



# Flames

by Robbie Arnott

Teaching notes prepared  
by Marion White



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION  
FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH



Cover image: Viveka de Costa (with minor manipulation).  
Original image sourced via Creative Commons.



# Flames

## by Robbie Arnott

Teaching notes prepared  
by Marion White

Edited by Faye Crossman

---

© VATE 2021

May be used for educational purposes within the institution that has purchased the resource.

All educational institutions copying any part of this resource must be covered by the Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) Licence for educational institutions and must have given a remuneration notice to CAL.

Disclaimer: This VATE Inside Stories 2022 contains the writer's perspective and does not necessarily reflect the views of VATE.

VCE® is a registered trademark of VCAA.

The VCAA does not endorse or make any warranties regarding this study resource.

ABN 22 667 468 657 Inc. No. A0013525E



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH



# Flames

## by Robbie Arnott

Teaching notes prepared  
by Marion White

### Introduction

It is clear to readers of *Flames* that Robbie Arnott loves the landscapes, seascapes and people of his home. Tasmania is more than the setting in *Flames*—it is like a character. Readers are reminded of its separation from Australia's mainland, and of its unique ecological and historical features. They are given a virtual tour of its towns, cities and roads, and familiarised with its flora and fauna, timbers and rocks, rivers and estuaries and harbours. Using the literary tropes of magic realism, Arnott depicts the interdependence of creatures and features of the Tasmanian environment, and shows that the balance in ecosystems can be fragile—characters in *Flames* are capable of both love and hate, creating and destroying, using and abusing.

At the centre of an interconnected web of characters in the novel are two 'old families', one a matriarchal farming family and the other a fishing family. The fisherman, Karl, is not only courageous, smart and successful in his salt-water hunting, he is also a loving father to Nicola and, ultimately, a generous father-figure to Levi, the disturbed son of twice-deceased farmer Edith McAllister and her shape-shifting erstwhile husband Jack. Karl is also accepting of Levi's sister, Charlotte McAllister, when she becomes the partner and lover of his daughter Nicola. Jack, however, is a volatile and unreliable supernatural creature—he is fire, a god-like being become human, and walking among humans because he fell in love with Edith. Despite Charlotte and Levi's psychological issues as a result of their strange parents, the two central siblings grow and learn, and ultimately become more stable, loving and selfless.

Arnott's novel consists of chapters narrated in a number of different voices, each with differences in tone, tense and style. This allows for development of a values dichotomy—there are 'goodies' and 'baddies', there is farce and irony, murder and mayhem, yet also an earnest portrayal of love and caring, growing and learning, determination and steadfastness. The zany Mavis Midcurrent (Arnott's tribute to a celebrated Tasmanian member of the Country Women's Association) is truly caring of the people in her Avoca community. The smart but cynical female detective, a woman disappointed in love, is determined, intuitive and successful at her job. The steadfast ranger, having devoted his life to the love and care of the natural environment, makes quick decisions under pressure to save others. But the two characters who are malignant and deranged—again with magic realism aiding Arnott's graphic descriptions of their descent into evil—highlight all that is the opposite of love and caring. They descend into madness, becoming excessively nasty, self-centred and destructive.

There is ambiguity along with this dialectic. Central in the novel's web of connectedness are the supernatural or mythical fire and water. These two are seen as both necessary and nourishing, yet also powerfully destructive. Readers suspend disbelief and accept shifts into the supernatural in order to dwell on the significance of the power of Nature—the metaphorical fury of fire, and the powerful sorrow of 'the Cloud God'. Readers considering Arnott's ideas and values are left to contemplate the significance of our own interconnections with all the people, animals, plants, earth, water and air around us, and of the question, whether ultimately the most power lies with humans or Nature. This may be a first novel, but students will find intriguing, unresolved sub-plots for their creative consideration, and plenty of ideas and values to explore.

## Ways into the text

---

### Water and fire

- Students should research and discuss notable fires and floods in Tasmania, such as the floods of 1929 and 2016, and fires of 1967 and 2013.
- Floods and bushfires are often connected with Australia's identity. Students could read 'Said Hanrahan' by John O'Brien (P J Hartigan) and discuss how this sort of 'bush poetry' became significant in our sense of identity.
- How many ways can you think of, in which fire, flame and flood are used metaphorically? Make three lists of possible metaphors or similes using these three words.

### Magic realism

What should the reader expect in approaching this literary genre? Discuss some well-known examples such as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or Isabel Allende's *House of Spirits*. If we accept magic realism's deployment of mythological beings, entities and spirits, are we confusing fantasy with fact? On the other hand, is the idea of the supernatural a more effective way of conveying certain ideas and values? What is the effect of telling mythological stories?

### Flora and fauna

Students could research the habitats, behaviours and uses of seals, tuna fish, native water rats (rakali), cormorants and wombats—information about Tasmanian wildlife is not always factual in this magic-realist novel. (See **Further activities**.)

## Tasmania

Students could research and discuss Tasmania's environment and history. Whilst Tasmania is noted for its natural beauty and its attractive old Georgian-era towns and bridges, it is also noted for its history of logging, mining, frontier decimation of Aboriginal peoples, and, from 1804, transportation of convicts. Students could investigate the:

- activities that bring tourists to the island: white-water rafting, bush walking, mountain-bike riding, yachting and deep-sea fishing;
- towns, rivers and beaches of the north, Midlands, north east and south-west which provide the settings for Arnott's characters (see **Further activities**, mapping);
- historical and contemporary mining in Tasmania—what is mined, and where?
- development and use of hydro-power. Many books and articles have been written about the struggles to preserve the wild beauty of south-west Tasmania, including protests against the flooding of Lake Pedder in the 1960s and the more successful protests against two further dams, the Gordon-below-Franklin dams, in the 1980s;
- logging in Tasmania, including protests against the extensive logging of old-growth forests, and the involvement of the Gunns, an 'old family', in protests against a Gunns Ltd pulp mill proposal;
- history of Indigenous language groups, and of early colonial 'settlement'.

An excursion to Tasmania would be ideal but 'online travel' more likely. It is difficult anyway to fly into beautiful Bathurst Harbour, landing on the airstrip built by Deny King, although easier to see the two Esk rivers converging in Launceston and forming the large tidal estuary called the Tamar. Arnott takes his characters to places commonly frequented by tourists. A few of these are:

- Cataract Gorge in Launceston
- Crater Lake and Cradle Mountain
- Beauty Point and Hawley beach on the north coast
- Campbell Town on the Midland Highway, and Quorn Hall
- Avoca on a road to the east of the Midland Highway (where you can get coffee at 'the Cow Shed café', admire old buildings, and see plenty of dirt bikes).

## Structure of the text

Each chapter is named for a place or an element significant in the action or in the nature of the character featured by that chapter. And in each chapter—whether written in past or present tense, in third-person limited or omniscient point of view or first-person voice, or in a different form (letters, memoir or diary)—we hear the point of view of a different character, with the first and last chapters narrated by Levi McAllister. Although this makes for a disconcerting variety of voices or points of view, each chapter has some discernible connection with previous and/or subsequent chapters. Events, however, are not sequential. Readers must work out for themselves the sequence of events in the plot.

In ‘Ash’, Levi McAllister tells us that a third of the women in his family returned after they had been cremated, although none of the men did. Cousin Ella did, after her ashes were scattered at Stacks Bluff, Grandmother after being scattered at Hawley Beach, great aunt Margaret after scattering at Bothwell, and, most significantly, his mother. After her ashes were scattered at Notley Fern Gorge she ‘came back’ for four days with ‘leafy appendages’—fern fronds of course—sprouting from her, and then she was incinerated at the house of ‘our father’ (p. 3). The idea is thus established that the McAllister women—including Charlotte—are magically unusual, and the family has a weird relationship with fire.

‘Salt’ (p. 5) tells us, in third person, about Karl’s connection with water and fishing. On Tasmania’s north coast, he hunts tuna with the help of a seal, his ‘New Zealand fur pup’. Karl had seen ‘the McAllister matriarch rising from the tide, reborn’ (p. 9) and understood that the ‘McAllister women were trouble’ (p. 9). His wife Louise must bond with the amazing seal—Karl’s partner in securing the ‘Oneblood tuna’ that makes his fortune when he sells it to Oshikawa—before marrying him. Sadly, the seal is hunted down by a pod of killer whales. Walking on Hawley beach, Karl meets Levi, who looks malnourished, and they talk about his sister.

In ‘Sky’ (p. 25), we learn that Charlotte is running away from home because she deduces that her brother Levi is planning to build a coffin for her. It is not that she does not want to be buried, it is that she will not relinquish her ‘family tradition of flames’ (p. 26). She wants to burn even if it means ‘she might return’ (p. 27) as their mother did. She does not trust her father, so she hitchhikes down the west side of the Tamar to Launceston and as the winter sky darkens, she finds a dinghy on the docks under

which to sleep. She dreams of her childhood on the farm near Beauty Point, of her brother Levi who was screaming but ‘always so controlled’ (p. 29), and of her younger sunburnt self perhaps sprouting fern fronds (p. 28). She wakes to find that a rakali, or native water rat, has slept under the dinghy with her. Sure (and annoyed) that her brother is crazy, judgmental and controlling, she travels on through Kingston, Tunbridge, the Midlands and Franklin to Melaleuca.

‘Iron’ (p. 38) gives readers, in third-person limited voice, the point of view of the magical water rat, the Esk God who inhabits the freshwater of the South Esk, a river stained by the rust-coloured element iron—by the effects of mining. It is because he ‘didn’t want to pick a fight with’ (p. 41) Charlotte’s father that he ‘allowed her to live’ (p. 41), thus suggesting that water and fire must keep their distance. However, after the ‘ape’ Thurston Hough kills him and he rises to meet his Cloud God creator, he remembers the dream he had on Charlotte’s warm stomach. In his dream he was lying on the warm grassy bank of the gorge seeing ‘a towering wall of flames’—as this fire raged, ‘his river had never been more glorious’ (p. 47).

