

## SALT STORY

Sarah Drummond

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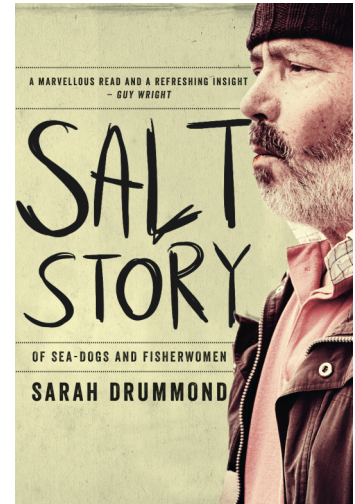
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Themes: Environment & Nature, Memoir, Fishing, Marine Biology, Southern Ocean, Regional

Year levels: Y9, Y10, SS

Cross curriculum: History, OI.Sustainability



### ABOUT THE BOOK

*Salt Story was born in the Great Southern inlets and bays of Western Australia. Initially, these tales of fisher men and women may appear to read as fragments of a day, a life – ripping yarns, beautiful lies and a few home truths. But these sixty-two pieces contribute to a living history of the estuarine and inshore fishers. Salt Story is my tribute to the beauty and fragility of the industry.* (p. 14)

In this warm, lively, salty account of living on and by the sea, Sarah Drummond writes of life as an apprentice fisherwoman.

Through her firsthand account of small-scale commercial fishing in the Great Southern, Drummond also makes the case for local fisher dynasties whose culture is under threat. With wit and humour, she considers the politics of sustainable seafood in the south-west fishery.



*Salt Story* is a tribute to sea-dogs, fisherwomen, oystermen and storytellers everywhere.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Drummond is a fisherwoman, PhD student and blogger. She is currently working on a novel about the sealers and Aboriginal women who sailed from Bass Strait to King George Sound in the 1820s. She has had essays and short fiction published in *Shadow Plays: an anthology of speculative fiction*, *Short Stories Australia*, *indigo journal*, *Best Australian Essays 2010*, *LINQ Journal*, *Kurungabaa Journal* and *Overland*.

Visit the *Salt Story* photo archive at [sarahdrummond.org](http://sarahdrummond.org).

Visit Sarah's blog, *A WineDark Sea*, at [thawinedarksea.blogspot.com.au](http://thawinedarksea.blogspot.com.au).

### STUDY NOTES

#### A. About the Book

1. Consider the book's structure. Examine the contents pages, noting the titles, grouping and sequencing of sections and chapters. How have the stories been organised? Why has the author done this?
2. Read the book's references list (pp. 202–203). What does it tell us about the author's approach? What types of knowledge is she drawing on beyond her own experience?
3. Pages 4–6 include regional maps and a note regarding them. Why do you think some places are known by several names? Why has the author taken the time to orientate us in the specifics of the region?

#### B. Language

4. What words would you use to describe the narrator's tone towards her subject as well as towards her readers? To what extent does she use humour to engage and convince her readers? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

5. What effect does the use of fishing jargon in the book (e.g. briny, carvels, clinkers, sinkers, seiners, two-stroke etc.) have on the reader?
6. In your opinion, is the writer's credibility strengthened or diminished by her use of colloquial language? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
7. The author uses figurative and descriptive language to great effect in *Salt Story*. Discuss in class with reference to the two passages below, naming specific literary techniques. Then find an additional passage of your own from the book, write it out and swap with a partner. Annotate your partner's passage to show the techniques discussed in class.

