FISH LAMB HAS AN AFFINITY WITH WATER, WHICH IS ITSELF A KEY SIGNIFIER THROUGHOUT THE MINISERIES
The Prosaic and the Poetic
Challenges of Adaptation in *Cloudstreet*

Translating a text as unconventional and epic as this beloved classic is never an easy task. BRIAN MCFARLANE looks at how the makers of this breathtaking miniseries approached issues of narration, character and scale when bringing this cherished tale to the screen.
ADAPTATION AND THE MINISERIES

We’re used to handsome, stately, somewhat unadventurous television miniseries adapted from revered English novels. For some years, it seemed to account for the ABC’s Sunday night viewing as persistently as crime accounted for Friday night’s. Watching the miniseries version of a Victorian or Regency novel in some ways approximated the reading experience: there was a comparable sense of coming back each time to where you left off, albeit a little more regularly spaced than just picking up the book where you had dropped it. There was also a feeling that if, say, Pride and Prejudice were being given the six-episode, 300-minute treatment, there would be more chance of almost everything from the beloved source text getting in. For many viewers, this was enough.

For others, though, such reverent adaptations lacked real imaginative flair.

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Now there is a major Australian entry in the literary-miniseries stakes: Screentime’s recent production of Tim Winton’s treasured novel Cloudstreet, to be aired as a three-episode, six-hour series. Winton’s book comes in at over 400 pages, has a large cast of characters, and its ‘action’ spans twenty years and ramifies out in many directions. It was adapted for the stage in 1999 by Nick Enright and Justin Monjo, and performed with some success both locally and abroad. Now, Winton himself has collaborated with American writer Ellen Fontana, who previously wrote a feature-length script based on the novel. Producer Greg Haddrick describes Fontana as ‘the writer who began with a blank page one, who first tackled the tough question posed by adapting a classic’.1

For all the talk about a ‘classic’ and calling it ‘the Australian bible’, it is pleasing to report that the makers of the mini-series, however much they value the original, have not succumbed to idolatrous transliteration – even if that were possible with so individualistic a work.

Haddrick asserts that ‘The novel was simply too big for a feature’, and he may be right that so complex a work of fiction needed the spaciousness of the six-hour format.2 But this is not a Victorian novel crowded with plot and intricately interconnected characters. Rather, Cloudstreet is a fiction that resonates with the most powerful sense of a poetic insight at work. It is very far from a conventional realist novel, which means that the adaptors, if they want to maintain the contours and tone of the original, face several major challenges.

Not only is a serious element of selection and condensation necessary (even with the comparative luxury of a six-hour running time), but the filmmakers must also consider more than just events and characters when attempting to capture the riches of the novel. Winton appears to be as concerned with offering a rumination on a range of matters – family, the ties that bind and those that fray, the role of chance and luck in life, and the place of the spiritual and the sensual in the daily business of living – as he is with engaging in the more conventional narrative expectations of the novel form. The narrating voice of the novel is reflective and idiosyncratic, informed by a poet’s insight and a diction that moves flexibly between the lyrical and the vernacular. It is a voice that gives the reader confidence and accounts in no small measure for the spell cast by the novel. What is the filmed version to make of this? Can such a ‘voice’ find release in the visual and aural imagery of the series? Have the filmmakers wanted to do this? Whatever the original intentions, this was never going to be a run-of-the-mill adaptation.

THE NOVEL’S CONVERGING LIVES

The narrative spine of Winton’s novel inheres in the converging of two ill-assorted families as they make their way to the rambling house on Cloud Street, which is located near the Swan River at a short distance from Perth. It is, the book’s narrator tells us, ‘an enormous, flaking mansion with eyes and ears and a look of godless opulence about it, even now’.3 The families are called, with culinary humour, Lamb and Pickles – ‘It’s gunna sound like a counter lunch,’ Sam guffaws4 – and their routes to Cloud Street (later elided into one word) are very different. Sam Pickles, not known for the good luck he depends on, has lost the fingers of his right hand in an accident, but in a sudden flurry of good fortune he inherits the ancient empty house on the condition that it can’t be sold for twenty years. The family – wife Dolly, daughter Rose and sons Ted and Chub – quit Geraldton and move to Cloud Street. Dolly is no homemaker and, increasingly, responsibility will fall on Rose’s shoulders.

