



# *Black Water*

## by David Metzenthen

### Summary

It is 1915 when we meet Farren Fox, living with his fisherman father, the memory of his mother, now dead two years gone, and the hope that his brother Danny will return from Gallipoli in one piece. Although life is not always easy for Farren, he takes comfort in the positive things that come his way. He has a wonderful relationship with Charlotte and Maggie who staff the kitchen at the Victory Hotel where Farren works as a kitchen hand, especially Maggie who has taken Farren under her wing as a mother figure. A small boating mishap rekindles an earlier mateship with the great Robbie Price, who has his own demons at home, with his father missing in action and his mother suffering dreadfully as a result. The boys lean on each other and help to keep each other afloat through their trials.

Farren's father is still learning to live with the loss of his wife, and the love he has for the sea fills that empty space for him. The relationship that exists between father and son is a tentative one, but sharing the occasional smile and kind word helps them both get through, as does their mutual love of Danny, still fighting in the Great War, and their hope that he will be safe.

Sadly, tragedy strikes the small family when a raging storm hits and Tom Fox is out at sea with his fishing partner aboard the family's treasured yacht, the *Camille*, named after Farren's mother. The following morning the yacht is washed ashore, and the bodies of the two fishermen washed in with it. Farren is helped by the people of the small township who gather together to support him during this terrible time, but it is the return of his brother Danny, injured in battle, that truly keeps him afloat. But the Danny who comes home is a far cry from the wild young man who Farren last saw, and the emotional and physical trauma of war has taken its toll. He drinks very heavily, and for some time is unable to cross the bridge that separates the Fox house from the township, to take the step back into civilisation and the 'civilian' world.

Another night and another fierce storm bring a child into their lives. Souki, around eight years old, is the only survivor of a ship wreck, and it is Danny who finds her, far from where anyone else had even considered looking. Souki is from Furneaux Island, midway between Queenscliff and Tasmania, where it will take some weeks to get a message to her family, and in the meantime Souki and Danny strike an immediate and strong friendship, both carrying their own pains and fears. Souki becomes almost a mascot for Danny, encouraging him out of his self-induced hibernation, and at the same time she finds her way into the hearts of Farren and Robbie, and most of the

other townspeople besides. She is a wild kid, but with Danny's and Farren's encouragement she begins to attend school, make friends, and become a solid part of their lives.

At the same time, a bet made with a local fisherman in the heat of the moment has got Farren and Danny caught in a boat race that could break them financially. Danny's cunning plan to win almost comes undone when he bets more than money with the Clouty brothers, forging an agreement that if they lose the race, they enlist for the war. At the last moment it dawns on Danny that he cannot force other young men into war, and the potential effects of his actions stun him. As it turns out, the men have already enlisted, so Danny and Farren win the race with a clear conscience and the pride of having won in their late father's precious *Camille*.

Souki's mother comes to take her daughter home to Furneaux Island, and ends up spending some time with Danny and Farren. A relationship blossoms between her and Danny, and when it comes time to bid them farewell, Danny realises that he has to follow her to see where it might lead, on the promise that he will one day return to Queenscliff and to Farren.

This is a heartfelt, emotional story of a short but tumultuous time for Farren and his family. This time during the Great War is captured beautifully by the author, and his ability to create a picture of a moment in time is exceptional. *Black Water* is perfectly suited to middle to upper secondary readers, and beyond.

## Themes

- The impact of war
- Loss and Grief
- Life and Death
- Families
- Living with a disability
- Life in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Australia
- Taking shelter
- Loyalty and bravery
- Responsibility
- The glory (or otherwise) of war

## Characters

### Farren Fox

Farren is a young country boy, well known to the people of his town, and has left school to work in the town's pub and help keep himself and his widower father afloat, both literally and figuratively. He is still dealing with the death of his mother and the departure of his older brother to fight in the war. Farren has a great love of nature and all things to do with boats, and hopes that one day he will be able to join his father on the family boat, the *Camille*, as a

fisherman. Farren has a very gentle nature underneath his gruffness, which is shown clearly in the way he rescues the small rabbit (admittedly, that he himself had trapped) and keeps it as a pet (p11).