‘Fur’ (p. 48) is a series of letters from Levi to the author of *The Wooden Jacket*, whom he politely addresses as ‘Mr Hough’. Thurston Hough’s replies are excessively rude in tone, although informative: a blackwood coffin kills anyone who approaches it (blackwood will ‘host a single black-faced cormorant’); the smell of golden wattle keeps people away; native myrtle turns people into cannibals; a snowgum coffin for Charlotte would preserve her ‘for all time’; and finally, the creatures of the river are trying to kill him. We learn that he uses the fur of water rats to line coffins now that his suppliers of wombat fur in the south have ‘farming difficulties’ (p. 58).

‘Ice’ (p. 65) may be the element which the nameless detective puts into her numerous alcoholic drinks, but it also describes her steely character and the temperatures in parts of Tasmania. Levi has asked her to find Charlotte, who is on the run from the home of their recently deceased mother. The detective goes first to Jack McAllister’s house. Her fellow detective Graham Malik explains Charlotte’s disappearance as a need ‘to get away from that creepy brother of hers’ (p. 73). He also explains that ‘something’s off’ about Jack McAllister, who has ‘a forged identity’ (p. 86). The detective has one of her twinges at mention of Jack, which indicates for her that ‘something was wrong with Charlotte’s father’ (p. 88); her twinges usually foretell a threat. She finds the ‘two Romeos’ who had molested Charlotte in Tunbridge, lets them molest her too so she can get information from them,

and then beats them up and heads for Melaleuca. Alighting from the Jabiru at Bathurst Harbour, she sees a 'field of burnt heathland' (p. 90) and a 'man' who tells her to '*Stay away from my daughter*' (p. 92).

'**Feather**' (p. 94) is the diary of Allen Gibson, manager of Mrs Quorn's wombat farm at Melaleuca. Over the course of eight entries, the reader detects a disconcertingly nasty change in his attitudes. He begins by wondering who, of the three people on the farm, is killing the wombats: Nicola 'cries over fresh corpses' (p. 97) and Charlotte lovingly tends the wombats. There is a blackwood tree above the grave of the farm's founder—readers recognise this as an ominous (p. 55) reference to the deadly behaviours of black-faced cormorants. When pelt orders cannot be met, Gibson surmises cormorants are killing the wombats, but then he is himself eerily seduced by, and united with, the cormorant (p. 109), and he morphs into a crazed killer. As Charlotte defends herself and Nicola, her fury becomes fire, and the defeated Gibson knows 'the truth': that he himself is the wombat-killer. He retreats with his diary into the tin mine where the cormorants feed him. He knows there will be 'more blood, more death' (p. 118) and indeed there is.

'**Cake**' (p. 119) purports to be a chapter in the memoir of Mavis Midcurrent, a member of the CWA in Avoca. This chapter's farcical humour uses clichés about the country women who have in fact been a force for good in regional areas over many years. Arnott states in his end-note that Marjorie Bligh was the inspiration for the character of Mavis. The chapter serves the purpose of underlining the 'vile' nature of Thurston Hough and informing readers that he was found dead, and that a 'client' (whom we know to be Levi) 'took the golden-brown pelt' (p. 125), which we know to be the warm wondrous fur of the water rat.

In '**Grass**' (p. 126), the ranger in the National Park near Melaleuca rescues Nicola and Charlotte after Gibson threatened to kill them. In a third person limited voice, the chapter reflects on the wondrous beauty of Tasmania's wild southwest, the threatening terror of fire, and the miraculous possibilities of post-fire regeneration. The ranger, having seen his erstwhile friend Allen descend into madness and attacked by the cormorants, flies with the women to Hobart, where they promptly disappear. He will 'report a fire and make sure the pilot [is] paid' (p. 134) but he will not bother telling anyone about the 'thin trail of blue tears' falling from Charlotte's eyes or the blue flames in the grass. From the plane, he sees the farm burn as 'the flames tore across the plains' (p. 132). He knows the fire will burn itself out and everything

will regenerate, including wombats, orange-bellied parrots and buttongrass—and 'he would feel the wonder again' (p. 135). As the two women and the ranger fly out to Hobart, we realise that this fire, from which they are escaping, is where the detective will soon encounter the enigmatic 'man', the one of whom she says 'I can't put my finger on his features' (p. 91).

'**Snow**' (p. 136), in third person limited voice, follows Nicola as she and Charlotte drive up to Cradle Mountain in her parents' old station wagon which had been parked at the airport. Nicola remembers the 'blaze of love in her father's smile', (p. 137) but now as she drives Charlotte to 'somewhere fire-proof', the two women gradually fan the flames of their sexual desire and learn that Nicola has the unique ability to suppress flames of rage with her touch: 'Her touch had travelled through Charlotte's heat. She had quenched the rage; she had stopped the fire.' (p. 137). Nicola, who is selfless, measured, thoughtful, and logical, plans to 'get control' and 'sort everything out' with police and ranger, although just when she's enjoying time alone with Charlotte in the 'soft-falling snow' (p. 156) at Oshikawa's stone hut at Cradle Mountain, the detective arrives.

In '**Wood**' (p. 157), Levi, having obtained his Avoca address from the publisher and driven there, finds Thurston Hough's dead body, a 'mess of stale meat' (p. 157). He is filled with confidence when he takes the golden-brown rakali pelt from Hough's hand, although—as the reader is told in a third-person omniscient narrative voice—he hasn't been 'well' since his mother died, and he should just talk to Charlotte rather than make a coffin for her. He drives past Exeter to the home near Beauty Point that he had shared with his mother and Charlotte. But he finds his father there; his anger and confusion builds until a 'fire is crackling through him' (p. 165) and he resolutely leaves to go build a coffin 'out of something far more personal' (p. 165).

'**Coal**' (p. 166) begins as a third-person reflection on fire, on the origins of peat, and thus on coal. But it soon emerges that fire in Arnott's novel is not merely the element or plasma we know it scientifically to be, and a provider for humans both dark and pale, but also a personified 'He', a 'crackling god' (p. 168) who has learnt to 'walk among them' (p. 172). According to Arnott's myth, fire was 'born when a woman ... smacked two smooth stones together' (p. 166), it is endlessly hungry, it wants 'to please his creator', and it has numerous purposes in 'this water-edged world' (p. 172). This fire god becomes human in the person of Jack McAllister; he falls in love with the pale woman Edith McAllister and sets out 'to make her love him' (p. 179),



knowing that the McAllister men usually ask him to turn their women to ash. He throws a spark to get Edith to like him, moves onto her farm, and 'begins to love her in a human way' with strong feelings that spurt fire from his eyes, nose, fingers. He 'asks her to marry him' and they have two children. His son Levi, with a 'love of purpose and ... strength of resolve' (p. 183), is like his fantastical father who can 'flick himself' into flame 'with a simple act of will' (p. 171). His much-loved daughter Charlotte ingests 'a drop of fire' (p. 184) at birth, and leaks fire thereafter whenever her emotions are aroused. But when their mother Edith realises that he uses sparks to influence or control people, including herself, she 'turfed him out' (p. 187). He begged, he 'haunted her' for fifteen years, but only 'learned of her death' as he 'crackled to life around her funeral pyre' (p. 188). Water is to him 'hateful'; at sight of the sea he flickers with fear. Finally, smiling sadly at Charlotte in the gorge, he is defeated by the Cloud God who, in sorrow, is drowning the world in a flood.

'Grove' (p. 190) is the climactic chapter, told from Charlotte's point of view. Levi and Charlotte at last talk with each other when they meet in Notley Fern Gorge. Their confrontation is witnessed by Nicola, who gets hurt in the process but not rejected, and aided by the detective, whom Nicola trusts but Charlotte doesn't, because with 'flames of rage and loneliness ... that can't be put out', (p. 190) she thinks the detective is just like her. The detective (at the end of 'Snow') had found Charlotte and Nicola at Oshikawa's hut; now, as they set out in two cars to locate Levi, Charlotte considers why she had left him at their mother's Beauty Point farm: she had become aware that her flames had 'been burning ever since our mother had' (p. 193); she and Levi had 'never understood each other' even though 'there is love' between them (p. 192); and his plan to make her a coffin was 'too much death' (p. 192) for her to deal with. As the three women drive north, passing near Jack's Exeter 'mansion for one man' (p. 195), Charlotte thinks 'We do not need him; we do not want him' (p. 196). It is the house at her mother's farm that is 'home'. However, Levi isn't there. Charlotte is annoyed with the detective (and still intending to drop Nicola), but goes with them to find Levi at Notley. He is felling tree ferns and he looks unhealthy; Charlotte and Levi are both worried about each other now, and both in a very emotional state. After Charlotte grabs the brown pelt from Levi, a scuffle becomes an inferno: 'my flames ... are pouring out my ears now' (p. 208), the grove is aflame. Then 'a man' appears—but as her father looks up, he meets his match: 'the rain starts falling ... And now the rain, first so welcome, tries to drown us' (p. 212).

In 'Cloud' (p. 213), an omniscient third person voice explains that the cloud's rage and sorrow is caused by the smell of smoke from the small, golden-brown pelt. She, the cloud, loves the rakali; her 'tantrums and wind-screams' (p. 215) are monstrous and severe because that golden-brown pelt 'belonged to the other half of the cloud's heart' (p. 215). You can feel a cloud's sorrow 'whenever a storm hits the world with uncommon force'; 'such sorrow came to [Tasmania], and tried to drown it.' (p. 216).

In 'Sea' (p. 217), Levi explains that he used to be 'afraid of the ocean' (p. 217) when their father was with them, but now Nicola has the idea to get him into a dinghy with her father, Karl. Levi admits to feeling shame about the irrational behaviour he has displayed since their mother's death; he claims that he 'had been erratic, selfish and weak' (p. 219) in failing Charlotte when 'she needed [him] most' (p. 219). He and Charlotte seek forgiveness from each other, while Charlotte and Nicola appear to be mutually committed. Levi finds his true confidence, perhaps his true self, in the salt water when Karl gets him to bond with his own seal.

