

THE SILENCE OF WATER

SHARRON BOOTH

ABOUT THE BOOK

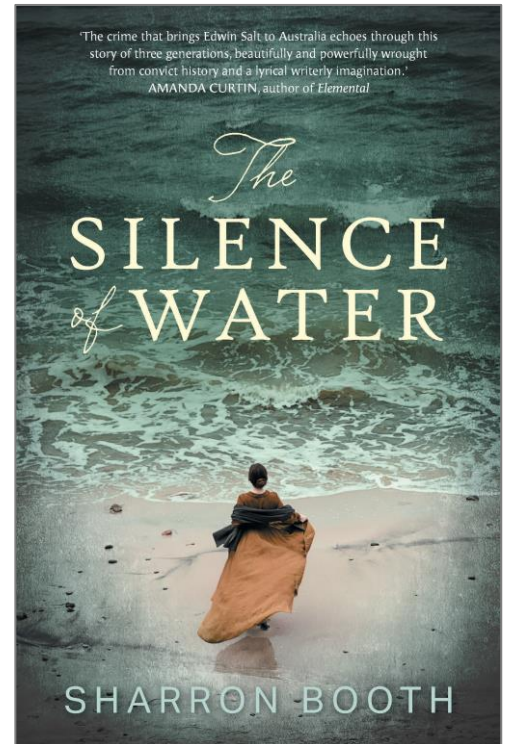
In 1862, Edwin Salt arrives in Western Australia as a transported convict. Here he starts a new life, marries and becomes a father. Decades later, his granddaughter, Fan, is living an idyllic family life in Adelaide, until her mother announces the family is moving to Fremantle in Western Australia to take care of Fan's grandfather – a man her mother has never spoken of before. Resentful about moving, Fan forms an unlikely alliance with the old man. As she notices the rising tension between her mother and grandpa, Fan takes to snooping among his possessions, looking for the truth about the fragments of story Edwin has shared with her. But when she unearths a dreadful secret, it must lead to a reckoning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharron Booth was born in Yorkshire, England and emigrated to Western Australia as a child. She has worked as a professional writer for more than twenty-five years. She has a PhD in Creative Writing and her creative work has been published in *Southerly*, *LiNQ* and *The Australian*, and broadcast on ABC Radio. *The Silence of Water* is her first novel and was shortlisted for the 2020 City of Fremantle Hungerford Award.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is the novel called *The Silence of Water*?
2. What is the meaning of water to Edwin, Agnes, Fan and Ernest?
3. Why do you think this novel is structured the way it is?
4. What difference do you observe in the structure of the final part, 'Family', and why do you think the author has done it this way?
5. How are the actions of Edwin felt down the generations?
6. Is it possible that trauma experienced in one generation can be resolved in another?
7. What difference does it make to the reader that this novel is based on the real-life people Edwin and Mary Ann and their descendants?
8. Do you think that Walter succeeds in his role as the protector of his sister?
9. Because Western Australia did not begin as a penal colony, what effect do you think the convict era had on this state's psyche?
10. Though this is a novel that focuses on the lives of a family descended from convicts, what elements of Indigenous life are visible?
11. What effect on shaping lived experience in this country do you think that alcohol has had?
12. What does this novel reveal about the toughness of life for women such as Eliza, Cath and Annie?
13. Do you think that Edwin successfully escapes his past?
14. What do you think this novel is saying about a family's relationship to its own past?



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Where did you first encounter Mary Ann and why have you dedicated this novel to her?

I first discovered Mary Ann after going down a long research rabbit hole! I was researching the family history of someone I knew – he had a colonial prison warder in his family tree. That prison warder became quite a senior figure in the colonial prison system in Western Australia. His early career was unremarkable, except for an incident in which a female inmate at Perth Gaol accused him and another warder of assaulting her. That woman wrote to the Governor with her allegations and, predictably for the times, her claims were summarily dismissed. She wasn't taken seriously by any of the people who reviewed her case: there are scribbles across corners of letters that amount to the senior people saying, 'You can't believe her because she's a prisoner so she must be lying.' I was appalled by these biases. I became fascinated by this woman who spoke her truth to power and was discredited, ignored and let down by the patriarchal system. That woman was Annie Edwards.

In trying to find out more about Annie, I discovered she had married a man named Edwin Thomas Salt in Perth in 1877. In piecing together more about Annie's life I wanted to find out more about Edwin, and so I looked in Western Australia's dictionary of early settlers in the Battye Library. I couldn't find him in the books about free settlers, but I found him in the book of convicts. This record says he was convicted of murdering his wife, and that he'd left four children behind in the UK.

Of course I wanted to know more, and from there it was to online newspapers and then emails to the Scottish equivalent of our State Records Office. I obtained a copy of the autopsy report, and that was the turning point. It was shocking, and so very sad. This woman, Mary Ann, who had been vilified in the press because she was a heavy drinker and a bad mother, could not speak for herself in any way whatsoever. The history of her life was written in the scars on her body. It was profoundly emotional. I felt immediately that I needed to do something about what I had discovered. But what could I possibly do? 'Doing something' ended up meaning I decided to write a novel that might speak of an alternative understanding of Mary Ann beyond the excessive and biased documenting of her death. As Agnes says in the novel, 'Tell me about her life, damn you. Her *life*.'