### Tom Fox

We see very little of Tom Fox in the story, although his character is a large part of the narrative. Tom is a big man, “*with a strength that Farren had never seen defeated*”, until the night the storm takes his life. (p8) Tom is a man of few words, quiet since his wife died in a way he had never been before. His desire to keep both his sons safe from harm means he will not let Farren go out fishing with him while Danny is away fighting at Gallipoli. He tries hard to parent his sons in a way his wife would have been proud of.

### Danny Fox

Until Danny returns from the war, and after the death of his father, all we really know of him is filtered through what Farren reveals. Farren describes him as “*tough and fast-handed, a real good fighter*” (p3). Danny returns home quiet and drawn, with the ghosts of the war surrounding him, and it takes him a long time to leave the ‘wartime’ Danny behind, and reconnect with his home life and the people around him.

### Robbie Price

Robbie Price is a young man Farren’s age, also keenly feeling the impact on the war as his father is missing in action. Robbie and Farren had been friends of a sort at school before Farren left, but it is the afternoon that Farren rescues Robbie after he is knocked from his boat that cements a true friendship between the two. Robbie, or ‘Pricey’ as he is known, is a larrikin always keen to push things as far as he can to get a laugh. He is also acting as ‘man of the house’ for his mother, who is suffering severe emotional distress over the fact that her husband is missing in action. He puts on a very brave face during this time, and his ‘class clown’ act is a way of hiding his own fears and troubles. Robbie gives Farren wonderful support when Tom drowns and their bond is yet further strengthened.

### Mrs Price

Mrs Price is a character we meet only fleetingly but the emotional power of what she represents resounds through the whole book. The position she finds herself in, knowing nothing about her husband’s whereabouts or his safety, characterises the tragedy of war very clearly and helps to explain the way the people of a small town gather to support one another in times of war. Her desire to speak with Danny after he returns, to try and get an understanding of what the war was like first-hand, reveals the powerless position women and children were in during the war, waiting for news of their men to reach them.

## Charlotte and Maggie

These two young women are not a great deal older than Farren, however they become an important support network for Farren as he deals with first the loss of his father, and then the emotional turmoil of Danny's return. Maggie, especially, plays a key role, as Farren awaits news of his father's missing boat, and as he receives the war telegram giving news of Danny. Her role as nurturer in Farren's story is highlighted by her role as cook at the pub where Farren works, where she is often feeding him or preparing food for him.

## Isla

Isla comes to Queenscliff to work at the Victory doing the wash-house work. Farren describes her as *"thin, her face was milk-pale, and her hair was black, loosely held with a royal blue ribbon"*. (p15) Isla is deaf, and she makes an immediate impact on Farren who decides that he likes her right from the outset. When Isla develops pneumonia from her wash-house work, it is Farren, with Robbie's help, who saves her life, and the connection made between the two is strong. Isla becomes the school teacher's sweetheart, and they are engaged to be married before he enlists for war.

## Souki

Souki is a true wild child, found by Danny after surviving a boat accident during a storm that killed three fellow seamen. She comes from tiny Furneaux Island, midway between Queenscliff and Tasmania, and because of the winter weather, she must stay on the mainland until boats can get through. She is a saving grace in Danny's life, arriving mysteriously at the point where he seems about to be engulfed in depression, and with her outspoken way she manages to get him to do things in a way that nobody else can. Souki seems older than her years and speaks with a turn of phrase more fitting the local front bar of a pub than a small child. She has a ferociousness that balances with Danny's silence, and together they are able to navigate an incredibly difficult time in both their lives.

## Jardy

We meet Jardy, Souki's mother, towards the end of the novel when a boat can finally get through from Furneaux Island. She is described as a strong, powerful looking woman. *"...she was, in a way, beautiful. She wasn't happy and forgiving like Maggie, or elegant and funny like Isla, she was tough and breathtaking, rare like a diamond."* (p259)

## **Questions before reading**

- Read the description of the storm on the back cover blurb of the book. What might it be like to have to face a storm of this magnitude? What possible reasons could there be for someone to be out in a boat in a storm like this? What sort of scenario can you envisage for Farren Fox's father, as described in the blurb?