- What significance do you see in the title *Flames*, and in the chapter titles? The elements of matter essential to all life used to be thought of as fire, earth, air and water. Fire, however, is not really an element—flames primarily result from a reaction between a gas, oxygen, and a fuel such as wood. Are the titles literal or metaphorical, or both?

## Perspective on the text

---

Published in 2018, *Flames* came on to the VCE English text list in the summer of 2020. The fires that destroyed vast swathes of Australian bush—and terrified people as they huddled on the water’s edge looking for an escape—were ‘unprecedented’ (see **References**). Rain had barely begun to fall before pestilence became pandemic and we were isolated in lockdown. The Covid-19 pandemic has now utterly disrupted our relationship ecosystems. People everywhere have become uncertain about who or what to trust any more. Yet paradoxically, acts of kindness and caring have been equally ubiquitous. What is it about our interconnectedness within a vast ecological web that can be so terrifying and yet so wonderful?

Of the four great apocalyptic fears—fire, flood, famine and pestilence—Australia is usually noted for the first two, an aspect of our national identity memorably conveyed in the old Irish-Australian poem ‘We’ll all be rooned, said Hanrahan’. But in 2020 it was fire and pestilence that disrupted our relationship ecosystems. Vast areas of bush were so badly burnt that many experts expressed concern about the regeneration of natural ecosystems. Millions of animals were killed, and their habitats destroyed. In fact, environmentalists worry that we must not let our attention be diverted by the virus pandemic from the looming, and possibly worse, devastation that could be caused by human-induced climate change.

How to represent in a novel, such vast themes as the interdependence of earth’s life forms, or the ambiguous nature of fire and its nemesis, water? Arnott deploys the tropes of magic realism to convey a panoramic sweep of ideas such as: whether humans use natural resources well or badly; whether nature will fight back if ill-used; and the effect of men and women’s emotions and attitudes on their interconnectedness with each other and with their environment.

In this grand mix of the supernatural and the very real, where do the novel’s values lie? Fire is seen to be malignant but also useful—and perhaps even sacrificially selfless. Fire is a threatening, domineering, volatile creature; yet humans have depended upon it since time immemorial for cooking and keeping warm. Rain has the ability to defeat the ravages of fire, and it is capable also of taking revenge on humans. A grand love-affair between an animal and a cloud could signify the importance of keeping nature in the right balance.

Or in Arnott’s supernatural metaphor, the passion of the Cloud God perhaps represents an expression of universal sorrow for the death of earth’s creatures. The novel thus suggests some ethical problems raised by the interconnectedness of earth’s life forms.

However, the main ideas and values are about how humans act and react within their particular ecosystems. For characters in Arnott’s novel, redemption lies in their ability to selflessly care for others around them, perhaps even to the point of sacrifice, and in their capacity for genuine self-understanding. Reacting calmly in threatening situations is endorsed, as is thinking of, and executing a plan, with the idea of saving others whilst also taking care of oneself. Charlotte and Levi grow calmer and more confident as they work through their grief (mother) and psychological issues (father)—with the help of the dependable Nicola and Karl, the cynical but equally dependable detective, and the idealistic ranger.

On the other hand, culpable reactions to ecological or personal challenges are seen in such actions as failing to take personal responsibility, blaming or controlling others, and harming others. The evil actions of Gibson and Hough suggest authorial condemnation, not only of personal immorality and failings but also of all the ecological destruction wrought by humans. Arnott’s novel, in drawing on both the beautiful and ugly aspects of Tasmania, suggests that his values lie with environmental protection, and that he condemns mining, damming of waterways, and logging of native forests. The novel condemns human irresponsibility, selfishness, and destruction, while it endorses love, responsibility, determination, self-control, caring and kindness.

We often use fire and flame as metaphor to symbolise the passion of diametric opposites: love and hate, distress and calm, confusion and resolution, creation and destruction. Perhaps ultimately it is passion that is at the heart of Arnott’s novel. Our passions flicker or flame—the question is, are our passions constructive or destructive?

## Characters

Whilst **Tasmania** is the novel's 'setting', it is also in a way, the main character. The novel's other characters travel to many of its tourist attractions, enabling the mainland reader to become more familiar with the experiences to be had on the other side of the Bass Strait. Tasmanians have historically had a strong awareness of separation from the mainland. This very separateness underpins both the attractions of its tourist industry—'it was spectacular ... in the way that nature often is', as the detective remarks (p. 90)—and some of the darker aspects of its history such as the convict era and the dispossession of its Aboriginal peoples. Emphasising its difference from the mainland, the detective refers to Tasmania as 'this strange southern rock' (p. 76), whilst her fellow-detective Graham Malik emphasises its distinctive border when he observes that if Charlotte has '*crossed Bass Strait we can't do much*' (p. 73).

**Karl** is an angler and 'decky on a fishing charter' (p. 9) who lives at Hawley on the north coast. He becomes a hunter, with the magical New Zealand seal pup as his salt-water hunting mate. He trains the seal to hunt 'Oneblood tuna' which Oshikawa buys from him for large amounts of money. He marries Louise, who works in tourism in Devonport; she must bond with his seal before they can marry. Karl is devastated when his magical seal falls prey to a pod of killer whales, and is haunted by the clicking sound of the Orca. He and Louise have two daughters, one of whom is Nicola. He is a man given to 'small-town courtesy' which is why he listens on Hawley beach to the young man (Levi) who has an intense stare and looks malnourished (p. 23). Karl has heard about the McAllister women; his family now becomes interconnected with theirs. His daughter Nicola has met Charlotte in the far south, and ultimately it is father-figure Karl who teaches Levi to trust, in salt water with the seals.

**Nicola** grew up at Hawley in a secure and loving family, where her father Karl's 'victories in the water' as a fisherman are 'matched by Louise's success on land' (p. 15) as a tourism operator. (Louise is an organised mother who leaves a car at the airport and clothes in the boot in case of arrival at freezing places such as Cradle Mountain.) Nicola is in Melaleuca to work on the wombat farm because as a child she had become 'enamoured with the place' (p. 21) and she is studying to be a vet. By the time Charlotte arrived in this isolated place, Nicola 'was in desperate need of a friend' (p. 139). The manager, Allen Gibson, thinks she 'needs to toughen up' (p. 96) because she weeps over wombat corpses, but in contrast to Charlotte,

she is steady, reliable and calm: 'so measured, so thoughtful, so full of plans and logic and duty' (p. 138). Her 'friendship' (p. 140) with Charlotte becomes something more passionate as they escape from danger. A person who lives 'by putting others first' (p. 145), Nicola takes care of Charlotte by calming her with her touch and driving her to safety, to 'somewhere fire-proof' (p. 145) at Oshikawa's 'roomy stone cabin' (p. 21) on Cradle Mountain. Although Charlotte is thinking of dumping her, she remains steadfast in her devotion, like an ideal wife.

**Edith McAllister** lived 'on a little farm that had been owned by her family for five generations' (p. 178), but has recently died, been cremated and, like other women in her family, returned for a time, before burning again. During her four-day return, her body sprouted moss and fern fronds, but these were dried out when she went up in flames on the front lawn of her ex-husband's house, leaving behind 'a blackened patch of burnt grass ... a ring of charcoal' (p. 70). Her two children, Levi and Charlotte, are now in various stages of grief: Levi, behaving irrationally and worried about his sister, wants to build a coffin for her so she won't be cremated, and Charlotte, despite reciprocal concern for her brother, is on the run because she 'will not stay in a house ... with a brother who wants to bury her' (p. 26).

**Jack McAllister**, initially Monty, is 'hard to describe' (p. 91) and has no background; Graham Malik tells the detective that '*he turned up out of nowhere—out of the blue, engaged to Edith McAllister*' (p. 75), and there's '*something off*' about him. He 'found [Edith] by the ocean' (p. 178) 'centuries after he first met a woman', and 'love bloom[ed] in him' (p. 178). With his 'love of purpose and his strength of resolve' (p. 183), he overrides Edith's hesitations about him by throwing a spark of fire at her to 'burn out the ill feeling she'd formed of him' (p. 181). They marry and have two children, but when Edith—although she already knows he is a controlling, shape-shifting creature of pure flame—fully realises that she herself has been the victim of his controlling sparks, she leaves him. He then lives in a large three-storey house built of myrtle—the wood that can lead to eating people (p. 56)—overlooking the Tamar near Exeter, and doesn't speak to his family for years. When Edith blazes out of the world on his front lawn, he is not sure, but hopes, that she might perhaps have forgiven him, that she might still love him. The detective gets one of her prescient twinges when she sees the 'patch of burnt grass in the lawn' (p. 70), before meeting him again at Bathurst Harbour. When Charlotte had begun leaking fire and Levi 'unravelling', 'he intervened with only half of his flaming heart' (p. 189). Ultimately, he appears to Charlotte as he steps out

of the smoking coals in Notley Fern Gorge, smiling at her with a 'sadness that touches despair' (p. 212), and submits himself to the 'huge swamping sheets' of rain.

**Levi McAllister** was 'duty-bound and serious' (p. 185) as a child, whereas his sister was boisterous and loved the water (p. 162). In grief about their mother's death and alarm over her reincarnation, he wants to save his sister from a similar fate. But when she runs away from their mother's house and from him, he hires a private detective to find her. Charlotte says of their sibling relationship, 'Levi and I have never understood each other' (p. 192). His relationship with his father is also strained—the father who thought young Levi inherited his own 'love of purpose and his strength of resolve' (p. 183) now invades Levi's house and lectures him on needing to be reliable and strong, which is ironic because Levi has just recently been 'filled with confidence' and 'more sure of himself' (p. 160) since acquiring the soft brown rakali pelt (p. 160) from the dead fingers of Thurston Hough. Levi becomes angry and confused at this confrontation with his estranged father and deteriorates further. After an even more heated confrontation with Charlotte, he feels shame at having been irrational, 'erratic, selfish and weak' (p. 219) and failing her 'when she needed me most'. Less sure of himself after the pelt has gone in the fire, he claims that it is as if his memories 'were someone else's' (p. 219). He cries at last, in the hospital room where Nicola is recovering from burns, and ultimately, he is in the salt water, 'there for' the seal pup, and himself 'afloat ever since' (p. 226).

