

SWAMP

Nandi Chinna

ISBN: 9781922089489

Themes: conservation, wetland ecosystems, environmental protection, Swan Coastal Plain

Year level: Y6 to 12

Cross-curriculum priorities: Sustainability; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

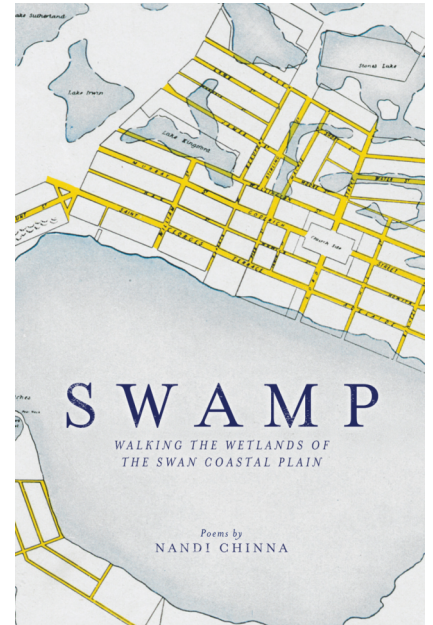
ABOUT THE BOOK

Chinna uncovers the lost places that exist beneath the townscape of Perth. For the last four years the poet has walked the wetlands of the Swan Coastal Plain – and she has walked the paths and streets where the wetlands once were.

Chinna writes with great poignancy and beauty of our inability to return, and the ways in which we can use the dual practice of writing and walking to reclaim what we have lost. Her poems speak with urgency about wetlands that are under threat from development today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nandi Chinna is a writer and environmental activist. Her first collection of poetry was *Our Only Guide Is Our Homesickness* (Five Islands Press, 2007), followed by the chapbook *How to Measure Land* (Picaro Press), which won the 2010 Picaro Press Byron Bay Writers Festival Poetry Prize. She is currently a PhD candidate at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, for which she is writing poetry about wetlands and walking.



STUDY NOTES

LITERACY: COMPREHENDING TEXTS THROUGH LISTENING, READING AND VIEWING

(A) Before Reading

Exploring the poetic medium

1. Create a class definition for the term 'poetry'.
 - a. List different kinds of poems and the conventions of each e.g. free verse, haiku, limerick etc.
 - b. Do any of the students have a favourite poet?
 - c. What particular qualities do they admire in the work of this writer? Why?
2. Brainstorm ways that poetry differs from prose.
3. Explore the history and characteristics of free verse poetry.

Considering the context of the collection

4. Research the history of the Swan Coastal Plain. Create a timeline recording major alterations to this natural environment.
5. What are some of the main environmental concerns for the wetlands of the Swan Coastal Plain?
6. What species of plants and animals are found in the wetlands of the Swan Coastal Plain?
7. How many of these are currently endangered? Why is this the case?
8. What organisations are involved with conservation efforts in this area? How can students become involved?
9. What companies are involved in the damage or destruction of this environment?
10. Map the Swan Coastal Plain on a map of Western Australia.

11. Why do you think the author has chosen poetry to explore the issue of the environmental protection of the wetlands of the Swan Coastal Plain? Why not a report? Or a non-fiction book? What particular effects might be evoked by a poetic medium?

Exploring the introduction

12. Chinna describes the collection's walking motif as a combination of the Noongar word 'yannow', *to saunter; to walk; to move slowly along* (p. 9) and the psycho-geographical term 'dérive', *politically purposeful drifting* (p. 9).
 - a. Consider the way *you* personally walk to and from places. Do you move slowly or hurry?
 - b. Do you take time to observe your surroundings?
 - c. Try walking a familiar route (e.g. from home to school) but deliberately slow your pace and pay attention to all your senses. What do you see, hear, smell, taste, feel?
13. Write a definition for the term 'poepatetics' (*the poetry of walking: poe from poesis or making; patetics from peripatetics or walking, travelling; a person who walks and travels about.*) (p. 10)

(B) During Reading

Comprehension strategies to practise with students

- Inferring
- Summarising
- Identifying key ideas/themes
- Drawing conclusions

Questions to guide a critical analysis and discussion of each poem in the collection

The following can be applied to any poem selected:

- Conduct an initial reading out loud for students.
- Secondly, allow students to read the poem once through for themselves, or to a partner. Have them pay close attention to the rhythm.
- Further suggestions: read the poem aloud together as a class (choral speaking); read the poem aloud as a class, allocating one line to each student.