- Is the blurb an ominous one? What about the cover? What sense do you get about the story from looking at the image on the cover? Is it one of danger, melancholy, sadness, or something else?
- How important is the cover of the book to the way in which we perceive the story prior to reading? Do you have to like a cover in order to enjoy the story inside? How much weight is there in the saying 'don't judge a book by its cover'?
- What might the title *Black Water* refer to? What sort of image does it create in your mind and how does that affect your reading of the story?

## War

*"And what would it mean, Farren wondered, if Danny had killed some Turks? Would it mean a lot or not much? You weren't supposed to kill people, everyone knew that; it even said so in the bible, but in a war it was different. . . It was confusing."* (p90)

- What is your opinion of this view? Is it okay to take another life during a war, if that is what is called for in battle? If it is a case of 'kill or be killed' can your actions be justified? If you think about the fact that Danny has Farren and a whole town full of people thinking of him and worrying for his safety, is it not possible to imagine that each Turkish soldier (or Vietnamese, or German, or Iraqi) has that same family or town worrying for their safety? This can lead to all sorts of morality questions, such as what is the value of a human life during a war? Do you see the lives on your 'side' as more valuable than those of your enemy? How can you justify this view? Is it necessary to feel this way to be able to do what is required of you during war? These sorts of questions can be enlarged upon to whatever extent you are willing to go to with your students. You might like to lead this into a discussion about crimes of war generally or be more specific about certain events, such as the killing of Jews by those whose own lives were threatened if they did not comply.

*"And he doubted, although he didn't know why, that Danny would want to fish. Farren just couldn't picture him stripping in couda after couda, to let them die in piles around his boots. Danny appeared to have had every bit of the killer instinct knocked right out of him."* (p109)

- It is well documented that many young men went off to war, especially in the First and Second World Wars, excited about the idea of killing the enemy. Equally well documented is the way these soldiers returned home haunted by the evil things they had seen and done, feelings that distanced them from their families and communities, thus finding it hard to fit back into 'society'.
- Using the internet or other research tool, find some accounts of soldiers' experiences of war. You may even have friends or relatives who were sent to later wars and can give you a first-hand account of their own experiences.

- You could imagine that seeing a lot of death and dying would make you *more* desensitised, so that it didn't have such an impact on you, like someone who works in a hospital. Why might this not be the case for soldiers at war? Discuss with your classmates the way a war might impact on you, and even the way you are affected now by the images you see on the news and in the newspapers.

*"Yer see, they don't care that I can't do up me boots or boil a bloody egg, but they certainly do care if they think that I'm gunna shoot someone. Or someone from our side, anyway."* (p150)

- This speech of Danny's comes after he takes a token shot at Joe Clouty's dog, and decides he needs to return to the hospital that he has left only days before, before someone is sent to bring him back forcibly. What Danny means is that the government really have no concern for the state of his, or any other soldier's, mental or physical health once they have done their bit for the war effort, but of course they would care if it has a direct impact on 'normal' civilised society. In other words, a returned soldier may come home to a miserable life shattered from their experience of war, but unless it affects their wider community it really is nobody's problem but theirs.
- Does this sound fair to you? Can you imagine a society in which returned soldiers are left to find their own way? Using the internet or other research tool, look into how the government supported returned soldiers after WW1, in Australia and other countries. How different is government involvement now, or after WW2 or the Vietnam War? Has much changed in almost 100 years? In what other ways could returned soldiers be supported by their countries?

*"It's interesting, isn't it? That pretty much any feller who's ever actually been in a war wouldn't want to go near another one with a barge pole. Yet all the other dingbats around the place reckon it's like a game of bloody British Bulldog."* (pp210/211)

- Where does the 'romance' of war come from? Why is it that throughout history there has been a love/hate relationship with the idea of war, so that so many of those who have not been are enticed and excited by the prospect of it, yet as Robbie puts it so clearly, anybody who has been involved in war is certain in their desire to avoid being involved again? Discuss this idea as a class, perhaps using examples from other books or films to support your argument.
- In the time of the First World War, people at home only learnt about the events of war through radio, newspapers and letters home from the soldiers fighting. This news always came long after the actual events had taken place, and in most instances would not have included any actual visual images of the ravages of war. Compare this to today's warring, where we see nightly the events of the past 24 hours, including the brutal evidence of our own warfare, not just that of our 'enemy'. How much difference does it make to our attitude to war when we can see the realities, and not just base our knowledge on our own imagination?