### Passage A (from pp. 60–61)

*From the highest point of Breaksea Island where giant, streaked megaliths swooped down to the water on an angle that made my feet tingle, I saw a seal swimming far below. Smooth, missile-like; not the delightful, doe-eyed darlings I'd seen earlier, this seal was hunting and its speed indicated a carnivorous intent.*

### Passage B (from p. 35)

*I have to laugh when they finally motor by. Two men singing their hearts into the gathering dusk. Their boat is the size of my twelve-foot Lightburn and, like the Selkie, the motor is a brave little six. Full throttle, she is wallowing like a beetle through honey, weighed down to her gunwales by the happy drunken sailors.*

## C. Characterisation

8. The book opens with Salt pointing out that Sarah eats an apple just like him. In what ways are Salt and Sarah similar? In what ways are they different? What is the nature of their relationship? Give examples from the text.
9. In the book's penultimate piece, 'Sarah and the Poet', the narrator inhabits her fishing identity with confidence. Compare this Sarah with the one we meet earlier in the book.
10. To what extent does gender play a role in Sarah's experience as a fisher? How does she negotiate this?
11. According to Drummond, what makes a *legend*? Refer to the section beginning on page 141.
12. What is the function of the Ms Mer chapters in this book?
13. *The lot of fishermen, yachties and truckies seemed to be a purposeful shiftlessness, a nomadism that raised a middle finger to the myth of the Great Australian Suburban Dream.* (p. 15).  
In what ways do the characters in *Salt Story* challenge the Great Australian Suburban Dream?
14. The book is populated by a colourful cast of fishers. Discuss the defining features and traits of each of the following characters, as well as their role in Drummond's story:
  - a. Nails
  - b. Grievous
  - c. The Blunty brothers
  - d. Ms Mer
  - e. Jordie
  - f. Jolly Roger and his son

## D. Reading in Context

15. Refer to the section 'How to Eat Fish' beginning on page 75. Drummond argues the case for small-scale commercial fishers.
  - a. What are her key points?
  - b. Do you agree or disagree with her conclusions?
  - c. What does the chapter 'Devouring the Dodo' (pp. 78–79) contribute to the debate around sustainable fishing?
16. *When I pick apart the politics of this work, I get an ominous sense of the industry's fragility. Perhaps it is just that, like farmers, commercial fishers have always felt endangered by outside forces beyond their control* (p. 196).

- a. What are the 'outside forces' to which Drummond refers?
  - b. More broadly, what are the threats to small commercial fishers that the author describes in this book?
  - c. What problems do farmers face in Australia today? Research one key issue and present to your class (e.g. drought, floods, climate change, cheaper imports pushing prices down, rising costs, generational change).
17. *No wonder people of Salt's ilk struggle to make sense of the rules these days.* (p. 149).  
 What does the narrator mean? In what ways has the south coast changed over Salt's lifetime?
18. Throughout the book, Drummond draws numerous comparisons between the Indigenous peoples of the Great Southern and the region's old fisher families.
- a. Fill in both columns of the table below. Use as many examples from the text as you can.

Comparison of fishing communities and Indigenous communities	Quotes demonstrating the comparison
Both have intimate knowledge of the place where they live and work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>the Menang people and the estuarine fishers know where the black bream are.</i> (p. 102)</li> <li>• <i>People who fish for a living know more about their prey and their workplace than anyone.</i> (p. 106)</li> <li>• <i>Although they will be compensated for their licences, the natural history knowledge and the cultural heritage of these fishers deserts the beaches with them.</i> (p. 195)</li> </ul>

- b. What is the significance of this comparison? What is the author trying to tell readers by drawing this connection?
19. What perspective does Drummond bring to the sights and characters she describes? Is she an 'outsider' or 'insider' or both? Choose a story or scene from the book and rewrite it as it might have been told by:
- a. A Department of Fisheries officer
  - b. A history scholar with no fishing experience
  - c. Salt himself
20. In what ways can the creative non-fiction genre be a powerful tool of persuasion?
21. In what ways is this a political book?

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

*Tell us about the genesis of this book. What led you to write Salt Story?*

I began writing *Salt Story* when Salt and I worked at the Pallinup (Beaufort) Estuary. Every year, three commercial fishers get the ballot to fish these waters for mullet and black bream. The country we were working in was so wonderful – and then there were the people. I realised that I was in a unique position to document something resembling an anthropology/social history but my workspace also appealed to my aesthetic mind. As a writer all the right elements were there: plot, character, landscape and beauty. Originally, I was writing stories about our fishing exploits on my blog, *A WineDark Sea*. People from my hometown and around the world were reading my stories and their feedback made me realise that I had something pretty special.