The Lambs, on the other hand, are a churchgoing family comprising father Lester, mother Oriel and six children. The accident that has marked their lives is more tragic than Sam Pickles’ loss of his fingers: their cheerful, outgoing son Fish has been caught under water in a fishing net and, though his life is saved by Oriel’s intervention, ‘not all of Fish Lamb had come back’.5 In a key paragraph, we are told that, as he almost drowns:
Fish will remember. All his life and all his next life he’ll remember this dark, cold plunge where sound and light and shape are gone, where something rushes him from afar, where, open-mouthed, openfisted, he drinks in river, whales it in with complete surprise.

I quote this partly to suggest the poetic strand in the novel’s texture, and partly because of how the miniseries will render Fish’s near-death insight.

Two impairments – Sam’s hand and Fish’s brain – align the families in the book’s structure before they arrive at Cloud Street. Things have gone badly for the Lambs, and when Oriel finds an ad for a tenancy in the West Australian they make their way to the ramshackle house. Two families with not much to show for the efforts of their lives, two families with utterly different handles on life, on work – on everything really – have now converged on the eponymous house, and the rest of the novel will dramatise and poetically contemplate their attempts to live under the same roof, to come to terms with their pasts, and to try to realise some of their dreams. If that sounds sentimental, the book is emphatically not: Winton is clear-eyed about the limitations of any approach to life, and at certain crucial moments reveals a moving pity for its victims.

In its far from conventional approach to narrative, the novel gains an unassailable structural firmness from the parallels between the two families, sometimes in the interest of contrast but perhaps overall, and at a deeper level, of comparison. By comparing the two families, the book seems to assert some profound acceptance of the dynamics that all families share, however much their surface lives may vary. Sam and Dolly Pickles exude a kind of haplessness: they are dependent on ‘luck’ and have little in the way of resources when this runs out. They have each had a good deal to cope with – Sam’s accident, Dolly’s hatred of the mother who was not a mother and the death of one of their sons, Dolly’s adored Ted. Daughter Rose is determined to break out of the family cycle of hopeless surrender to circumstances. This leads her to take education seriously and to get a job well away from home. Lester and Oriel Lamb have had their tragedy in Fish’s near-death accident and subsequent brain damage. Their older son, Quick, in a semi-parallel with Rose, shakes off the shackles of family and heads inland to cull kangaroos, among other demanding occupations. The ways in which the two families keep [only just] financially afloat provide examples of parallelism indicating contrast. Where the Pickles rely on Sam’s intermittent good luck at the races and his job at the mint [where he tries to make off with the produce], the more industrious Lambs set up a successful smallgoods store in the front room of their half of the house. Rose and Quick, after their efforts to break away have failed for different reasons, will eventually find a future together. I don’t mean to make this sound schematic; instead, it is gratifying in the sense of their having found common ground nearer to home than they had expected.

I have spent more time discussing the way the novel works than I normally would because I want to suggest how skilfully the miniseries both retains Winton’s essential framework and, at the same time, makes something admirably new from it. The fact that the miniseries retains some of the novel’s sometimes quirky chapter headings – for example, ‘The Shifty Shadow Is Lurking’, ‘The Vanilla Victory’, ‘Down among Them Killing’ – may suggest that it is being overzealous in relation to the original. This is not the case: these titles simply serve as a means to tie the work to the novel, to keep something of its elusive tone and, more importantly, to pique the viewer’s interest. So, what else does the filmed version significantly take from the novel?
The spine

Winton and Fontana’s screenplay has preserved the central structural procedure of the novel. Indeed, one wonders, how could it not? This is still a story of two families converging on a house that has seen better days, two families at odds with each other in their attitudes towards, and their dealings with, what life hands them. Each has come with the baggage of an accident, and the narrative interest of the rest of the miniseries will essentially lie in watching how these families manage to live under the same roof, finally arriving at an accommodation with each other when Rose Pickles marries Quick Lamb. This marriage happens in the nick of time before their baby is born, and the miniseries departs from the novel by ending here; it is making its own point about the beauty of reconciliation and of birth, both literal and metaphorical. To end this way is the filmmakers’ decision, and it is legitimated by any number of lesser and greater moments of understanding. It is a matter of emphasis; the spine is preserved even if some of the vertebrae feature more prominently here than in the novel.