- Farren's response to Robbie's comment is interesting. He agrees with what Robbie is saying, yet he can also see that sometimes what is said by the 'blokes in the pub' about war being great sport can make it sound as though it was *"just like a big game and everyone got to go home after."* (p211)
- Re-read this entire conversation as a class, from the beginning of chapter 38 through to page 212. What are people's views, how does it make students feel to think about the idea of actually going to war themselves?
- Discuss the idea of conscription with students and how it affected wars Australia has been involved in during the last century. Could we ever have conscription again in this country? What would the impact be? Why was conscription *not* needed during the First World War?

*"He's still got everythin' he ever had, Farren . . . Except that now he's got more . . . He's been tested a thousand times and he ain't never come up short. You have to know that. . . And he might falter once or twice because of what's happened, but believe me, mate, he's tougher now than ever."* (p261)

- Does war and killing make you tougher? Why/Why not? Explain and justify your answer.
- Farren says that *"blokes like Joe didn't seem to think Danny was tough at all."* (p261) Would this really be the case? Why might some of the 'blokes down the pub' have a particular attitude about Danny?

*"Not a bad bloke, old Abdul the Turk, all things considered . . . He was always gunna have somethin' to say about us jumpin' his back fence. Just like you would. And sometimes he did the right thing . . ."* (p138)

- How common is it for soldiers to return from war with a greater understanding of their 'enemy' and a level of respect for them and the job that they had to do? Do some internet research (or use other research techniques) into the Australian view of the Turkish following our involvement at Gallipoli, and over the years since the war. Look also at our experiences on the Western Front. See what you can find out about the stories that came back from war of soldiers crossing no-man's-land to share cigarettes, and even a game or two. Are these true stories, or legends created over time? Is Danny's view a common one? How about the people of Turkey? What might their view of Australians be?

### **Life in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Australia**

- When we first meet Farren he is out fishing and trapping rabbits. We learn quickly that he is no longer at school but working at the local pub. He prepares the dinner for himself and his father, and when he rises in the mornings, his father has already left for a long day at sea. Most of the time he seems to be left to his own devices. He is roughly fourteen years of age.



- Think about your own life at fourteen and the sort of life you were leading. How different was it to Farren's life? Obviously Farren spends so much of his time alone since the death of his mother, and of course things would be different if she were still alive, but the reality of life for a young person in the early 1900s was vastly different to the life of a young person in today's society.
- Both Farren and Robbie drink beer, and on occasions brandy and rum. Both smoke regularly. This behaviour seems to be either accepted by many of the adults around them, or if not wholly accepted then consciously ignored in that 'boys will be boys' attitude. How would this sort of behaviour be tolerated in today's society? Were times really so different then? Why?
- Does this mean that adults cared less about young people's wellbeing, or is it more the case that the idea of there being a time between childhood and adulthood is a modern day one? Discuss this with your students, using examples from the story. Students might like to take this opportunity to speak with older people in their lives, such as grandparents, about their experiences of that world of 'young adulthood'. Did it exist in their day? How different was it to the students' experiences?
- In the time in which the book is set many young people left school at fourteen or fifteen years-of-age, the average age to marry was somewhere between eighteen and twenty-one, and the step into the adult world happened very quickly. The idea of being a 'teenager' did not really exist, when the majority of your 'teen' years were spent living an adult life. Does this sound like a better way of life than yours? As a class, make a list of the most obvious differences between your own life and Farren's life. Discuss the pros and cons of both, using examples from the book and from your own life to support your comments.

## Imagery

*"She got up, Farren feeling the cold return as if it had sat down in her place."*  
(p57)

- There are many examples of imagery used throughout the book to create a particular emotion; be it fear, safety, romance, comfort, etc. As you are reading the novel, take note of particular passages that create a strong image in your mind of the way the characters are feeling or the things that they are going through. As a class, share these with one another, discussing such writing techniques as personification, simile and metaphor.
- Make your own attempt at evoking a particular mood or emotion within your writing. Imagine a particular scenario when the overwhelming emotion could be fear, or comfort, and then in a paragraph or two see how you can employ writing techniques to bring about that emotion. Share this writing with the class, with your teacher offering assistance or support where needed.



