humanity and nature coexisting.

- Karl and his seal share a special bond. They work together for many years before they are successful in catching the Oneblood tuna. After the seal's death, Karl is distraught and unwilling to find another animal to be his partner.
- Charlotte McAllister feels at peace in the natural world – especially near the coast. Despite her fiery nature, she still feels more at home near the sea than in the city, or in the enclosed space of the gorge.
- Both Nicola and Charlotte love the wombats and treat them well. Their work at the wombat farm contrasts Gibson's crimes.

Paragraph three
argues that nature
fights back against
humanity.

Paragraph four
argues that it is
possible for nature
and humanity
to coexist.

The **conclusion** brings all the essay's points together and restates the contention. It ultimately resolves the tension in the topic by, for example, answering a 'do you agree' essay prompt or offering a final comment on the text in a 'discuss' or 'explore' essay prompt.

- The ranger was brought up in nature and serves as an example of the ways humans can be raised to respect and care for the natural world.

Conclusion

A tension exists throughout *Flames* in the way that humanity has related to nature over time. From Jack's early understandings of the First Nations peoples who created him to the industry of the colonisers, humanity's relationship with the natural world has changed greatly. The Esk God experiences the destructive power of humans – first observing their impact on the environment, and ultimately being slaughtered to furnish one of Thurston Hough's coffins. In response, nature fights back – Jack unleashes flame and fury on the island at whim, with a callous disregard for humanity. The pelt of the Esk God infects any human who holds it with a madness. And ultimately, the Cloud God drowns the island with the tears of her grief over the destruction of her lover at human hands. However, while there are moments in the text that criticise humanity's relationship with nature, there are characters such as Karl, Charlotte, Nicola and the ranger who prove humans and nature can coexist. Arnott does not attempt to resolve the tension between nature and humanity in *Flames*, but he does suggest that it is at least possible.

Sample Essay 2: A Complete Essay

TOPIC

To what extent is *Flames* a work of Tasmanian Gothic fiction?

Through its dark parody of life on the island of Tasmania, *Flames* could be considered Tasmanian Gothic fiction; however, there is more to Arnott's novel than this simple term suggests. Arnott's novel features many of the conventions of the Tasmanian Gothic genre, from its macabre themes to its strange and sometimes disturbing characters. The locations are sometimes rich and lush, but equally others have the claustrophobic and threatening feeling associated with this Gothic genre. As *Flames* is written as a series of chapters focusing on different characters, Arnott is able to write one entire chapter – 'Feather' – in the Gothic genre. However, the term Tasmanian Gothic can be problematic as it only offers a narrow definition of texts. There are also characters, settings and chapters in the novel that do not conform to the conventions of the genre. Ultimately, while there are many dark and morbid features of the text, Arnott's novel refuses to be pigeon-holed into one specific genre.

The Tasmanian Gothic genre – an offshoot of Australian Gothic and the Gothic genre more broadly – features dark, claustrophobic locations; disturbing characters; and is often concerned with environmental issues and the island's troubled colonial past. Arnott addresses all of this in *Flames*. The impact of humanity on the natural environment of the island is made clear early on, with the Esk God's criticism of humans who have "swamped over everything" and contaminated the waters. Humans are also responsible for the death of the Hunt God, an allusion to the extinct Tasmanian tiger, which has been "harried, tortured and finally killed by the pale apes". Through the fire spirit Jack, we can also see some criticism of the European colonisers who "brought pain" to the First Nations peoples who had populated the island long before their arrival. Throughout the text, Arnott weaves themes like these together with the broader overarching story of Levi's morbid quest to build a coffin for his sister, to "bury her whole and still and cold" so that she is not "condemned to rise again, changed and ghastly" after her death. These typically Gothic themes and concerns are heightened through Arnott's use of Gothic language in describing the settings of the text, such as Notley Fern Gorge, the land of the south and Cradle Mountain. Charlotte's distaste for the gorge is clear when she describes how "worms and beetles churned across the bracken floor" and "water throttled in a stream". Similarly, her descriptions of the "dryness" and "beigeness" of the south and the "strange, muted landscape" of Cradle Mountain add to the Gothic feel of the text. Finally, characters like Thurston Hough and his "unparalleled expertise" in the field of coffin-making add an

The **introduction** clearly sets out the contention in the first sentence. It then moves on to briefly define the key term 'Tasmanian Gothic' from the topic, and then signposts the main arguments of the essay.

parody: an imitation of reality, usually with a humorous effect

Paragraph two presents evidence that Arnott's novel does follow the conventions of the Tasmanian Gothic genre throughout.

extra layer of Gothicism. Hough's lengthy and detailed descriptions of the properties of different woods – such as myrtle coffins, ideal for an "axe murderer" – are equally funny and disturbing. Through the themes, settings and characters of this text, Arnott creates a distinctly Gothic feel.

Paragraph three provides a detailed study of a specific chapter that acts as a self-contained Gothic short story.