**Charlotte McAllister:** When Charlotte was born, her parents watched 'for signs of the fire growing within her, but they saw nothing' (p. 185); she was 'a normal, if belligerent, child' (p. 185). She describes herself as 'a coast person' (p. 194) who experiences fear in the rainforest of Notley Fern Gorge and 'distaste for wet soil' (p. 201). After their mother's twin deaths, Charlotte and Levi were living in her house and 'fumbling for a way to be and talk and stay together' (p. 195); although 'there is love between them, they 'have never understood each other' (p. 192). She thinks Levi is crazy (p. 30), and she is determined to get away from him even though she thinks he needs help. Charlotte does not trust her father; she does not trust the detective either. But she shares warmth with the rakali—who in gratefulness for good dreams mercifully does not bite her (p. 38)—and she sings wombats into their burrows (p. 97). Charlotte is volatile, her emotions always seem to be leaking out just as her flames do: 'behind her pale face there lurks a curious ferocity' (p. 97); she screams when a wombat dies; she runs from her brother out of fear she

would 'end up hating him' (p. 193); and she constantly contemplates ending her sexual relationship with Nicola. She tells us she is 'just like' the detective in having 'flames of rage and loneliness that burn through her smirk: flames that can't be put out' (p. 190).

The **rakali**, or water rat, is the Esk God (p. 43) whose other half is the Cloud God. He regards the people swimming at the mouth of the Esk as 'pale apes', but he has a mystical affinity with fellow-animals Charlotte and Levi. Charlotte's 'warmth... provided him with the best dreams he'd seen in decades' (p. 38) and as a consequence he 'allowed her to live'. Levi 'is filled with confidence and a renewed sense of purpose' (p. 158) when he takes the golden-brown pelt from the dead hand of Thurston Hough. However, the rakali also regards humans as the enemy, and indeed after Hough murders the water rat for its pelt, the creatures of the South Esk take violent revenge (p. 61).

**The Detective** whom Levi hires is a tough no-nonsense female, 'a thirty-something woman with hard eyes, dark lips and short hair' (p. 78), although Charlotte recognises 'she is not as tough as she would have us believe' (p. 190). She once had a corporate career but was disappointed in love—her fiancé dropped her for a blonde. Now a female sleuth, she drinks too much gin and claims to have no feelings. She is 'bored' by pretty landscapes, historic towns or 'ceaseless farmland'. She used to play footy, 'used to be normal' (p. 83), but now lives a single life fuelled by unhealthy food, black coffee, and gin. But she has friends: a tom-cat who sleeps on her stomach; an ex-colleague, senior detective Graham Malik; and Cindy, the Jabiru pilot whom she had once helped by 'persuading' the boyfriend 'to leave her alone' (p. 89). Her hunches have a supernatural edge: she gets twinges (p. 76) that act as a sort of 'foretelling'. She extracts from two putative rapists in Tunbridge the information that Melaleuca used to be a mine and now has only a wombat farm. We wonder at the end whether Levi pays her for her work.

**Thurston Hough**, with his extremely misanthropic attitudes, is an almost farcical villain. The author of *The Wooden Jacket*, he writes excessively rude letters in reply to Levi's polite requests for information about what wood to use in building a coffin, but the correspondence continues because he is in financial strife. He is a tax avoider and self-congratulatory conspiracy theorist; he considers himself a 'genius' (p. 61), claims he has 'knowledge that no other man on earth possesses' (p. 53), thinks the CWA is 'a secret arm of the government' (p. 123) and that everyone is out to get him. He was using high-grade wombat pelts to line coffins, but when he can no longer source

these from the wombat farm in the south, he takes to ‘trapping water rats’ (p. 58). In a letter to Levi, he remarks that the pelt of a particularly large rat he has, which is ‘always warm to the touch’ (p. 58), would be ideal for his sister’s coffin. In his next letter he tells Levi that all the creatures of the South Esk are trying to kill him, and sure enough, when Levi finds his house, he also finds Hough’s mutilated corpse (p. 155).

**Allen Gibson**, as manager of the Melaleuca Farm Estate, has the unlikely job of ‘farming’ wombats. However, he kills wombats with malevolent intent, not humanely as a real farmer would. He excuses himself from blame or fault for this violence, claiming instead that he gains power because he becomes increasingly inhabited by, and united with, his ‘glorious cormorant’: ‘powered by the thirst of my other feathered half ... [m]y body is gaining a power it never had. And the glorious cormorant within me is content’ (pp. 114-117). Gibson has worked for farm owner Mrs Quorn for ten years, and initially claims to have a strong bond with the wombats: ‘this herd of wombats is the closest thing to family that I might ever know’ (p. 96). But he changes, his ‘violent mood swings ... [become] more erratic’ (p. 140) as he becomes more like a cormorant himself. After he threatens Nicola, and Charlotte’s fury explodes in fire, he leaps into an old tin mine with his diary and cormorant feathers to keep him company. Later, the great flood caused by the Cloud God’s sorrow washes out to the ocean ‘something built with flesh and feathers ... violent black feathers’ (p. 214).

**Mavis Midcurrent**, herself a ‘small-town nutter’ (p. 119), writes in her memoir about the special people of Avoca, including ‘the lovely ladies’ of the Avoca Country Women’s Association and lovely lads such as Larry, Garry and Barry. The reader infers she is an ebullient, well-meaning woman, with no qualms about loving the men of the town as well as the women, nor about including marijuana in her cake recipes. But she despises the ‘vile’ Thurston Hough.

**The Ranger** grew up near a forest in the ‘gentle east’ where ‘the wonder became a regular part of his days’ and he ‘let the wonder take his soul’ (p. 127). He has now worked in the National Park in the ‘wild southwest’ for ten years. He copes calmly with the drama of the dead wombats, his erstwhile friend Allen’s growing insanity, and the two women needing his help, one ‘leaking fire’. He will ‘report a fire and make sure the pilot was paid’ (p. 134). Having been brought up by a mother who enabled him to find nourishment in nature, he is now able—even after seeing violence, madness and a terrible bushfire—to contemplate the wonders of regeneration.

## Issues and themes

What ideas and values are evident in *Flames*, and how do the structural features of the novel convey these concepts? Characters in Arnott's novel, both realistic and supernatural, form a web of relationships that highlights interconnectedness and passions both constructive and destructive. As Nicola wisely understands, 'she needed human contact' (p. 139). We all need human contact, and furthermore we need to understand the extent to which we depend upon our interconnections with other living things and with the earth, air and water around us as well. Ecosystems are important, both relationship ecosystems, and ecosystems of nature. Through distinct contrasts in the ethics of its characters, the novel endorses loving, caring, trust, and personal development over self-centredness, meanness, coercive control, self-deception and destructiveness.

### Relationship eco-systems: interconnectedness

Charlotte and Levi, having learned in their childhood to fear instead of trust because their father is not dependable, are redeemed partly by their own efforts and partly through the love and selflessness of others. The McAllister siblings learn to trust and to curb their fear and anger. They change to become less obsessed or controlling and more open in their relationships with others. And they relate on equal terms not only with humans, but also with other animals.

### Love, passion, caring and trust

Love abounds in the relationship network in *Flames*. Divine love is expressed in the cloud's boundless grief (p. 47) and the rakali's intense joy at seeing the cloud's 'face' in heaven. Mavis's fondness for all the people of Avoca (except Thurston Hough) is 'promiscuous'. Nicola's love for Charlotte is almost sacrificial, whilst their reciprocal love becomes a passionate sexual desire as well as a steadying influence for Charlotte. Whereas the detective's cynical exterior has been shaped by disappointed love, the ranger was loved by a mother who 'nudge[d] him towards the trees' (p. 127), thus shaping his true adult self. In Karl's love for his daughter we see the powerful adoration of a truly loving father: 'Nothing could match the blaze of love in her father's smile.' (p. 137).

Characters who are able to trust others are those who are emotionally secure in sharing love, caring for others, and in understanding themselves. Mavis Midcurrent loves her town, trusts and loves everyone

but Thurston, and says selflessly of the mayor, 'What an inspiration she is!' (p. 120). Nicola 'had lived by putting others first' (p. 145). The ranger tried to take care of his erstwhile friend Gibson (p. 107) but instead takes care of Nicola and Charlotte. Karl trusts and loves his seal as he does his family. But Charlotte and Levi must learn about trust and self-understanding. It is partly the love and caring of others around them that helps in their personal journey of change and transformation.

Charlotte experiences a brief and unlikely trusting relationship with the rakali, but she and Levi have more than grief to deal with after their mother's twin cremations. From grief they travel through rage and misunderstanding to a healthier sense of personal agency, trust of others, and confidence, purpose and resolve. Although they 'have never understood each other', Charlotte knows 'that between [them] there is love. Not warm love, not vocal love, but love nonetheless. Love built with his stubborn resolve, with [her] hot temper, with all the care [their] mother poured into [them].' (p. 192).

- 'What [Jack] knew about building love: very little.' (p. 179). When Jack sighs and disappears into the mud, drowned by the Cloud's expansive love and deep grief, has he sacrificed himself for his children? Does he love his children?
- Is it the love and caring of others that transforms Charlotte and Levi, or is it their own determination, resolve and mutual care?
- Is love differentiated from lust in the novel?
- Are there characters who fail to express love, caring or trust? How do we view them?

### Change and transformation

After their mother's death, Levi and Charlotte exhibit in their different ways, behaviour that is impulsive, irrational, erratic, explosive, selfish—traits that remind us of their father. But each, in their own way, then goes on to learn and grow in self-understanding, and in the ability to open up to others and to new experiences. Are they in this sense, like their mother, sprouting new leaves?