## Loyalty, Bravery, Pride and Responsibility

- Re-read chapters 23 and 24, where Robbie and Farren break into the pub and steal a car to get Isla, who is critically ill, to the hospital. Although these scenes are quite dramatic, there is also an element of comedy to them that makes them seem all the more realistic.
- Was it a foolish thing for Robbie to steal the Doctor's car, even though it ultimately worked out for the best? Instead of saving Isla's life, they put it and their own lives in danger. Everybody, almost, praises them for their efforts. Would the same thing happen today? Why/Why not?
- *"Yer dad'd be proud of yer, Farren. And yer mum."* (p184) Is Farren, in a sense, stepping into his father's shoes when he answers the call of the Wreck Bell, heading out to help search for a boat in peril? He acknowledges that he has never gone out on such a search before, because his father thought him too young. Is this a coming-of-age moment for him, when he realises he must step up and be the 'man of the house', especially when Danny seems to need him to take control?
- What does it mean to have someone be proud of you, and of your actions? It is especially poignant for Farren to have someone tell him that his late parents would be proud of him. Think of the moments in your own life when you know your parents have been proud of you for something you have said or done. What does that pride mean to you? Can it be put into words or is it just a feeling it gives you? Have there been times in your life when you have been especially proud of yourself, or of someone else in your life? Use these moments to inspire some personal writing about pride.

*"Bein' scared don't mean you ain't brave, Souk . . . Bein' brave is all about bein' scared. And then decidin' what yer should do and if yer have to do it. You don't have to go in that boat, little mate. But if someone's life depended on it then you would. I know you would."* (p216)

- Is this how you would define bravery? Do bravery and fear go hand-in-hand? What are some of the other acts of bravery that are shown in *Black Water*? Do they sit well with this description of what bravery is? Discuss this as a class, using both examples from the book and examples from your own life experience to justify your comments.

## Emotional healing

*"Look, matey. I won't be goin' over that bridge for a wee while because . . . Me head's not right, me arm's not right, me eye's not right, and I'm not right. A lotta things've happened to me, Farren, and I gotta work 'em out and let 'em settle. And that's why I came home. For some peace and quiet. And to see you. But I ain't crossin' that bridge. Not today, And not tomorrow, either."* (p131)

- Read back through the passages from when Farren first visits Danny in the hospital. There are many signs that Danny has returned home a

different man from the one who left. Make a list of those things that seem particularly obvious, and also the not so obvious signs that might indicate he is not quite ready for returning to civilian life.

- The quote above shows Danny acknowledging that not only has he been physically wounded, but that he has been mentally scarred by his experiences of war. How common was it for soldiers to return from war and receive no assistance with psychological issues that affected their everyday lives? Do some research into the current level of assistance the Australian government gives to its returned servicemen and women? Is it adequate? How does it compare with countries like the USA or the UK?

### Souki and Jardy

- Souki's arrival in the story signals the start of Danny's slow recovery. The first time that Danny crosses the bridge after returning home is the night he finds Souki, and they become true comrades in Danny's healing process.
- *'Danny, you 'eard Farren.'* She nodded at Danny. *'He needs your help. It'll be good for yer. You can't sit around 'ere all day twiddlin' yer bloody thumbs.'* (p207) Farren notes that Souki seems to understand a lot more than she lets on. How do you think it is that children are able to pick up on feelings and emotions that a lot of adults can't? Why does Danny seem to find it easier to listen to Souki than to Farren or other town's people?
- *'I do wanna go,' she said wishfully. 'I do wanna be in the race. Only somethin's bloody stoppin' me an' I don' know what it is.'* (p216). Are there any similarities between Souki's reluctance to go in the boat and Danny's reluctance to "rejoin society"? Could a young child and a war veteran have more in common than we first see?
- *'Farren walked quickly past, realising there were depths to Danny's words he didn't think he should be hearing.'* (p296) Why do Danny's feelings for Jardy make Farren uncomfortable?
- *'I'm not sayin' anythin', mate. I'm goin' onboard.'* His eyes simmered with the liquid intensity of burning oil. *'I 'ave to. It's me only hope. Otherwise I'll never know and I'll never make it. I 'ave to go, Farren'* (p303). Why does Danny have to go? Surely he knows how much Farren needs him? What can Souki and Jardy offer Danny that Farren can't?

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