Other key parallels from the original make their presence felt in the miniseries. Obviously there are the accidents, with which the series’ first episode opens as if to announce something about rotten luck – luck is not something to rely on, and we should keep this in mind as we watch the rest unfold. But there is also the contrasting two fathers and two mothers, and the rapprochement that they bumble towards, as well as the important fact that each has a kid who wants to opt out of the family’s round of failure and uncertain success and who, in each case, will return to Cloudstreet. Inevitably, the constraints of time, even in a six-hour miniseries, will necessitate some compressions, some omissions – the other children, apart from Fish, Quick and Rose, are summarily treated, and one sees why – but the overall trajectory of Winton’s poetic epic is still evident, giving dramatic shape to the lives of the Lambs and the Pickles.

Who’s telling this story?

Haddrick has written that ‘it takes one bloke to write a book and two hundred people to make a screen adaptation of it’.7 I’ll come back to some of those ‘two hundred people’ later, but first I want to draw attention to the idea of the series’ narration as distinct from the voice(s) that puts the novel before us. In the book, we are conscious of the vernacular and the lyrical, of everyday observation and the effortlessly poetic insight melding together. Sometimes the narrating voice seems to be working in a purely functional way – just letting us know who is doing what and where – but again and again it suggests an apprehension that goes beyond this. Chosen at random, two small examples of what I mean about the narrating voice having access to insights beyond the purely factual are as follows: ‘Summer is on the land like fever’8 and ‘There was a long, steady rustling in the wheat, rhythmic as the sound of sleep.’9 And then Fish is revealed as narrator for some – most? – of the time.

The series, as adaptations often do, employs a voice-over. In Cloudstreet, it is a voice thick with memory, with insights denied to those going about the quotidian business of living. It is actually Ron Haddrick’s voice that gives utterance to large formulations such as ‘No one believes any more’, or later, as the camera prowls the night house, panning its surfaces, ‘Life was all there was’. In a curious way, these generalities feel as if they have been earned by the experiences they seem to summarise. This voice-over gives an extra dimension to the actualities of the lives of the Lambs and the Pickles, sometimes commenting on a specific moment such as the end of the war or Oriel’s grief at Quick’s departure, but more often lifting the series away from an easy realism to endow it with a metaphysical perspective. And sometimes, as in the novel, it is the voice of the adult man that Fish will never properly become.

There is more to ‘telling the story’ than just telling the story. Film has its own narrational strategies, and this version of Cloudstreet draws more imaginatively on these than most television dramas do.
There are visual as well as verbal punctuation markers. The series opens and closes with the river, with lyrical shots of water and sky, and such images recur throughout as reminders that it all began with the river.

So how is the story being ‘told’ on film?

The voice-over is the most obvious form of narration, and the one most directly comparable to the novel’s narrating prose. Unlike many literary adaptations, the source of Cloudstreet’s voice-over is sometimes disconcertingly hard to pinpoint; it is not the kind of consistent first-person voice that conducts the reader through, say, Great Expectations, or the omniscient chronicler of Anna Karenina. Viewers coming to the miniseries without knowledge of the book – and even some that do – may still wonder for much of the television version whose phantasmal voice punctuates its action. Has it been Fish all along? Or is it sometimes the ever-present Bob Crab, an Indigenous man who is seen standing in the street opposite Cloudstreet at night when we hear his voice as he talks of – and to – the house: ‘I’m watchin’ and waitin’. I see you. One day I come back and finish that story.’ But the ‘story’ finishes with Fish running to the end of the pier while his voice, as he hangs in the air, intones:

Whole and human. I know my story for that long ... For as long as it takes to drink the river, as long as it took to tell you all this. And then my walls are tipping and I burst into the moon, the sun and the stars of who I really am. Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Every place. Me.

This draws word for word on the last paragraph of the novel’s penultimate chapter. I don’t mean to ‘explain’ the lyrical insights Winton has attributed to Fish, but just to indicate that the film does not feel constrained to end as the novel did – that is, with Oriel and Dolly together packing up the backyard tent in which Oriel has lived her withdrawn life. Perhaps the filmmakers decided that the touching moment when the two women dance at the wedding makes the point about their being united in their common roles of wives and mothers, happy and unhappy, and wanted to finish on a note of overarching reconciliation of the everyday and the eternal, the prosaic and the poetic.

