 Chapter summaries

Havoc: A life in accidents

This chapter is about Tim Winton’s experiences of vulnerability and trauma, particularly with motor vehicle accidents. As he is driving home from a fishing trip with his father, a motorcyclist is in accident. Tim Winton provides some detail about his father – a traffic cop, before focusing back on the accident. He is given the task of stamping on the brake pedal of the car as they wait for the ambulance to arrive. Upon reflection, he recognises that this task was designed to keep him busy. He interjects that years later, in a similar experience, he employs the same tactic to prevent his own children from witnessing an even worse accident. In this experience, Winton is reminded of three years earlier when his father was in a motorcycle accident and how it changed his and his family’s lives completely. Eight years later, Winton is in a car accident himself and is left in a state of shock, grief, and what he later recognises as depression. This chapter is all about Winton’s experiences with havoc, as the title of the chapter suggests. As Winton reflects upon these experiences he acknowledges that as a teenager he flirted with the idea of death whereas now, after living through various traumatic experiences, he craves safety and stability. He learns that as humans, we are forever vulnerable to havoc.

Students should be able to recognise how negative experiences are an inevitable aspect of human experiences. While students may not have a string of experiences of havoc, they should be able to identify how these moments of uncertainty and vulnerability connect us as humans. This chapter explores those uncomfortable human experiences that stay with us throughout our lives and often shape who we are in the future. Students should also be able to recognise that the process of accepting and managing difficult experiences is in itself an aspect of collective human experience, where individuals are continually influenced by their personal human qualities, emotions and their relationships with others.

Possible human experience focus: vulnerability - accepting and managing negative experiences and recognising how negative experiences/emotions are an aspect of human experience.

Betsy

This chapter is about Tim Winton’s experiences with Betsy – a Hillman sedan. Winton describes his different experiences with Betsy as a teenager growing up in Perth, Australia. He recalls experiences of being dropped off to school, learning to drive, building an alliance with his younger siblings in an attempt to get rid of Betsy, moving back to the city and Betsy’s replacement after returning to the city. Throughout the chapter Winton reflects on particular moments of grief that Betsy had caused him and through personal reflection, is able to gain a new understanding of the role that Betsy played in his childhood.

Students may be able to associate their own similar experiences with Winton’s, particularly as a teenager. They should acknowledge that human experiences are both positive and negative and how both these types of experiences can have a meaningful impact on an individual, particularly when reflected upon. They should be able to identify the human qualities and emotions that are evident in the chapter (self-awareness, embarrassment, judgements, etc.) and connect these with their own personal experiences.

Possible human experience focus: self-awareness – becoming increasingly more aware of how we are perceived by others and, as a result, altering our behaviour. Perhaps the notion of reflection also, and how we can perceive things differently throughout time.

Twice on Sundays

This chapter reveals the paradoxical nature of human experiences focusing on the constructive and destructive impact religion had on Winton’s growth in his formative years. It shows that human experiences are ambiguous. They can offer fulfilment, but also challenge what we believe in and are dynamic. Our perception of childhood experiences shift as we grow, however, they will always be an important part of who we are and we carry those experiences for the rest of our lives. For Winton, religion was integral to his upbringing, as it shaped him as an individual within his family and his relationship with the broader community. The chapter focuses on Winton’s experience growing up in a religious household. He was exposed to a sect of Christianity called the Churches of Christ. He recounts how his experience of a childhood shaped by religion shaped him in many ways.

Barefoot in the Temple of Art

This chapter focuses on Winton’s relationship with art as he seeks to find beauty as a source of inspiration and fulfilment. He recounts his experience of visiting the National gallery of Victoria as a child and subsequent visits. He details the changes the art gallery undergoes which also mirrors his own shift in attitude towards the gallery and he evaluates the role of art within a contemporary society.

