

VAMPIRE SQUID

PREMA ARASU

ABOUT THE BOOK

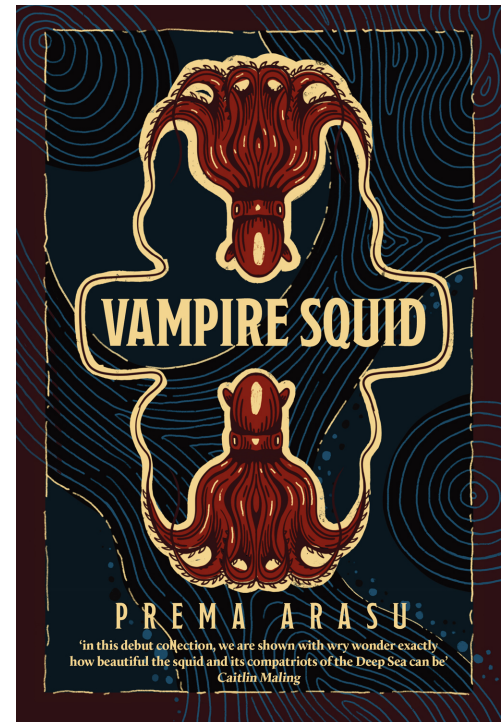
You are what you see. The deep sea – home of the uncanny vampire squid – is fathomless and mysterious, but so too are the scientists who observe the creatures of the deep. Full of wry wit and ironic scrutiny, *Vampire Squid* examines the relationship between humans and the deep sea as the poet places their colleagues under the microscope, drawing attention not only to the teeming suboceanic life, but the distinctive ways that the scientists, each equipped with different disciplinary approaches, interpret the same world through different eyes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prema Arasu (they/them) is a writer and Adjunct Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia. Their research utilises transdisciplinary and creative methods to investigate the aesthetics of the deep sea. They are editor and author of *The Book of Sea Monsters: Leviathans of Literature* (Bloomsbury, 2025). In 2023, Prema's fantasy novel, *The Anatomy of Witchcraft*, was shortlisted for the Fogarty Literary Award.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why has the author chosen the vampire squid as the titular creature?
2. What does the structure of the collection tell us about its contents? And how does the poem, 'depth' (p.8) tell us still more?
3. Prior to reading this book, what do you already think/know about the deep sea?
4. Read the author's note on p.6. What do you think they mean when they say 'Is there such a thing as a singular, objective, true deep sea? Perhaps, but it is impossible for humans to truly know this object, as to observe an experiment is to inevitably alter its outcome.' (p.6)?
5. How does the author's own participation in the experiment of writing a book of poems about the deep sea 'alter the outcome' of what we can understand about the deep sea and its creatures?
6. How do the poems in 'Sunlight' affect the rest of the poems that follow? What difference to the collection does it make that these are there?
7. The section 'Twilight' leads with five poems about the vampire squid. In what ways could these poems also be read as poems about gender, racial, and professional identity?
8. What other poems in the collection speak to aspects of queerness and/or race?
9. Why do you think the poet has chosen to include the poems they have in the 'Midnight' section? Why is the poem for 'developmental milestones for lonely children' there?
10. What poems might you expect to find in 'Abyss'? What difference does it make to the scientific quest if 'all biologists are guilty of anthropomorphism' (p.59)?
11. What do we understand is happening in 'Hades'? Why do you think the author has chosen to end the collection with the poem 'remember' (p.85)?
12. Which is your favourite poem – and why?
13. Which is the funniest poem? What is the effect of using humour to represent the deep sea?
14. The poems feature recurring characters who are only referred to by their scientific discipline. Why do you think this is?



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

You have said elsewhere that you didn't have a big body of poetic work behind you when you began to write Vampire Squid. What was it about your role at the Deep-Sea Research Centre that made you turn to poetry to describe what you saw?

My role at the Deep-Sea Research Centre was borne out of a need to investigate and challenge the ways in which the deep sea is constructed in the cultural imagination. Across books, movies, documentaries, and YouTube videos, it tends to be represented in terms of its alterity, its incompatibility to human life. Its inhabitants are construed as sublimely mysterious and resistant to anthropocentric modes of knowledge. I saw this as a problem of aesthetics, and as a dedicated researcher, I approached the problem with the creative mode most suited to the contemplation of aesthetics: poetry.

It's true that I hadn't written much poetry before starting to write what would become *Vampire Squid*. The earlier poems were parodies, e.g. 'Ode on a Blobfish' and 'Sonnet to a Fair Kraken' or found object pieces e.g. 'reviewer two'. Once I decided to collect it all into a monograph, much of my research was doing my own close readings of Romantic poetry, reading papers about post-anthropocentric poetics, and writing plenty of bad poems that didn't make the final cut.

What did your colleagues think about being under the poet's microscope? How have they responded to the poems you wrote about them?

It was a privilege to work alongside a team of the smartest, most dedicated and hardworking people I've ever met, and not just as a writer-in-residence, but a fully salaried postdoctoral researcher. This, I believe, was a prescient managerial decision made by Centre Director Professor Alan Jamieson and drove home the idea that humanities research plays a huge role in the dissemination, reception and outcomes of scientific research. My presence at the centre made sure that everyone was always questioning the assumptions they brought to their own work, such as anthropomorphising fish or describing something as cute versus weird.

Broadly speaking, scientists are very used to removing themselves from their work in the pursuit of scientific objectivity—that's why they love using passive voice. Most of them loved hearing my recounts of silly or strange moments of the things that happened in the lab. I was often asked what made something a poem or not a poem. I still can't answer this.

What do you hope that readers gain from reading about the deep sea?

I hope they think about it more. The deep sea covers 40 percent of the earth's surface and is inhabited by some of the most wondrous creatures. Its stability is also increasingly threatened by deep-sea mining, climate change and plastic pollution, but it often is forgotten when it comes to ocean conservation campaigns or policy.

What is next for Prema Arasu?

Speculative fiction has always been my thing. There are hints of it in *Vampire Squid*, but I'd like to return to worldbuilding in long form. Witchcraft, resurrection, cults, eldritch gods, parasitic fungi, blood magic.



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