There are visual as well as verbal punctuation markers. The series opens and closes with the river, with lyrical shots of water and sky, and such images recur throughout as reminders that it all began with the river. The opening images of water, of kids playing on the beach, of laughing faces, of a body in slow motion diving in the water, of night around the campfire with the singing of ‘Shall We Gather at the River?’ (recalling John Ford): all of the shots in this montage create an idyll that is about to be shattered when a boy, Fish, is caught in a net in the river. Saved from death thanks to his mother’s efforts, he will never be whole again, even if he is described as ‘a miracle’. The images of the river and the overarching sky are not merely lyrical, however; sometimes working to dangerous effect, signifying the vast mystery of the natural world over which people have no control. At other times, though, the cinematography is used for a more potently dramatic purpose, as in the overhead shot of the Lamb boys drifting at night in the boat their father has bought and wants them to row home. Here, their vulnerability is captured by their smallness in contrast to the immensity of their surroundings; we also recall the tragic outcome of Quick’s and Fish’s dealings with water and wonder at their father’s folly in sending them off on this escapade. This doesn’t need spelling out because the camera creates the meaning.

It is not to undervalue the contribution of the film’s director, Matthew Saville, who no doubt orchestrates all of these ‘storytellers’, that I emphasise here the importance of the other contributions: Haddrick’s vocal narration, Mark Wareham’s cinematography, the editing by Geoff Hitchins, the
production design of Herbert Pinter, the costume design of Terri Lamera and the haunting score by Bryony Marks. These people are all crucially involved in the ‘telling’ of the story, and I haven’t often been so impressed with such a collaborative team in Australian television. Hitchins and Marks, especially, convey the postwar period without ever being too obvious. The outdoor dunny or the sort of shop the Lambs set up at once alert us to the mid-century era, but, on a less ‘realist’ note, camera and design work together in a recurring shot of Dolly sitting by the railway track at night to signify her longing for something and somewhere else. To describe it in words fails to do justice to the moment’s poignancy. And speaking of Dolly, her slinky, deliberately suggestive outfits not only nail the period but also her general approach to life: when she’s at home she can scarcely be bothered to get dressed; when she’s on the town, she’s dressed, if not to kill, at least to make an impact on any likely male. The costume design is ‘telling’ aspects of the story here, as it is in the contrast between Dolly’s sartorial choices and Oriel’s sensible overalls as she goes about her household and shop work. Similarly, the costumes, hairstyles and make-up of the girls on the switchboard where Rose works evoke the 1950s with unobtrusive precision, and Rose’s successful efforts to fit in to this ambience is a way of ‘telling’ us about her aspirations.

All of these behind-camera personnel are engaged in the business of making meaning, of putting the story before us in a particular way. Any filmed version of a novel is necessarily going to draw on a different semiotic system to tell the story, and the adaptations that stay with me are those that exhibit real imagination, even daring, in exercising visual medium’s resources. Another instance here is the way the editing compels our attention and how it goes about ensuring that we ‘read’ the film as the director and writers intend. This is most striking in the montage sequences, which collapse a number of images in the interest of establishing a point, but also in the preponderance of duologues caught in medium and close-up two-shots, as when Oriel and Quick have this exchange:

Oriel: You can’t unsee it, but you can endure ... Strong people endure. That’s all life is.
Quick: Just being strong? That’s all?
Oriel: Yes – and being nice.
The intimacy of this segment, preceded by Oriel telling her older son about how her family was destroyed by fire, is made palpable by camera and editing in concert. In fact, though there is something epic (to use the term loosely perhaps) about the all-encompassing sense of two families’ lives being lived out against a panorama of the times, the film is most moving in its more intimate moments. And very often the two-shots work potently to this end, as in the Oriel–Quick exchange, or in any number of others in which a relationship is charted – sometimes as it is forged, sometimes as it disintegrates. The epic nature of the project may excite, but it is the individuals coming to grips with each other that stir the heart. There are stunning wide shots of the daunting outback, but these are no more telling than the close-up of Dolly’s red fingernails as she grasps her two favourite objects – a glass and a cigarette.