*The characters in Salt Story are all based on real people. How did the fisherpeople you write about react when you told them about your book?*

Ha! Well firstly I have an anecdote. After I'd sent an unfinished and rather shambolic manuscript to Fremantle Press, the publisher, Georgia, asked to meet me. So I went up to the city and we met at her office. She asked, slightly incredulously, if the characters in my book were real and I assured her that they were. A few months later Georgia made it down south to the Sunday markets where Salt and I sold fish and I was able to introduce her to Salt. 'Look! See. He's real – and there is Grievous, across the way!'

When Ms Mer read the manuscript, she said, 'You sound like I did when I first started fishing. I couldn't quite believe that those characters really existed.'

Ms Mer loved the book. I was a bit nervous handing it out to the other fishers. I know that it can be confronting to read a description of yourself in print if you are a private person – and the commercial fishers that I write about tend to be intensely private. There have been some minor anxieties when it comes to their pseudonyms. I realised I'd gotten one man's pseudonym seriously wrong when his wife informed me the name I'd chosen was the name of a man who he'd had a run-in with thirty years ago, and his wife told me, 'I don't reckon he'll be happy about that name, Sarah.'

The fishers tended to be suspicious of my motives but also delighted that I was documenting their history. All of the fishers who have read my book so far have told me that I have 'got it'. Phew.

Salt loves it. Sandy is circumspect but happy. Bullet reckons it's great.

*The book outlines your concerns for the future of small-scale commercial fishers. What changes do you think we'll see in the south-west fishery in the coming years?*

After writing *Salt Story* and during the editing process, Salt retired from commercial fishing and sold one of his licences to a seventeen-year-old boy and his mother – who happen to be twigs of one of the briny family trees that I mentioned in the book. This in itself is a heartening extension of the family-led industry that is south-coast estuarine fishing.

I've been encouraged by different voices to document the south-coast fishing industry as a society that has had its day. But I'm reticent to build my book on a plinth the ilk of Daisy Bates' ideology 'smoothing the pillow of a dying race', or Tomas O'Crohan's 'to set down the character of the people about me so that some record of us might live after us, for the like of us will never be again.'

No family or culture likes to be told they are, or are about to become, extinct. History regularly raises a middle finger to these narratives anyway. I'd prefer to call *Salt Story* a living history.

But while working as a deckie and seeing the reality of fishing for a living, standing around fires in isolated fishing camps listening to the fishers talk, reading the local newspaper, handing over my hard-earned black bream cash for wet-weather gear across the top of a clip-boarded petition against the netters at the local anglers shop or reading about the minister shutting down beach fisheries because of the gentrification of coastal areas, I have worried for the local estuarine fishers. It's tricky. Commercial fishing tends to be lumped into one exploitative, politically sensitive venture but I would like to counter that with *Salt Story* and show readers the other, gentler side.

*Do you still work as a fisherwoman today?*

I don't at the moment. Salt is retiring. Recently I spoke to Salt and he said, 'They were good days, weren't they, girl.'

I'm working on getting the money to buy one of his licences. Ultimately, my idea of a good life is to go fishing and write books.

*What writing projects are you currently working on?*

In the 1820s, right before Western Australia was colonised, people from all over the world lived on Breaksea Island, King George Sound. They were Aboriginal women from Van Diemen's Land and Kangaroo Island, and

men from New Zealand, America, Canada, Mauritius, Ireland, England, Bass Strait and New Holland. The men and women from this small community, on a small island, on the edge of the colonised world, never fail to intrigue me. I want to know who they were.

I'm also writing about the bikie scene and Western Australian politics during the 1990s and early 2000s, and an Aboriginal woman who led a guerilla campaign against white settlers (and anyone else who bothered her) in Van Diemen's Land in the 1820s.



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