The dedication is my way of bearing witness and paying my respects to the real woman on whom the novel is based. While Mary Ann is absent for much of the novel, she is also one of its central figures.

Several years ago I went to Colinton, near Edinburgh, where Mary Ann is buried in an unmarked grave. I picked flowers from the roadside and I stood in the quiet and I spoke to her. I said, 'I don't know why this story has chosen me, but I promise I will do my best to do justice to you.' Dedicating the book to Mary Ann is a reflection of how I felt in that moment and that promise I made in Colinton.

What for you was the importance of the emphasis of women in this novel in a space where convict history is often given over to men?

In some respects, convict history is straightforward, in that so many records were kept about them: they were under surveillance and classified at every point in their convict lives. Yet these records are not objective, they are the product of an inherently biased patriarchal and colonial system.

I found huge discrepancies in the *amount* of information and the *kind* of information I could find about Mary Ann, Cath and Annie, compared to Edwin Salt. I wanted to explore who those women might be if I took away the patriarchal language of 'bad mothers', 'lunatics' and 'liars'.

As a woman, I'm interested in women's stories. *What about the women?* I kept asking. Also, as a writer, I'm more interested in gaps and dead ends than in neatly completed timelines. I find ambiguities and gaps far more interesting to write about, creatively.

It was also interesting to explore what might happen if Edwin's granddaughter found out about his past, and what effect this might have on the family, and on Edwin himself. Women are so often the family story-keepers. What if Edwin's own version of his story wasn't the one that held true in the end? When Fan came into my imagination, I knew she wasn't going to accept the status quo.

Were there any moral challenges and considerations in writing the story of a woman who met with a violent death?

There were many moral challenges, and I took this aspect of writing the novel very seriously.

Firstly, I am not connected to any of the people I wrote about. I was in the privileged position of having time and resources to pursue this story simply because I was curious to do it. There were many times along the journey when I thought, *This is crazy! Why am I doing this? These people have nothing to do with me.* I was having such thoughts while I was in the National Archives in London, reading the case documents. Then I happened across some correspondence suggesting that while he was in prison, Edwin had started to write a narrative of his life to be given to his family. He had wanted his story told. Around 150 years later, there was I, a newbie, sitting in the National Archives in London, trying to work out how to do it. I'm not sure he'd be happy with the result!

The hardest part about writing about Mary Ann was that, even after months of research, I was unable to establish the basic facts of her life: birthdate, birthplace, parents, siblings and so on. There were lots of possibilities, but nothing that could be proved via the original records. The autopsy report meant I got to know Mary Ann literally from the inside out. It was a peculiar feeling – a mix of compassion, voyeurism and shame – knowing such intimacies about a stranger: the difficult births, the alcoholism, the forensic detail of her death, while lacking those basic details.

Mary Ann's marriage certificate states that her father's name was John and that she was living in Bromsgrove Street, Birmingham at the time of her marriage. I chose to take this information as the 'true' record, as it would be the information most likely to have been uttered by Mary Ann herself. It was a small way to give some agency to a woman who had virtually no agency during her lifetime.

The overwhelming bias against Mary Ann in the newspaper accounts of Edwin's trial, and in the case documents, was shocking. The prevailing view was that Edwin should be spared a death sentence because he was provoked. Writing about Mary Ann was an act of resistance against those biased views. I wanted to write a woman character for whom the reader could feel empathy and compassion. I also gave Mary Ann some supporters at key moments. Jane McKenzie and the anonymous women at the trial who give their silent approval of the death sentence are there to take a quiet stand against patriarchy. The real Jane McKenzie did not sign the petition asking for mercy for Edwin. While she may have been illiterate, the fact that her name wasn't there could have been an act of passive resistance on her part.

The violence was very hard for me to deal with, both as a researcher and a writer. The archival material was thorough, forensic and unrelenting. I needed to be sure I kept a line between writing what happened, taking the reader into perhaps confronting territory, without becoming exploitative or fetishising violence, which I abhor as a reader. Mary Ann had been exploited by so many in her lifetime and I did not want to be yet another person using her for my own ends.

Consequently, I left out a lot of what happened, and pared back even more through the editing process. Here, working with my editors at Fremantle Press was invaluable because it is possible to become desensitised when living with a story like this for so long.

Fan's symbolic burial of Mary Ann's hair was also a way to afford Mary Ann a dignified ending. When I stood by her grave in Colinton, I wondered how many people mourned at her funeral, how many strangers had attended. She was utterly alone in the world by that point. I didn't know Fan was going to make that gesture until it happened while I was writing. It was so brave and compassionate, of course it was typical Fan!

What is next for Sharron Booth?

I am happily working on two new projects!

One is a non-fiction book that takes a look at the work of some Western Australian women writers who were famous national and international best-selling authors in their day, but are now all but forgotten. I'm asking – who were they, who were their women characters and why should we care about them today?

The other is a novel set in suburban Perth that explores the experiences of two English families who came to Western Australia in the 1970s via the Assisted Passage Scheme, and how they deal with a sudden, unexplained death. It continues my exploration of the themes of loss, exile, belonging and family secrets.



@FremantlePress



Sign up for enews



fremantlepress.com.au