The Wait and the Flow

An essay that is part memoir, part history and part sociological observation, in this chapter, Winton demonstrates that he is a humanist, one who has not only learnt from the world around him, but one who is dedicated to educating others through his graceful and didactic prose. His own environmental activism isn't explored within this essay, but the underlying care and concern is clearly evident. Here, however, he appears to be more concerned with humans and their care or lack of care for themselves on a psychological level, as he clearly connects activities like surfing to mental health. Winton comments on the paradoxical nature of humans and those that exist between our own sub-cultures. He connects social values to the way people treat each other and the often ensuing sensationalised media. The most beautiful aspects of his prose are the sublime and almost physical descriptions of the surfing experience and the emotional connection it creates between people and the ocean. Winton's passion began at the age of 5 and he recounts the moments of agony when he decided to leave the sea because of changes in subculture. It is interesting to note that it is in these moments that his profanity slips in and exemplifies his anger at the violent, ultranationalist misogyny that took over the 'sport' in the 80s. There are still the religious references and it is clear that this is a constant internal struggle for Winton. He emotively compares the act of surfing with his process of writing, creating an illuminating metaphor that appears to connect to many other observations he makes about human nature. Winton comments on the paradox that exists between the healthy and healing nature of the ocean and the aggression that some people brought with them. A sociological observation may make a connection between the changing cultural expectations and opinions of masculinity and social values with the changes that took place in the 1980s. It could also connect the booming corporate involvement in surfing and the role of advertising in the creation of 'appropriate' surf stars.

The Demon Shark

This deeply personal essay creates a narrative that interweaves Winton’s personal experiences with a commentary on the darker and often sadder sides of the human condition. He anchors this in an Australian context but does make connections to international concerns. Greed, prejudice and ignorance are connected to the social, political and historical treatment of the natural world. He tries to show his readers that we are still repeating the same mistakes of our past, sometimes in the same ways, sometimes different, but always with a clear victim. In the case of ‘The Demon Shark’, it is our marine life, and in turn our wider environment, that is the victim. Winton isn't without bias and he approaches his writing topics with a very Australian lens. Winton connects the silence of the shark to its treatment, and then contrasts between the sounds of animals like whales and dolphins with personification throughout literature. One could simply consider some of the films about these animals in contrast to films about the shark. Winton opens the essay with a reflection on his conflicting views of the ocean. He then explores the impact the trailer for Savage Shadows had on his own perspective of the shark and connects this to the contextual perspectives of the 1970s. He also connects this to Peter Matthiesen's shark-chasing memoir Blue Meridian, and the 1971 documentary White Death. Thus, his didactic tone is infused with his own deeply personal melancholic affection for the sea and how it can enrich a person’s life. His humanist perspective also contrasts this to what we will lose as a people if we do not care for our environment Winton loves to use a variety of sentences, both in terms of their grammatical form and their purpose. His complex compound sentences are beautifully crafted and combine paradox, simile, metaphor and many other figurative elements. He also routinely combines aspects of the rule of three, or the juxtaposition of two things, when he is trying to draw you into an intensely emotive experience. He manages to take us to a place and then draw us into his sensory experience. He also combines scientific jargon with emotive sensationalising media style descriptions. This essay opens with paradoxical descriptions of the marine world and continues this thread through the purposeful juxtaposition of the Australian divers ‘against’ the American film makers. He continues this thread to highlight the paradoxes that exist between people’s perceived and conceived experiences of the environment. He also explores Australia’s tradition of exploring the environment through historical, social and spatial means.

In the Shadow of the Hospital

Winton begins the chapter with the idea that the word hospital suggests ‘shelter, respite and hospitality’ when we need it, but otherwise ‘the very word brims with dread’. This is a very brief and very personal chapter that considers a range of encounters and responses to hospitals, including several years where Winton and his wife lived across the road from one. The language is deeply descriptive, the sentences short and sharp. Winton’s personal experiences include the fear instilled in him from two significant experiences in his life - his father’s extended stay in hospital when he was five and his own experience of waking up in hospital at 18, having been involved in an accident. He explains that ‘in hospital you become needy, greedy, callous’ and the whole chapter is a consideration of this concept. In a brief passage about the period of time after his first son was born, when his wife returned to hospital and he visited a couple of time each shift so she could breastfeed, we are invited to consider the inverted gender roles and the paradox of nursing a newborn while nursing the dying that was the daily reality for Winton’s wife.