Despite (or perhaps because of) lacking confidence, Levi's worry about his sister leads to his impulsive search for a coffin. He 'is not realising: he could have just spoken to her' (p. 160). He pursues Thurston for the coffin and hires a detective to find Charlotte, but he fails to look after himself, becomes unhealthy and behaves irrationally. After taking the animal pelt from a dead man's hand, the 'renewed sense of purpose' he feels (p. 158) is in fact a false confidence. And after his mad chopping episode at Notley, he realises

that his 'behaviour was wrong' (p. 219) and feeling a sense of shame, he seeks Charlotte's forgiveness, wanting to 'win back her trust' (p. 220). Levi has learnt to talk things over with his sister and gained self-understanding. Now, helped on by the loving father-figure Karl and the caring Nicola, he is ready to expand and develop even further. He is ready to immerse himself in salt water—a baptism of renewal.

Charlotte, despite reciprocal concern for her brother, 'will not stay in a house ... with a brother who wants to bury her' (p. 26). She is worried by what she feels is an inability to control her 'episodes' (p. 150), although she also has the insight to know that 'Maybe the flames have always been there' and that flames represent her strong emotions of grief, anger and love: 'I'd been burning ever since our mother had.' (p. 193). With Nicola's determination to keep loving her, Charlotte is able gradually to gain confidence in her own ability to control her explosive reactions. She had thought '*What if I can't? ... Control it*' (p. 150), but Nicola's ability to quench the fury of her flames acts as catalyst for Charlotte's new sense of calm. For Nicola, though, it is not easy. She has to exercise patience in developing her relationship with Charlotte: 'even though Nicola wanted to talk to Charlotte, she felt no words rise up in her' (p. 149) and at the grove she has to be fearless and brave. Charlotte then is 'swamped with shame' (p. 191) about her treatment of Nicola. And after coming to terms with her father, she is able at last to come to accept and understand her brother—she seeks his forgiveness.

- Is Levi really 'erratic, selfish and weak' (p. 219) as he suggests?
- Has Charlotte really become calm? Will her relationship with Nicola remain passionate?

Changing and transforming is what Jack does by his very nature, over millennia and in quite biblical ways. At the moment when fire stretches out of coals, 'without intention or design' (p. 173), he becomes human and nobody sees him 'emerge and transform' (p. 174). Ultimately, he 'holds a hand over his chest' (p. 212), looks up into the sky, and disappears.

- Does Jack change in his role as father?

Transformation is not only a matter of positive personal growth. Allen Gibson, for instance, willingly embraces black cormorants to the extent of sprouting black feathers himself. Ultimately, the Cloud God flushes out of the old mine a creature with 'violent black feathers' and a 'waxy nose-bill' protruding from the water (p. 215).

- What do you think has happened to Allen Gibson? (see **Creative text response**)

A sense of purpose is not only a human need, but is known to be the vital factor in keeping people alive in extremely stressful situations. Jack, or his metaphorical alter-ego Fire, felt 'he had a purpose in this water-edged world'. On 'the shore of the harbour' he learnt that 'even in the spread of his power, he could still serve a purpose.' (p. 171).

- What purpose did Jack serve on the shore of the harbour?
- What other purposes does this character serve?
- Which other characters find they need a sense of purpose?
- Discuss fire and flames as metaphor: what purposes are served by this metaphor?

### Nature's ecosystems: the interconnection of species with land, water and each other

Our interconnectedness with other species in nature's ecosystem can be life-threatening as well as life-enhancing. In *Flames*, Arnott uses both realism and myth to develop ideas in an ecological narrative. We enter into the subjectivity of 'characters' in this ecological web: Karl's seal falls prey to a pod of Orcas; the rakali notices how mining contaminates his river; birds live in particular relationships with particular trees; animals live in relationship with fire and water. In the voice of the Esk God, the novel condemns humans for 'their foul industries ... their intrusions in the water ... the iron they sunk into [the] rivers' (p. 39). Humans are to blame for damaging animals, trees and earth; 'in years past everything in the land and water had consisted of a wider grandness' (p. 43). In return, the rakali contemplates revenge on the destructiveness of humans:

... he made a vow to himself: once he had shredded this ape into worm meat he would go after every one of his tribe. He would drown them in the gorges. He would open their throats and fling them off their bridges. He would fill his rivers with their bloated bodies. (p. 46)

Arnott thus draws our attention to the life-threatening aspects of ecological interconnectedness.

Our attention is also drawn to the life-enhancing beauty of Tasmania's landscapes, seascapes, and rivers, even as we observe the ways in which these natural features are used for economic return. We are treated to evocative descriptions of ferny groves, 'fields of patchwork cattle' (p. 141) and 'fields of rock and snow' (p. 194), cascading freshwater of the Esk rivers and 'sand whipped cruel by the dead northerly coming in over the white-chopped sea' (p. 5) or 'the rising sun ... in a yellow crawl' (p. 38).

The detective may declare that she is ‘bored by the ceaseless farmland’ and a historic place ‘is just a dusty version of boring. Even worse than boring, it was pretty’ (p. 77), but surely this is authorial irony—in fact, Arnott is reminding us that tourists flock to Tasmania’s historic towns and bridges in places such as Tunbridge, Ross and Campbell Town. And the sights at Bathurst Harbour or Cradle Mountain are undoubtedly breathtaking. People travel from all over the world to view them. Tourism is one of Tasmania’s lucrative businesses. The gorges, groves, fields, white-water rivers, fishing grounds, historic towns, sand-whipped beaches and mountains of rock and snow bring in the tourist dollar (provided travel does not continue to be shut down because of the pandemic).

Whilst the novel implies condemnation of the human-induced devastations of mining, logging and dam-building, it also suggests that Nature may ultimately take revenge on human destructiveness. The detective’s reflections as she drives into Hobart clearly frame humans as destructive—the timber industry has left in the ‘Midlands ... denuded hill after denuded hill’ and ‘all it [Hobart] contained was people, and the associated greed, horror and dirt of people’ (p. 85)—and the god-like rakali, having reflected upon ‘hateful dams’ and ‘the tang of iron’, considers widespread revenge.

The paradox of our interconnectedness with the natural world is that we are inspired, on the one hand, by its beauty, but we are greedy, on the other hand, for what we can take from it. The ranger represents the positive aspect of this dualistic view: ‘[H]e allowed himself to enjoy it: to let the wonder take his soul places it hadn’t been since he was a child in the forest, crouching in a branch-built shelter, thirsty for the taste of all the wild things in the world.’ (p. 127). Arnott’s ‘baddies’, Allen Gibson and Thurston Hough, represent the negative, destructive aspect, Gibson as thoughtless hunter who ‘took unconscious pleasure in the killing’ (p. 111), Hough as careless destroyer of the environment: ‘one thing you can do for me: poison the South Esk River’ (p. 61).

- Does Arnott’s novel endorse or condemn hunting, farming, mining and the timber business?
- Does Arnott’s portrayal of interdependent relationships—between human and animal, people and timber, animal and cloud—reveal a concern for the preservation of the environment, and of all the species in it?
- Or does the novel suggest that interdependence is paradoxical, that nature is on the one hand useful and beautiful to humans and on the other hand dangerous and vulnerable?
- Do you think the novel suggests there is a kind of war between humans and Nature?

Gibson and Hough represent nasty and greedy attitudes towards farming and hunting, but *Flames* also values these ways of using the natural environment provided they are undertaken with care and mindfulness. Karl is a hunter, but unlike Gibson, he is not thoughtless in his hunting. He embraces the complex masculine art of hunting ‘Oneblood tuna’, ‘a beast more weapon than fish’ (p. 6). Like other men from the north coast, the ‘muttering men, salt-rinsed men’ (p. 6), Karl was destined to this very physical vocation. But although he makes a lot of money from it, he is not a thoughtless man; he is a loving father and a loving mate to the seal who hunts with him. Another character who acts as a contrast to Hough and Gibson is the ranger. The ranger cares deeply about the environment. As a National Parks man, he embodies the idea that we need to leave large swathes of bushland untouched and to care for the fauna.

- In what ways do Karl and the ranger exhibit masculinities that contrast markedly with Hough and Gibson?

*Flames* reveals both the devastation and the usefulness of fire. In the chapter ‘Coal’, Arnott portrays ideas about fire in ways both mythological and factual. Fire is the result of a chemical reaction between air and fuel; flora and fauna, for millennia, have been fuel. Peat soil is formed from the decomposition of vegetation in wet acidic conditions and it usually resists burning, although in recent years in Tasmania, it has been burning. Peat, over millennia, can become coal<sup>1</sup>. Arnott’s novel hints at all of this, just as it suggests in the climactic scene that a bushfire could get out of control. But although fire is god-like in *Flames*, Arnott personalises it in the character of Jack. The idea of a personalised fire god can be found, of course, in the mythologies of almost every human society (see Vulcan, Ra, Agni, Alaz, to name just a few). But Arnott’s Fire is a god who becomes human; he cares for people, it is people who have ‘thrown hooks into his soul’, it was people who first brought him into being by rubbing two stones together, and it is people who ‘had shown him that he had a purpose in this water-edged world’. This humanising reminds us of the Christian God who also ‘walk[ed] among them’ in the person of Jesus Christ. But in Arnott’s telling, fire often goes beyond caring or usefulness and becomes destructive, at which time it is possible for both humans and other ‘gods’ to challenge or defeat him. Edith draws the line at his controlling behaviour, and the Cloud God defeats him by drowning the world in flood.

- Do you see Arnott’s novel as embodying the concern that climate change is human-induced?



- In 'Iron', the Esk God is one of many gods including its lover the Cloud God. Arnott constructs Fire, on the other hand, as a flawed human being. Why do you think Arnott might have done this, and what is the effect?