**THE HOUSE AND ITS INMATES**

The images that rightly preside over the series are those of the house itself. The way it is presented is a triumph of production design, and of editing and lighting. I don’t know whether it was an existing house in decline or whether it was specially built, and I don’t much care. What matters is how this once-majestic, vestigially gothic structure, now in a state of desuetude, impresses itself on the viewer’s retina – and mind. Although needing a coat of paint and missing weather-boards here and there, it still exudes a kind of dignity and authority that might impose itself on the incoming families. The first (low-angled) glimpse of it, almost filling the frame, is against a blue sky, the front of the house largely in shadow. The camera pulls back to reveal the Pickles family standing in a row beyond the fence, taking in their new home. As the camera and the family venture inside, the house keeps sending out messages of mystery and of shabbiness, but with an evocative touch of grandeur. The leadlight of the front doorway and the brown pressed-metal dado of the walls are typical signs of the period. ‘Bloody strange, if you ask me,’ says Dolly, who is not about to surrender to its faded beauties. The strangeness is compounded by the discovery of a piano in a dusty room, and this will be a source of comfort, and more, to Fish. The camera then focuses on Rose standing at an upper-floor window, her face glimpsed behind a lace curtain as she responds to the lure and threat of the house. These, and other images of rooms glimpsed in shafts of light, are edited together so as to give the Pickles (and us) a feeling for a house that has a past, yet is also instinct with possibilities.

The design goes on ‘telling’ us about the starkly opposite attitudes of the two families via overhead shots of the divided backyard. Whereas the Lambs’ side is given over to growing vegetables to be sold in the shop they set up, the Pickles’ side shows no evidence of cultivation and remains scruffily barren of enterprise. In shots like these, the sheer doggedness of the Lambs, especially of the life-toughened Oriel, is set off against the Pickles’ indolence. The camera seems to love the house and prowls its passages and pans its surfaces, but Saville and his writers are aware that it is the lives within and around it that are the heart of the story.

**PAIRS, PLUS ONE**

**Fish**

As indicated above, there is a sense that Fish – the damaged boy, the laughing, loving, disconcerting teenager, and the disembodied presence who comments on the action from another place – is the pivot on which the story turns. The damage he has suffered places him at a remove from the daily difficulties of the others: it’s as if he’s been magically transplanted to a point of vantage denied to them. In Hugo Johnstone-Burt’s grasp of this character, in the way Fish adapts to the house via the piano, in what he brings out in the others – at best, a selfless love – and in the privileged access to knowledge that the film’s voice-over endows him with, he seems situated at the film’s core.

**Sam and Lester**

In their own ways, both of these men are gamblers. Sam bets on the races, always sure (despite the mounting evidence to the contrary) that he’s onto a good thing, and he’s not above a bit of mild swindling in his job at the mint. The teetotal, churchgoing Lester would never think of himself as a gambler but is prepared to spin a knife to decide matters, so perhaps it is not so surprising when he falls for Sam’s ‘corrupting’ pleasures of the races and the pub. Lester has seen Sam lugging drunken, giggling Dolly upstairs, and his corruption, if that is the word, is complete when he succumbs later to
Dolly’s undeniable attractions. There is a very nice scene between the two men early on when Sam is being facetious with Lester who, in his straightforward way, tries hard to get the point – but misses. The two actors intelligently read their roles, creating a persuasive feeling of a developing alliance in both their facial expressions (Sam always looking vaguely hapless, Lester a bit worried that he might not be doing what Oriel wants) and their body language (Lester’s tautness, Sam’s slackness). This will come to practical terms when Lester helps spirit Sam away from the vengeful bookies who are after his blood. Sam has corrupted Lester in the matter of gambling and Lester has lost virtue in his dealings with Dolly, but by the film’s end they have grown a little in stature, and the two knowing, understated performances register the shifts in and between the two men.