Point of view

14. Who is the speaker (persona) in the poem? How would you describe this persona?
15. What is the speaker's tone? Which words reveal this tone?
16. Is the poem ironic?

Figurative language

17. What images does the poet use and how do they relate to one another?
18. Do these images form a unified pattern throughout (a motif)?
19. What is the most powerful image for you and what senses does it appeal to?
20. How has symbolism been used in the poem? What do you think different images might symbolise?
21. Can you find examples of figurative language used to evoke imagery e.g. simile, metaphor and personification?
22. Can you find examples of metonymy, allegory or literary allusion in the poem?

Structure

23. How has the poem been structured?
24. Why do you think the poet chose to structure the poem in this way? Does the structure complement the thematic concerns?
25. Are there any examples of repetition? What is the effect of this?
26. Can you identify a rhyme scheme, syllable count, rhythm or distinct stanzas?
27. Is the 'shape' of the poem significant? (i.e. has it been written so as to visually represent something?)
28. Can you find evidence of onomatopoeia, alliteration or assonance? How do they give momentum to the poetry when read aloud?

Thematic concerns and reader response

29. What themes can you identify?
30. What emotions are evoked by the poem? How is this achieved?

Written comprehension activities

Have students write paragraph answers for the questions above. Have them provide at least one quote from the poem to support their claims.

Key themes and motifs to consider

- wandering and wanderers
- time
- memory
- the beneficial influence of nature
- a lingering preoccupation with water and vulnerability

Discussion questions

31. *Environmental destruction is soundly criticised throughout the collection.*
Find examples to support this claim. (e.g. in the poem 'Clearing the Swamp', the native birds, animals and plants rebel against the worker (acquiring humanised physical traits), while the worker himself eventually loses these.)
32. *Not all animal presences are linked with positive environmental activity. Chinna links horses with destructive tendencies, inviting a wider criticism of introduced species that damage habitats.*
Find more examples to support this claim. (e.g. the land is *scissored by rabbits desultory graze* in the poem 'Horse Paddock Swamp'.)
33. *Chinna's human figures are not merely the destroyers of the natural environment: they also appear as vulnerable individuals, pressured (like the wetlands) by societal encroachment.*
Find examples to support this claim. (e.g. in the poem 'Campanile Tower: Fake Lake, Ellenbrook Housing Estate' a false waterfront attracts the poet's first-person condemnation in the following lines from page 85: *Under surveillance there is nowhere to kiss, / nowhere to piss, no tangled place / to slouch back into animal.*)
34. What is the effect of including extracts from newspapers, maps and photographs of the Perth region, camps at Lake Monger, Herdsman Lake and stormwater drains? How do they invite close reader engagement with the journey, as well as emphasise historical links between the poems?
35. For the most part Chinna's work is presented in regular stanzas, bringing to mind small islands of text. However, the structures of both 'Illa Kuri' and 'Cut and Paste Lake: Lake Monger-Galup' are strikingly different. Why do you think this is the case?

Written activities

36. Have students conduct an exercise in *poepatetics* (the poetry of walking). Take a class excursion to a local wetland area and have them record their musings in either written form, through sketches, or through photographs. Upon returning to class, allow them to use this experience of walking amidst nature to create a free verse poem in the style of Nandi Chinna's *Swamp*.
37. Have students draft a poem that uses metaphor, rhythm and repetition in similar ways to their favourite piece in the *Swamp* collection.
38. Have students work collaboratively on a group poem depicting the theme 'environmental destruction' or 'environmental conservation'.
39. Experiment with a dramatic freeze-frame exercise (captioning scenes and lines from a poem).
40. Hold a performance poetry recital for the class, school or parents/wider community. Invite children to present these works.

Essay questions/oral presentation topics

The following questions can be adapted for in-class essay assessment, oral presentations or take-home research essays:

41. Compare and contrast the representation of 'nature' in any two poems within Nandi Chinna's *Swamp*.
42. Discuss the representation of one or more of the following in Nandi Chinna's *Swamp*: time, memory, humanity or colonisation.
43. Compare and contrast Nandi Chinna's *Swamp* with the works of William Wordsworth (listed as inspiration).
44. How is Australian culture/identity portrayed in Nandi Chinna's *Swamp*?
45. Create a three-minute presentation discussing the representation of one of the following themes in the

collection: selfishness, transcendence, innocence.