The idea of Tasmania being a 'water-edged world' appears throughout the novel. The ranger thinks 'the fire, having razed the vegetation, would have burned itself out on the rocky shores of Bathurst Harbour' (p. 134). We know that the metaphorical fire character, Jack McAllister, is afraid of water. And with good reason, for when the cloud mourns the death of her loved animal, 'you cannot imagine' the strength of the deluge, the storm that 'hits the world with uncommon force' (p. 216). Ultimately, then, water defeats fire in Arnott's telling. But the novel also suggests that fire is defeated by the natural process of regeneration: after the fire at Bathurst Harbour, the ranger is confident that the forest which had 'grown and nourished him' (p. 135) would regenerate, and that 'everywhere the world would open up to him as it used to' (p. 135). However, some environmental scientists are now not so sanguine about regenerative processes. The idea that water and/or 'burning off' will keep bushfire suitably under control has become, in our time, rather more complicated.

- Is the author suggesting that cycles of fire and flood are natural or inevitable in Australia?
- Given Arnott's reference to the 'denuded hills' of Tasmania's midlands, can we deduce that the author is against the logging of Tasmania's forests?
- Does the novel draw our attention to the issue of species extinction? If so, how?
- What views and values in relation to fire are conveyed in *Flames*?

### Personal agency, hate, coercive control and shifting the blame

Whereas Charlotte and Levi seek to control their emotions in order to fit more harmoniously within their relationship network, other characters instead fail to see their own faults. Gibson shifts on to the 'glorious cormorant' (p. 112) the blame for his own desire to see wombat blood, claiming it had 'joined with me ... had entered within the cage of my flesh' (p. 112). He thus transfers his own murderous intentions onto the bird. Hough thinks that everyone else is out to get him, whereas he himself is a genius. Jack uses his power coercively to control Edith, and deceptively

to control Charlotte's third grade teacher when he thinks she has criticised his 'perfect daughter'.

The expression of hatred can imply something positive in *Flames*. Jack hates water and 'at the sight of the sea' he flickers with fear (p. 168). The detective 'hates' Tunbridge because she declares all the 'pretty' sites of Tasmania to be boring, but we can assume this is a form of authorial irony. Besides, the detective is 'not one to let a little bit of hatred get in the way of a pay cheque' (p. 77). And we assume the divine Esk God's opinion of 'hateful' dams meets with authorial approval (p. 42).

However, the two male characters who most obviously express hate are seen to meet grisly ends. Thurston Hough, the mad conspiracy theorist, is gnawed to death by river creatures in revenge for the rakali's death and found by Levi still clutching the pelt of the divine animal. Allen Gibson's end is more enigmatic: the delusional crazed killer of wombats and putative killer of Nicola and Charlotte is flushed out into the ocean by the Cloud God's flood of grief.

Hough writes in his final letter to Levi that he is 'besieged in my own home by the creatures of the river' (p. 63) and of all the creatures, he most hates the water rats. The reader sees this as particularly egregious, primarily because the creature he 'hates' is divine, a god, and also because he has been using their pelts to line coffins! Gibson hates the wombats, feels a sense of 'control' and 'power' when he takes a gun to his friend the ranger and the two women, and feels pleasure when he stabs wombats: 'How I hate them; oh, how I wish them pain.' (p. 107); 'I felt nothing as I told [the ranger] to leave the farm ... I felt power; I felt the giddy swirl of freedom.' (p. 108); 'laughing to myself as I happily stabbed at fur and flesh and bone...' (p. 111). Even worse than this violent behaviour, he shifts the blame for it onto the cormorant: 'a female voice ... mixed with more fury than fear ... the cormorant and I switched our focus: we would kill her first.' (p. 114).

- Which characters are dependable, organised, community-minded or hard working?
- Which characters are nasty, threatening or selfish?
- Do you agree that the novel portrays 'control' as both positive and negative?
- Discuss views and values in the novel through the lens of gender.

<sup>1</sup> Coal as fuel for fire is implicated in human induced climate change. The burning of peatlands on Tasmania's west coast alarms scientists such as Prof. David Bowman. 'As the climate warms, the hoary peatlands that blanket Tasmania's west are drying out, and burning up... human induced climate change is responsible.' (Mitchell 2016)

## Language and style

A notable feature of Arnott's novel is its poetic language. Given that one of the purposes of his writing is to share with readers an appreciation of the attractions to be seen in Tasmania, this poetic language is alluring. Fishermen of the north such as Karl are described with alliteration, repetition, and the tri-colon: 'Men from the north coast of this southern island – muttering men, salt-rinsed men, men like Karl' (p. 6). The McAllister women are 'fused with leaf and lichen, root and rock, feather and fur.' (p. 2). Alliteration evokes the scene as Nicola and Charlotte drive up towards Cradle Mountain, emerging onto a flat plain where there are 'no forests, no ferns, no lushness of leaf or frond or fungus' (p. 142). These two tricola, with strongly alliterative language, provide a visual contrast for readers between the lush vegetation lower down and the cold bareness further up the mountain. Similarly, alliteration helps readers to feel the beauty of the rakali with its 'warm weight' and as a 'ball of brown fur', whilst the repetition of another tricolon emphasises its energy: 'A swimmer; a feaster; a bright thief' (p. 29). On the other hand, authorial distaste for the city is expressed in Charlotte's being 'disturbed by the wafting wind' (p. 35) and detecting through her 'neat nostrils' (p. 35) the 'artificial' smells that are repellent to her.

Repetition and mirroring, or parallels, are effective literary devices—they draw our attention to key ideas and values in the novel, underlining the contrasts in characters and their values. For instance, it is ironic that Hough plans to use the rakali's warm pelt as lining for Charlotte's coffin, when in fact Charlotte and the water rat have already spent time sleeping next to each other. Or that the mad, murderous Allen sprouts black feathers from his shoulders in a way similar to the sprouting of ferns, cowries and feathers from the loving McAllister women. Or that the Esk God has a dream of fire at the edge of a gorge, which is a parallel image to the fire that, in burning (cremating?) his pelt after he has already died, brings on the Cloud God's flooding downpour.

With his use of magic realism, Arnott constructs over-arching metaphors: fire as human, water and animals as gods, and humans taking on the characteristics of flora or fauna. Metaphor (along with assonance and personification) is also effective in describing the natural features of Tasmania. For example, in 'sand ... whipped cruel by the dead northerly coming in over the white-chopped sea' (p. 5), the metaphors of 'cruel sand' and 'dead northerly' are highlighted by the onomatopoeia in 'whipped' and

'white-chopped'. Or in 'the slapping crack of his seal as its body was broken against the ocean's face', the assonance in 'slapping crack ... face' depends for its effect on the personification of the 'ocean's face' (p. 19).

As each of Arnott's chapters is narrated in a different voice, the style and tone vary. Sentences may be short, perhaps to reflect a character's thoughts, feelings, actions or reactions. For example:

- 'And then it hits me. Not a thought, but a force. Something strong and fast.' (p. 210)
- 'Nicola, yawning. *Nearly there.*' (p. 141)
- 'A heavy stare. A long blink. A slow, submerged circumnavigation of the boat. A re-emergence and a querulous bark.' (p. 13)

Or sentences may be longer, using repetition and evocative verbs to highlight an action scene:

- 'He thrust the spear and missed by metres, miles, oceans, as the orca baulked, and the tiny bounce of relief that hung in his stomach was overtaken by a vast swell that rushed him backwards, followed by an even bigger thwack of rubber and muscle.' (p. 18)

Incomplete sentences are used, often to increase a sense of urgency in the action:

- 'Until she knew where they could go.' (p. 139)

Arnott uses past tense in most of the chapters. Some chapters, however, are in the present tense, including some use of the present continuous tense; for example: 'Charlotte is dreaming ... Charlotte is feeling ... Charlotte is sipping ... Charlotte is listening' (pp. 28-31), 'Levi is retching ... Levi is leaning ... Levi is driving ... Levi is stroking' (p. 158) and so on. The present continuous takes the reader along with the action. Similarly, speech in italics is also a device that heightens the sense of the action moving forward, as the characters' words flow along with their actions in shared paragraphs.

Mavis's memoir, Thurston's letters, and Allen's diary are written in a style and tone different from the main narrative. The ironic tone is different according to which character is narrating, but with these three characters it is mostly farcical, whether the point of view is beneficent or malignant. Mavis Midcurrent, the author tells us, represents a tribute to the celebrated Tasmanian 'domestic goddess' Marjorie Bligh—Arnott's Mavis may seem judgmental and overly eccentric (like Edna Everage), but she has a good heart and means well. Thurston Hough, on the other hand, is a misanthrope and a misogynist. Yet even with this character, as his sarcastic language and offensive curses become more malicious and sexist, we sense the author is having a laugh and enjoying his use

of language. The reader understands, as he refers to Charlotte as a 'strumpet' and Mavis as a 'promiscuous old crone', that he is a very bad character—one deserving of the dreadful end that is coming to him.

Arnott's sometimes humorous exaggeration is evident in these farcical characters. However, there is something particularly lovely and moving about his use of exaggeration in the chapter about the Cloud's sorrow. Poetic language, alliteration and repetition introduce the cloud's feelings: 'in those sprinting streams was every scrap of thought she owned: every splinter of memory; every puff of pain' (p. 213). And then the extreme nature of the ensuing flood includes the observation that 'The Avoca post office was washed clean of all its letters.' (p. 214), an image which is almost humorous. But 'there was more'. The penultimate paragraph and the final sentence of this chapter movingly suggest that destruction of nature's creatures causes profound sorrow, and that we ignore that profound sorrow at our peril.

