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THE MAP OF WILLIAM
MICHAEL THOMAS

ABOUT THE BOOK

Western Australia, 1909. William Watson's beloved father is sent on an expedition to the northwest to map water sources in the Pilbara. Invited along, fifteen-year-old William embarks on the outback journey of a lifetime.

At sea and on land, William forges lasting friendships with his fellow travellers, and transforms his relationship with his father as together they face the darkness that exists in the hearts of some men – including the cruel and powerful Sergeant Jardine.

This is a gripping tale about the triumph of friendship, and the price of survival, in a land with its own ancient story to tell.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Thomas was born and raised in Carnarvon, Western Australia, and spent his formative years travelling across the vast Gascoyne–Pilbara region with his father, who was a shearer. After graduating from university, he returned to teach in the Gascoyne–Murchison region before eventually settling in Perth. He retired in 2021 to write his memoir, but gave up when fact and fiction became entangled. *The Map of William* is his first novel.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Before leaving, Hywel Watson tells the family to remember that 'our adventure is not simply a line on a map.' (p. 20) What does he mean by this?
2. The author uses language reflective of the time, including words such as 'native'. How does this preserve the historical flavour of the book? What do you see as the author's responsibilities when it comes to making language choices that must weigh authenticity against language that may be offensive in a contemporary context?
3. How and why does William's relationship with his father change across the course of the novel?
4. William writes letters home to his mother, Louisa, throughout the book. What do these letters reveal about William's character? What do you think they add to the narrative?
5. 'Rome is burning, Mr Mullane. We do not have time to paint the flames.' (p. 180) Hywel Watson and the rest of the company initially treat Mr Mullane according to prejudices they hold. What prejudices are these? Why, in particular, does Hywel dislike Mr Mullane before he gets to know him?
6. How would you describe the character of Sergeant Jardine? Why has the author chosen to include this character?
7. History often paints people as binary – good or bad. Do you think the characters of Mr Hansford, Constable Barnes and Mr Turner are binary ones?
8. When William arrives at Dorre Island, he meets Martha, a First Nations woman. Lock Hospitals purportedly prevented the spread of disease, but in what sense were they an expression of the politics and attitudes of their time?
9. Rover is a victim of the Stolen Generations. In what ways does his character demonstrate the impact that this has on his experience of his culture, language and identity?
10. How would you describe Walala's relationship with his country (land, water and sky)?
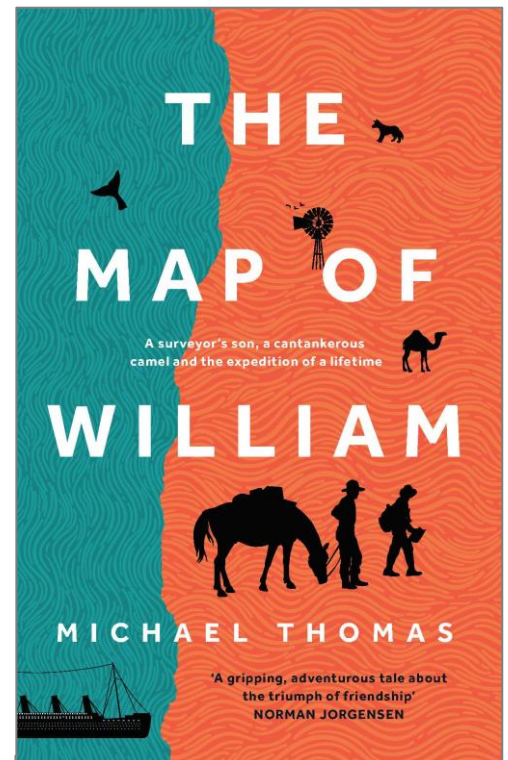
11. What do Rover and Walala teach William about friendship, shared values, and the attitudes of authority to this country's First Nations people?
12. Why do you think the author has chosen a younger, less worldly character as a means of observing the world?

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

The Map of William *is inspired by true events in your personal history. What made this history a story worth reimagining?*

I clearly remember my great-uncle Percy Thomas. He was born in Roebourne in 1890 and was laid to rest in Carnarvon, aged 82. In 1905, Percy's father, Alexander Thomas, fell from his horse on the road to Cossack and died a short time later. Alexander was thirty-seven. My family history is embedded in the country where William walks, and his journey of discovery is bound to my own search for knowledge and understanding. The Map of William *is a deeply personal reimagining and, if nothing else, the telling of the story has changed me.*

Where did you come across the inspiration for the characters of Rover and Walala? What challenges did you face writing them into the story?

My father was a shearer and I spent my formative years bouncing around the Gascoyne, Pilbara and Murchison regions of Western Australia. Childhood memories are often clouded, but certain people and events leave an indelible mark, even after a lifetime. I was taught to ride a horse by an old Indigenous man – Rover was his name. It was only fitting that a man of such boundless humour and patience be acknowledged in William's story. Years later, and with the benefit of hindsight, I can understand a little of his sadness. To convey the sense of pain and loss experienced by men such as Walala and Rover was my greatest challenge in writing The Map of William. *There were other challenges, certainly but none quite so daunting.*

What did you learn from the process of writing The Map of William? *What do you wish you had known before you began?*

In 1980, Carl Sagan stated, 'You have to know the past to understand the present.' To know the past – particularly one that is masked by misinformation and secrecy – is an exercise in persistence. It requires a fair amount of digging and the ability to recognise a rabbit hole when you find you have fallen down it. History is about facts and details, but those with vested interests also write it. As a first-time writer, the challenge of sorting the wheat from the chaff was a great learning experience, and one that caught me unawares. My success, or lack of it, was not through want of trying.

What's next for Michael Thomas?

The Map of William *will be published in my sixty-sixth year. I'll write every day between now and whenever with the sole aim of honing my craft and writing stories that have been bubbling away in the previous sixty-five. I'll flip between genres and time periods, change my style more than likely and travel the world to find my characters. Love will always be at the core of what I write and any day without humour is a wasted one. My heroes will be selected from the great ocean of good people, considered ordinary by some but their stories are no less worthy or compelling.*