46. How does Chinna's treatment of nature differ from that of the Romantic Poets (named as inspiration for the collection)?
47. What connections does Chinna make between nature and art?
48. *Chinna believes poetry to be an instrument of moral good.* Evaluate the accuracy of this claim.

Debate

Construct an argument for/against further industrial development of the Swan Coastal Plain.

CROSS-CURRICULAR LINKS

Science

Biology

49. Write a definition of the term 'biosphere'.
50. Write a definition of the term 'ecosystem'.
51. What is a food chain?
52. What is a food web?
53. Construct a food web for a wetland ecosystem of the Swan Coastal Plain.
54. Research and write a history of the Wetland Watch program on the Swan Coastal Plain which came to a close in December 2010. What conservation methods were used?
www.wwf.org.au/our_work/saving_the_natural_world/australian_priority_places/southwest_australia/southwest_australia_ecoregion/threats/swan_coastal_plain_wetlands/wetland_watch_solutions_for_sw_an_coastal_plain_wetlands
55. Research and write a report on the environmental characteristics of the Swan Coastal Plain.
www.wwf.org.au/our_work/saving_the_natural_world/australian_priority_places/southwest_australia/southwest_australia_ecoregion/threats/swan_coastal_plain_wetlands

Sustainability

56. Research ways in which students can contribute to sustainable living: visit the web address below for 'change the way you live links': www.wwf.org.au/what_you_can_do/change_the_way_you_live
Create a poster or pamphlet advertising this information to your school community. Suggested topics:
 - Sustainable shopping
 - Transport – car and air travel and offsetting
 - Saving water
 - Reducing energy consumption
 - Reduce, reuse, recycle
 - Green building design
 - Ethical and responsible investment
57. If your school is not already a member, consider registering for the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative WA: www.det.wa.edu.au/curriculum/support/sustainableschools/detcms/navigation/about-the-initiative/?page=2&#toc2
58. Visit the Department of Environment and Conservation WA website to find out more about conservation projects your school can become involved with:
www.dec.wa.gov.au/publications/cat_view/628-water/661-wetlands/662-publications/667-swan-coastal-plain.html
59. Visit the Australian Association for Environmental Protection WA website for lesson activities exploring the Sustainability cross-curricular priority: www.aaeewa.org.au/publications.html

Exercise in *poepatetics*

60. Conduct a survey of a local bushland area near your school. What plants, animals and insects can you find? Record the numbers observed of each species.
 - a. What evidence of environmental damage can you find? (e.g. litter)
 - b. What are the key environmental concerns for this habitat?
 - c. How can you be involved in conservation of this habitat?

Mathematics

61. Research statistics regarding endangered plant and animal species in the wetlands of the Swan Coastal Plain. Record your results in a table and graph them.
62. Are there more endangered plant or animal species?
63. Why do you think this is the case?
64. Exercise in *poepatetics*: Conduct a survey of a local bushland area near your school. What plants, animals and insects can you find? Record the numbers observed of each species in a tally chart and use them to create bar graphs and line graphs.

History/geography

Research topics

65. Consider the historical photographs and maps included in the text – compare these documents to current photos/maps of these areas. How/why have they changed?
66. *Poepatetics has a long history reflected in the poetry of Matsuo Basho in the seventeenth century through to Wordsworth, Dickens, Whitman, Thoreau, Wallace Stevens, Robert Walser, and more recently W. G. Sebald, Rebecca Solnit, Mary Oliver and Gary Snyder, all of whom are walker-writers whose work reflects the drive of homesickness for the wild, and for beings other than human.* (p. 10). Research and write a biography of one of these poets and their works. Why do you think they were inspirational for the author of *Swamp*?
67. The traditional owners of the Swan Coastal Plain are the Noongar people. Have students research traditional Noongar history and culture using the following subheadings (cross-curricular link: Technologies – ICT):
 - a. Geographic area
 - b. Laws
 - c. Spiritual beliefs
 - d. Traditional diet
 - e. Shelter
 - f. Hunting/gathering tools and techniques
68. Exercise in *poepatetics*: map the water sources around your school campus:
 - a. Research and map how water was historically accessed in your area. Compare and contrast the two.
 - b. Research statistics on water usage in your local area. What trends can you identify?

Art

69. Exercise in *poepatetics*: Go on a nature walk at a wetland close to your school. Take a sketchbook and/or camera with which to record scenes you find inspirational. Upon returning, create an artwork depicting the themes ‘environmental conservation’ or ‘environmental destruction’.