## Close study

### Passage 1

**‘Three months later a sharp-cut diamond ... he clenched his fingers around wet, warm fur.’ (p. 14)**

This passage foreshadows a number of the ideas and values evident throughout the novel. Karl’s masculine identity as both supportive partner and effective hunter is established. (His daughter Nicola similarly will be portrayed as supportive and dependable.) Karl is decisive in marrying Louise, steadfast in love for his other partner the seal, and supremely happy in the outdoors in a ‘breeze carrying tang and salt and the clearing scent of eucalyptus’. Karl hunts and kills huge tuna fish with decisiveness, courage and determination—and, importantly, with the assistance of his partner, the seal. His strengths will again be evident when he endures the terrible grief of losing his seal; ultimately, he accepts Nicola’s relationship with Charlotte, and acts as a nurturing father-figure for Levi.

What events or images are foreshadowed in each of these phrases?

- ‘rubbing the ruff of his seal as it dozed against his leg’
- ‘His other half sleeping beside him’
- ‘the fluff and cream of clouds’
- ‘he clenched his fingers around wet, warm fur’

Karl and his seal are salt-water characters. Consider the novel’s penultimate sentence: ‘But out there in the salt, that something kept swelling.’ (p. 226):

- What is significant about Levi’s rebirth ‘in the salt’?

### Passage 2

**‘He had been here longer than the loud pale apes, longer even than the quieter dark ones ... and to a god thinking is the same as knowing.’ (pp. 39-40)**

The thick-furred rakali can live in fresh or salt water. In Arnott’s magical construction, the rakali is the Esk God who, having lived over the millennia with Indigenous people as well as ‘pale apes’, knows humans better even than they know themselves. In this passage, the mythical creature reflects on human callousness, and on his own powerlessness in face of their dams, anchors, hooks and iron. He also comments disparagingly on humans’ summertime activities—‘they spat out saltwater’ and ‘feared the deeper currents’. The rakali knows humans can be bad, sad, deceptive or ‘warm-stomached’. And he knows why the McAllister women ‘returned after their ash had been scattered into the winds’.

- Why do you think the McAllister women reincarnate?
- What is the effect of portraying the water rat as a supernatural contemplative being?
- Are environmental issues addressed by the thoughts of the rakali? What do you think the Cloud God represents?
- The rakali thinks he will remain and thrive because ‘who could kill a river?’ (p. 44). Discuss or debate the rat’s confidence that it is impossible to kill a river.
- The rakali thinks ‘the Hunt God was dead’—do you? What does the novel imply about hunting?

### Passage 3

**‘The sun rose as the plane fell, ... spraying their life-breath high, smacking the dark water white.’ (pp. 133-135)**

The sequence of events at Melaleuca is clearer if you read this passage together with pages 114 and 115. The ranger, despite being shocked by ‘what he’d seen’, acts with all the calm and competence of a good National Parks employee as he gets the two women safely to Hobart away from the threat of bushfire and of being murdered by Gibson. He reflects at length on the amazing process of regeneration: ‘new shoots would soon spring forth’. He will write to his mother about it and he will ‘feel the wonder again’.

- At what point in the Melaleuca events does the detective see ‘a man’ (pp. 91-92)?
- Who is responsible for starting the fire at Melaleuca? What responsibility should Gibson have for the events that culminate in fire?
- To what extent does the character of the ranger tell us that the main idea or value in this novel is the importance of protecting Tasmania’s forests and natural habitats?
- Do you agree with Nicola that Levi and Charlotte will only be safe when they are ‘fire-proof’?
- Which character do you think most displays passion in this novel?

## Passage 4

**‘On the other side of the grove Levi ... Small among the ferns. Lonely in the flames.’ (pp. 211-212)**

Thinking she is about to die in this fire, Charlotte reflects on ‘everything I have loved, everything I have treasured’, including that she ‘want[s] Nicola to live’. She sees Levi looking terrified and confused, she sees the detective helping Nicola, and then she sees her father.

- Do you think ‘He smiles at me’ in this passage is a mirror image of Karl smiling at the young Nicola?
- Is the reader positioned to feel sympathetic towards Charlotte’s father in this passage?
- Was Nicola prepared to sacrifice herself for Charlotte? Do any other characters love someone so much that they would lay down their life for them?

## Passage 5

**‘I have always been afraid of the ocean ... a combination of my sister, his daughter, and my folly.’ (pp. 217-218)**

Levi has, since childhood, seen the ocean as strange and malicious. He is not sure why his father used to ‘wait at the edge of the gully’ instead of stepping onto the sand, but he senses that his own fear was transferred from his father. But now, having touched salt water while climbing into Karl’s dinghy, he is about to form a relationship with a seal while fully immersed in salt water. We have followed Levi’s difficulties with his confidence and his grief throughout the novel; now he feels shame and wants forgiveness from Charlotte.

- How did their father affect Levi and Charlotte? How did he affect his wife Edith?
- Describe Levi’s psychological ups and downs. Was he too ready to find strength anywhere but in himself? Is he ‘fire-proof’ now?
- Will Karl help him with restoring trust?
- How would you describe the relationship between Charlotte and Nicola, given their different families? Will their relationship last?
- Discuss the different kinds of passion readers could see in this novel.

## Further activities

### Author’s influences

Robbie Arnott writes in the author’s Note that these people ‘influenced’ his novel: Deny King; Marjorie Bligh; Taffy the Bee Man (Helmer Henry Hastings Huxley). Read the Obituary written about Mr T W H Clarke of Quorn Hall, Campbell Town published in *The Mercury* on 29 June, 1945 (<[www.trove.nla.gov.au](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au)>) and consider the deceased character Derek Quorn.

- Where do you see these influences in the novel?
- Discuss the effect of them on the ideas and values in the novel.

### Plot

- Construct a timeline of events in the plot. Begin with Edith McAllister’s death and chart events to the fire at Notley, the flood, and Levi’s saltwater renewal with the seal pup.

### Characters

- Construct a visual representation of the web of relationships in the novel.
- Which characters are we positioned to dislike? How? Why?
- With which characters do we sympathise?
- How are we positioned to view the creatures of the river, the sea, the land, and the air?
- Values continuum activity: at one end, a sign with ‘Nicest Character’ and at the other, ‘Nastiest Character’ (or something similar such as ‘Most Loveable’, etc). Twelve students volunteer to represent a character, and the other students must place them on the continuum. They must give reasons for their arrangement of the continuum.
- Gender: discuss constructions of gender in the novel. Are there male and female stereotypes? What views and values are evident?

## Map Tasmanian journeys

Present to the class a map of one of these journeys:

- The Esk God journeys in the South Esk river, from Stacks Bluff in Ben Lomond to Cataract Gorge via Avoca, Evandale, Perth, Longford, Hadspen, and the 'hateful' Trevallyn Dam.
- Karl took his family from Hawley beach to Notley, Cradle Mountain, Stanley, Queenstown, Boat Harbour, and Melaleuca.
- Charlotte hitch-hikes and takes a bus from their mother's house near Beauty Point to Franklin, and then to Melaleuca.
- Nicola and Charlotte's route and means of travel from Melaleuca.
- The detective's various journeys, including to Jack's house at Exeter.
- Levi's visits to places including Avoca, Beauty Point, Launceston, Notley Fern Gorge.

And:

- On Tasmania's east coast is 'the Bay of Fires'. What is the origin of its name?

## Magic realism

- Dreams: which characters' dreams do we read about? What ideas do they convey?
- The ancient druids worshipped trees, sometimes offering them human sacrifices. Is there a parallel idea in *Flames*?
- Discuss other mythical ideas echoed by the magic realism in Arnott's novel.
- How are fire, flames and flood used as metaphors in the novel?
- Discuss possible meanings implied by the idea that the McAllister women sprouted plants and shells from their reincarnated bodies.
- Why are readers willing to suspend disbelief when reading or viewing stories with magical or supernatural characters and events?
- Debate the topic 'That sci-fi and fantasy can teach people, just as much as non-fiction.'

## Fire, flood, flora, fauna

- Research and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of dams in Tasmania.
- What evidence is there of Arnott's writing having been influenced by the Tasmanian floods of 1929 and 2016, and fires of 1967 and 2013?
- Having researched Tasmanian wildlife such as seals, water rats, cormorants and wombats, do you think humans really hunt 'Oneblood tuna' in partnership with seals? Can cormorants kill humans? Does anyone 'farm' wombats? And would you 'sing wombats into their holes in the evening'?
- To what extent would Tasmanian timbers such as myrtle (*nothofagus cunninghamii*), blackwood (*acacia melanoxylon*), golden wattle and snowgum have anthropomorphic characteristics?
- 'Australia has the highest loss of mammal species anywhere in the world. ... Australia has lost 29 mammals since European colonisation' (RMIT ABC Fact Check 2016). Do you think the cloud's weeping represents authorial concern about native animal extinctions?
- Write an opinion piece about the burning of Tasmania's forests, or its peatland (See: Mitchell 2016: 'As the climate warms, the hoary peatlands that blanket Tasmania's west are drying out, and burning up ... human-induced climate change is responsible.') Refer in the piece to *Flames*, particularly the chapter 'Coal'.