Quick and Rose

The Pickles’ daughter, Rose, and the Lambs’ eldest son, Quick, both want more – or at least something different – from what they see as their parents’ lives. Initially, they don’t consider each other as a means to this end. Rose, who would rather be reading a book (Jane Eyre serves as a shrewd example) and going to teachers’ college or university, makes do with becoming a switchboard operator at a Perth department store, where she attracts the attention of the smooth-talking, middle-class Toby, a would-be author. She imagines she’s in love with him, but when he makes clear at a public occasion that he has been using her for material, she runs out – fortuitously into the arms of Quick. Quick, who all but broke Oriel’s heart when he ventured off to the bush, has been brought home injured after his attempt to escape. Quick’s obvious devotion to his disabled brother inclines us to like him, and Todd Lasance has something of the young Matt Damon’s looks and fresh openness of manner. Emma Booth, currently one of the best young actresses in Australia, makes something very affecting of Rose from her first moments in the hospital with the injured Sam, and her reflective response to the house establishes a presence that will have to be reckoned with. In one sequence she is wearing an apron over her school uniform, signalling the responsibilities she’s been forced to assume in this household. But it’s not just this telling detail that creates our sense of Rose: Booth registers the suppressed ambition and anger of Rose’s situation, and the gap between her rage at Dolly and her desperate cry for her mum at the end is filled with acutely observed shifts in her understanding. Rose and Quick have been forged in tough, albeit different schools; they know how to value each other and they are the hope of the future.

Dolly and Oriel

Arguably, the film’s profoundest truths are located in the respective portrayals of the two mothers: Dolly Pickles and Oriel Lamb. This adaptation is fortunate, because it has in Essie Davis and Kerry Fox, two superb actresses whose
heartfelt performances make irresistible claims on our attention and sympathies. Dolly, wearing her slinky dresses, puffing at a fag and swaying with booze, is an unforgettable figure of slipshod egoism. Everything about the indolent looseness of stance and step, reinforced by the accuracy of costume and make-up, works to create an aura of sloppy self-indulgence. Or so it seems. Then, in a single heart-breaking scene between her and Rose, any urge to censoriousness we may have felt is overturned, as she for once tells the truth about herself and her bitter past: the sister–mother who hated her and the belief that ‘I was rubbish because they treated me like rubbish’. Rose, years of resentment falling away, agonises: ‘Oh, Mum, you should have bloody said. You should have told me!’ This will feed into Rose’s cry for her mother at the moment of childbirth.

For Oriel, life is a matter of ‘enduring’. ‘The strong are here to look after the weak,’ she tells the returned Quick in her backyard tent, but lest this sound a bit self-preening, she follows it with ‘And the weak are here to teach the strong’. I don’t suppose Fox has ever given a poor performance since she first startled us playing Janet Frame in *An Angel at My Table* (Jane Campion, 1990), but she has done nothing finer, more wholly achieved, than her Oriel Lamb. This is a woman who has seen how life is and has refused to cave in to its worst blows, but she is not just a tedious amalgam of matriarchal hardihood and wisdom. As she sets about making the Lambs’ half of the house habitable or making the shop pay or staking out her own independent space in her garden tent or cherishing the broken Fish forever, she creates a wholly believable character who attracts viewer sympathy without ever playing for it.

Oriel and Dolly, incarnated in these two physically disparate actresses, survey each other warily for most of the miniseries. At the wedding celebration for Quick and Rose, the more upright, conscientious Oriel takes promiscuous Dolly to dance, and the effect is wonderfully moving, almost to the point that in this version, ‘Mothers’ (one of the headings retained) are at its core. When they dance together in an access of unspoken mutual understanding, the years of critical appraisal seeming to slip away, they pull off a moment of pure film magic. This is a moment that a novelist could have described but that only film could show.

**CONCLUSION**

However eloquent the contributions of those before and behind the camera referred to above, it needs to be said finally that two names above all should be asserted as the prime creators of this landmark miniseries. Winton wrote the novel, without which nothing would have happened; the fact that he is co-author of the miniseries suggests that the changes a reader might have picked up on (such as Bob Crab having a more corporeal presence or the timeframe being reduced from twenty to ten years or the focus on just three of the children) have his imprimatur. The screenplay for such a vast treasure-house of a novel was never going to be easy, and it was going to need a director who could marshal its sprawl of incident and personnel and give it its own coherence. Saville, who directed with such assurance the multi-story police procedural *Noise* (2007) as well as some notable series, maintains a subtle control, compounded of strength and delicacy, and may just have produced a classic of Australian television.

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Endnotes

4. ibid., p. 49.
5. ibid., p. 32.
6. ibid., p. 20.
9. ibid., p. 419.