Some chapters deliver Tasmanian Gothic conventions more than others and one in particular – 'Feather' – functions as a standalone Gothic short story. 'Feather' is written from the point of view of Allen Gibson, the farm manager at the Melaleuca wombat farm. Using diary entries, Arnott deliberately makes use of a common feature of Gothic fiction, mirroring classics like *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. The chapter begins in a dark and disturbing manner – "Something is killing the wombats. We found the first corpse three weeks ago". Gibson's description of the killings, that "something has torn at their throats and underbellies" and that "their eyes have been plucked clean from their sockets" continues to add to the macabre feel of the diary entries. 'Feather' continues with typical Gothic tropes, such as the central character's fear and paranoia, as Gibson is overcome in various entries with "a sense of weariness" and succumbs to "dark, flickering" dreams and "visions". By the fourth entry, it is becoming clear that Gibson is losing his mind; he claims he is "being toyed with" and ultimately comes to blame everything on Charlotte and Nicola, writing, "Damn these women! Damn them!" Another Gothic element of the story is the large black-faced cormorant that lives in the blackwood tree over the old tin mine. According to Gibson, "there is a calculated wisdom in its black stare; or if not wisdom, a depth, an intensity, a kind of primitive understanding of things". As the narrative unfolds, Gibson is possessed by the spirit of the bird, feeling "a needling, pointing dig of a bill ... behind [his] skin and sternum", and it is revealed that Gibson is responsible for the wombat killings. After fleeing Charlotte's wrath and falling into the abandoned tin mine, Gibson completes his grim transformation, sprouting "a scattered layer of black plumage" and growing his nose into a cormorant's beak. The chapter – finishing in the Gothic mode it has maintained throughout – ends with Gibson's ominous threat that "there will be more blood, more death, more warmth sucked up by the coldness of the night".

Paragraph four argues the counterpoint that Arnott deliberately writes in a number of different styles and genres, therefore the novel should not be pigeon-holed into the Tasmanian Gothic genre.

However, not all chapters in *Flames* are like 'Feather'; Arnott's deliberate experimentation with different styles often vary from the Tasmanian Gothic tone. The detective's main chapter 'Ice', for example, is written in the style of a hard-boiled detective novel or a noir pulp detective story. Her narrative begins with the deadpan statement that "you shouldn't drink gin before you drive a sedan. But you also shouldn't talk back to your mother ... so I didn't hesitate when I soaked my throat with a thick finger of Tanqueray before I hit the road". This style of writing is very different to 'Feather' and the

storyline introduced by Levi in the first chapter, and the detective is a complex but less strange and twisted character than Hough or Gibson. Other characters, like Mavis Midcurrent in 'Cake', exist only for comic relief, breaking the tension of the surrounding chapters. And the ranger, particularly in the chapter 'Grass', offers a narrative that is filled with warmth and love of nature; he reflects on the "buzz of belonging in his throat and chest" he felt whenever he was among the "swaying trees" that had "grown and nourished him". The relationships between characters generally stray from the Gothic genre too. The love between Karl and his family, and even his love for his "hunting companion" seal is clear. Nicola feels a warmth, "something red and foggy", for Charlotte. Between Charlotte and Levi there is love too – "not warm love, not vocal love, but love nonetheless". Arnott's use of a variety of writing styles, characters and themes; his use of humour; and his exploration of relationships makes *Flames* more than just a Gothic novel.

While *Flames* has been celebrated as another work of Tasmanian Gothic fiction, many Tasmanian authors find the term problematic as it provides a narrow view of the island's writers. Arnott proves capable of breaking the boundaries of the genre and writing a novel that is not bound by the term. *Flames* does feature the issues, concerns and conventions of Tasmanian Gothic fiction, such as the environment, a view on the island's bloody colonial history, claustrophobic settings and disturbing characters. However, there are also moments of humour, love and explorations of other genres in the text. Ultimately, *Flames* is a complex novel that features both darkness and light.

The **conclusion** brings together all the essay's points and adds clarity to the topic, clearly showing that while *Flames* has elements of the Tasmanian Gothic genre, it goes beyond this single label.

Essay Questions

1. How does Arnott create an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty throughout *Flames*?
2. 'Arnott refuses to treat nature simplistically.'
How is nature represented as a complex, unfathomable force in *Flames*?
3. '*Flames* is a surreal novel that is more concerned with fantasy than reality.'
To what extent do you agree?
4. "Such sorrow came to the island, and tried to drown it."
Discuss the impact of the natural world on the characters in *Flames*.
5. "I did what I thought was right. I started looking for a coffin, and I swore to bury her whole and still and cold."
Discuss Levi's intentions throughout the novel.
6. '*Flames* is more about the darkness of Tasmania than the light.'
Do you agree?
7. Explore how Arnott uses the individual chapters and narrative structure of *Flames* to strengthen and add to the overarching narrative of Charlotte and Levi's story.
8. '*Flames* reveals the darkness that lies at the heart of the island of Tasmania.'
Discuss.

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