## Key quotes

### Relationship ecosystems: love, trust, acceptance, communication

- ‘I didn’t want to upset the ecosystem of our relationship’ (p. 74)
- ‘*the McAllisters – they’re one of the oldest families you’ll find around these parts. Been here for generations. Bit like those tuna hunters up the coast.*’ (p. 75)
- ‘I twinge when a thug is about to get violent, when a client is lying, when a trail goes dead ... It’s a twinge I can trust’ (p. 76)
- ‘... my twinge ... was enough proof that something was wrong with Charlotte’s father.’ (p. 88)
- ‘Nothing could match the blaze of love in her father’s smile.’ (p. 137)
- ‘Nothing, that is, until the burn that spread from her stomach the first time she touched Charlotte McAllister. ... Her touch ... had quenched the rage; she had stopped the fire.’ (p. 137)
- ‘Levi and I have never understood each other. ... But I know that between us there is love.’ (p. 192)
- ‘I have been so angry with him. But now all I feel is a rushing tide of worry.’ (p. 205)
- ‘The detective is at her side now, helping her up.’ (p. 210)
- ‘All I can think of is how much I want Nicola to live.’ (Charlotte, p. 211)
- ‘Karl called out again. *Give him your hand.*’ (p. 226)

### Relationship ecosystems: malice, hate, suspicion, distrust

- ‘But ... the most hateful are the water rats.’ (Hough, p. 63)
- ‘... this herd of wombats is the closest thing to family that I might ever know.’ (Gibson, p. 96)
- ‘Where once I admired them, now I regard them with suspicion.’ (Gibson, p. 101)
- ‘How I hate them; oh, how I wish them pain.’ (p. 107)
- ‘I took unconscious pleasure in the killing’ (Gibson, p. 111)

### Self-awareness, overcoming grief, loss and fear

- ‘Soon the clicks would stop ... and an idea or direction or purpose would swim up at him.’ (Karl, p. 22)
- ‘I am desperate ... my mother recently died and my sister is struggling to cope with the loss.’ (Levi, p. 51)
- ‘Who would welcome a father who leaves?’ (Charlotte, p. 196)
- ‘Water throttled in a stream; I was used to it crashing in waves ... Give me white-chopped seas full of salt and fury.’ (Charlotte, p. 201)
- ‘I have always been afraid of the ocean. This fear comes from my father ... I have not touched saltwater since.’ (Levi, p. 217)
- ‘I had been erratic, selfish and weak. I had failed her when she needed me most.’ (Levi, p. 219)
- ‘... she told me: *As long as you forgive me too.*’ (p. 220)
- ‘I kicked at the water beneath me, trying not to think about sharks and jellyfish and giant squid.’ (Levi, p. 225)
- ‘It has kept me afloat ever since.’ (p. 226)

### Nature: interdependence, destruction, renewal

- ‘The seal rested, the waves chopped, and the true meaning of salt and water and air wobbled inside Karl’s mind.’ (p. 7)
- ‘With his blunt nose he could smell their foul industries; with the blanched 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.’ (p. 39)
- ‘...he didn’t want to pick a fight with [fire] ... the Cloud God ‘was his creator, his meaning, his life’ (p. 41)
- ‘... all [Hobart] contained was people, and the associated greed, horror and dirt of people, in greater numbers than anywhere else within a thousand kilometres.’ (p. 85)
- ‘It [Bathurst Harbour] was spectacular, I suppose, in the way that nature often is’ (p. 90)
- ‘Floods, fire, pestilence, disease; yet farmers always find a way to push on.’ (p. 100)
- ‘... new shoots would soon spring forth, green and vital, stronger than before’ (p. 134)

- ‘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 a family but as part of himself ... he could walk among them, as one of them.’ (p. 172)
- ‘... he was not one of them. He couldn’t relate to their problems. He couldn’t know their love and pain and hate and joy.’ (p. 174)
- ‘The cloud’s rage howled on, pushing the storm east and west, north and south. Fields became bogs; ponds became lakes; wombats swam like water rats, and water rats cavorted like seals, drunk on the storm’s power.’ (p. 214)
- ‘A cloud’s sorrow: you cannot imagine it. ... Such sorrow came to the island, and tried to drown it.’ (p. 216)
- ‘... the ocean’s weight, strangeness and malice were suddenly revealed to me.’ (p. 218)

## Analytical text response

---

1. “That was it: hide, recover, re-emerge.”  
How does Arnott explore recovery and renewal in *Flames*?
2. “I didn’t want to upset the ecosystem of our relationship.”  
‘The characters in *Flames* may have personal and social problems, but it is ecological problems that concern Arnott most.’  
Do you agree?
3. “Nothing could match the blaze of love in her father’s smile.”  
‘Arnott’s novel examines the ways in which family relationships affect people.’  
Discuss.
4. ‘In *Flames*, it is the female characters who are calm and constructive in dealing with challenges.’  
Do you agree?
5. “... all it contained was people, and the associated greed, horror and dirt of people”  
To what extent are the detective’s views supported by Arnott’s narrative in *Flames*?
6. “I had been erratic, selfish and weak. I had failed her when she needed me most.”  
‘The characters in *Flames* struggle to gain self-understanding.’  
Discuss.
7. ‘Arnott’s characters ultimately get what they deserve.’  
Discuss.
8. “Floods, fire, pestilence, disease; yet farmers always find a way to push on.”  
How does Arnott explore the idea that people are dependent upon the foibles of nature?
9. “She had quenched the rage; she had stopped the fire.”  
‘In *Flames*, the characters are able to resolve their problems only with the support of those who love them.’  
Discuss.
10. “He had helped them cook, create, shape and heat themselves ...”  
To what extent do readers’ sympathies lie with the non-human characters rather than the humans?



## Creative text response

---

1. What became of Allen Gibson? Write an extra chapter following on from the flood, showing what happens after this: 'was there a flicker of movement in its violent black feathers? ... something else reeled out of the mine' (p. 214). Or you could write for an online publication such as *Inside Story*, perhaps with photos.
2. Create either a script or an extra chapter to show what happens in Charlotte's relationships with Nicola and/or Levi after the events of the novel. The title could be 'Flood', or 'Fire-proof', or something of your choosing. Include at least Karl as a character in your creative, and perhaps Mavis, the ranger or the detective.
3. The detective 'promised to return and collect the money [Levi] owed her.' (p. 218). Create a playscript or an extra chapter that begins when the detective visits Levi with her invoice for services rendered.
4. Write an extra chapter set before and including Edith McAllister's death.
5. The ranger writes to his mother after the events at Melaleuca, about what happened when fire broke out and he accompanied the two farm hands on a light plane to Hobart. 'He hadn't wanted to see what he'd seen, didn't want to know what he knew.' (p. 133). Write his letter.
6. Create your own short story, video, or playscript, entitled 'Passion', 'Renewal', or 'Bushfire'. Discuss in your written explanation the parallels or contrasts in your ideas and values with those in *Flames*.
7. 'AfterWords' is the title of a story or opinion piece written by someone who survives emotionally tough times as Levi does. Levi says: 'My actions since our mother died weren't all that rational. Nor was the way I'd treated my sister.' (p. 219). What self-understanding does your character arrive at after his/her difficult experiences?
8. After reading a number of articles on the topic of 'Regeneration', script or act and film a discussion between the National Parks Ranger from *Flames* and an Environmental Scientist. Read articles such as Williamson et al, 2020. In your written explanation, comment on the language and ideas they use, and the media platform on which their discussion is published.
9. Write a poem or song or story in which the natural environment is weeping: 'A cloud's sorrow: you cannot imagine it. But you can feel it, whenever a storm hits the world with uncommon force. ... Such sorrow came to the island, and tried to drown it.' (p. 216). Decide on an element of the natural environment which is passionately sad about the threatened extinction of another part of nature: for example, a tree who is sad about loss of a bird; or a koala saddened by the loss of trees. Include reference to the Cloud God, Esk God, and others in *Flames*. Discuss in your written explanation the parallels in your piece with *Flames*.
10. Write a letter/email to your local Federal member entitled 'Passionate about climate change' in which you draw from your reading of *Flames*. You could also draw from articles such as: 'The [2020] summer of bushfires, which seems so far away now, was a brutal reminder of just how much humans need breathable air, drinkable water and weather we can cope with. It's clear that our wellbeing, if not our survival, depends on learning to live within nature's limits.' (*The Conversation*, introduction to Van Dijk et al, ANU scientists, 30 March 2020).

## References

---

- ABC News 2016, 'Tasmania floods: Thousands told to evacuate as rivers rise in Launceston', 10 June, <[www.abc.net.au/news/](http://www.abc.net.au/news/)>.
- Alexander, A (ed) 2006, *The Companion to Tasmanian History: Floods*, University of Tasmania, <[www.utas.edu.au/](http://www.utas.edu.au/)>.
- Arnott, R 2018, *Flames*, Text Publishing, Melbourne.
- Commander, L & Zimmer, H 2020, 'Yes, native plants can flourish after bushfires. But there's only so much hardship they can take', *The Conversation*, 17 January, <[www.theconversation.com](http://www.theconversation.com)>.
- Dolan, C 2017, 'Looking back at the June 2016 floods that devastated Tasmania', *The Examiner*, 3 June, <[www.examiner.com.au/](http://www.examiner.com.au/)>.
- Gergis J, Cary G 2020, 'Some say we've seen bushfires worse than this before. But they're ignoring a few key facts.' *The Conversation*, 14 January, <[www.theconversation.com](http://www.theconversation.com)>.
- Lambert, K T A 2020, 'These plants and animals are now flourishing as life creeps back after bushfires', *The Conversation*, 18 February, <[www.theconversation.com](http://www.theconversation.com)>.
- Mitchell, T 2016, 'Tasmania's burning peatlands could take some of us with them', *New Matilda*, 10 February, <[www.newmatilda.com/](http://www.newmatilda.com/)>.
- RMIT ABC Fact Check 2016, 'Fact Check: Does Australia have one of the "highest loss of species anywhere in the world?"', *ABC*, 4 March, <[www.abc.net.au/](http://www.abc.net.au/)>.
- Van Dijk, A, Renzullo, L, Yebra, M & Rapley S, 2020, 'A major scorecard gives the health of Australia's environment less than 1 out of 10', *The Conversation*, 30 March, <[www.theconversation.com](http://www.theconversation.com)>.
- Williamson, G, Mocatta, G, Harris, R & Remenyl, T, 2020, 'Yes, the Australian bush is recovering from bushfires – but it may never be the same', *The Conversation*, 19 February, <[www.theconversation.com](http://www.theconversation.com)>.
- For further information about the special nature of Tasmania's flora such as buttongrass, see: <<https://dppw.tas.gov.au/conservation/flora-of-tasmania>>.



**IS** 2022  
**INSIDE  
STORIES**

**Flames**  
by Robbie Arnott



**41187524**

1/134-136 Cambridge Street  
Collingwood VIC 3066  
T 9411 8500 F 9411 8511

[www.vate.org.au](http://www.vate.org.au)



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH