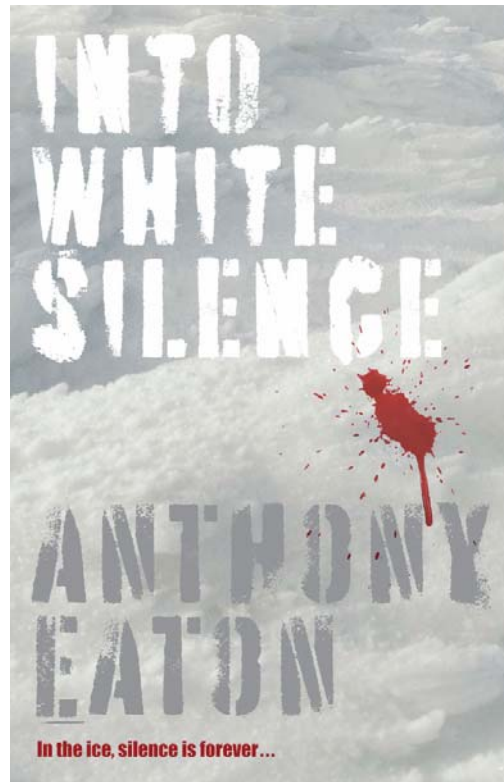


INTO WHITE SILENCE

Anthony Eaton



TEACHING SUPPORT KIT

by

Pam Macintyre, PhD

INTO WHITE SILENCE
Teaching Support Kit

CONTENTS

NOTES

- | | | |
|----|--|----|
| 1. | Synopsis | 3 |
| 2. | Before reading | 4 |
| | a. Setting | |
| 3. | During reading: framings of reading and response | 6 |
| | a. Genre: gothic fiction | |
| | b. Narrative construction | |
| | c. Characters | |
| | d. Themes | |
| 4. | After reading: response activities | 13 |

These notes may be reproduced free of charge for use and study within schools but they may not be reproduced (either in whole or in part) and offered for commercial sale.

Visit www.randomhouse.com.au/readingguides for information on other Random House Australia teaching support kits and reading guides.

Copyright © Random House Australia 2009

SYNOPSIS

Into White Silence reads like a work of non-fiction, but it is fiction modelled on the writing styles of Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley and to a lesser extent Joseph Conrad. It employs techniques of deliberate overstatement, involvement of the self and unreliable narration.

There are two major stories here. The main narrative deals with the ship *Raven* and its journey to the South Pole, as recounted through the journal of William Downes. This story takes the entire book to tell. A second story relates how 'Anthony Eaton' acquired this journal. This story frames the main thrust of the narrative and acts as a device of reader positioning. The journal of William Downes serves as a primary source document. 'Anthony Eaton's' chapters act as commentary and reflection on the Downes journal, and tell of his journey to the Antarctic and his experiences at Casey research station.

As to the journal itself, William Downes details his involvement in the Edward Rourke expedition to the South Pole from October 1921 to June 1922. The journey's aim is to find a new overland route to the South Pole and map the territory along the way. This appears an ambitious and outrageous task. The reasons the crew have signed up are complex, but some had been through a disastrous World War One and were lucky to be alive. The men's motivations are deliberately left ambiguous. Rourke is a secretive figure, a driven man who is contemptuous of the well-known explorers who have gone before him. He is wealthy, highly organised, and the expedition is well resourced with sixty Siberian huskies and two dog handlers as part of the crew.

The first journal entry is dated 2nd October 1921 and the last is 30th June 1922. In the journal we learn much about the reasons for the expedition, the sailors aboard the *Raven* and the progress of the disasters that befall them. Eventually the *Raven* becomes trapped in the pack ice.

BEFORE READING

This is a carefully constructed novel with much to notice and query. Reading and discussing it in stages would be the most fruitful and engaging approach.

Novels are narratives, and narrative, whatever its medium . . . holds the interest of an audience by raising questions in their minds, and delaying the answers . . . The questions are broadly of two kinds, having to do with causality and temporality . . . such narratives are designed to put the hero or heroine repeatedly into situations of extreme jeopardy, thus exciting in the reader emotions of sympathetic fear and anxiety as to the outcome.

David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, p. 14

As Lodge says, fiction by its nature involves us in the reading process and provokes questions. Anthony Eaton invites the reader into this story of dark deeds and awful tragedy in intriguing ways. In the preliminary pages, much as in a work of nonfiction, there are lists of personnel, diagrams of the vessel, family trees for the central players and the author's introduction.

- Talk about the tone and register of the introduction. It is an oddly formal style that seems more 19th century than 21st.
- Why would an author admit to such blatant theft?

So we are positioned unsettlingly before we start the narrative – is it true? A mixture of fact and fiction? Are we meant to believe everything we read? One thing we do know is that author expects us to be alert readers, sensitive to the clues, uncertainties, ambiguities he is about to unfold and to join him in what is going to be absorbing reading experience – as much an adventure for the reader as the characters.

SETTING

Antarctica, in all its Ice Queen splendour, is the awful seductress in this tale, for both Downes and Eaton. The sound of sea ice cracking and grinding in the night, the taste of penguin, the leads opening up suddenly across the frozen ocean, the shimmering night aurora, the black and threatening skies, the obsessive interest everyone has in the sun's angle, and the way the cold seeps through things and into the soul – a cold so intense that teeth crack or adventurers lose their nose to frostbite in a minute, these images above all stay in one's mind.

Chris Wheat in *Viewpoint: on books for young adults* 16 (4) p. 13.

The novel is set aboard the polar exploration vessel *Raven* and takes place initially in Hobart and then the Southern Ocean. The Antarctic ice is both beautiful and terrifying, pristine and imprisoning. As life on the *Raven* becomes more claustrophobic, the vast expanses of Antarctica serve to highlight the frailty of man against wild nature, and his arrogance in the face of such a landscape. Its inhuman cold is contrasted with the heat and dust of Ballarat and drought-ridden Weatherly.

- Discuss the various ways in which the setting might operate metaphorically in the narrative.

DURING READING: FRAMINGS OF READING AND RESPONSE

Below are several ways of approaching the reading and analysis of this novel.

GENRE: THE GOTHIC NOVEL

- Gothic fiction describes a story of terror and suspense, with a sinister, grotesque or claustrophobic atmosphere. Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley, William Faulkner are exponents and could provide appropriate further reading.
- Characteristics of the gothic novel include:
 - Characters are often overcome by anger, sorrow, surprise, and especially, terror (e.g. Rouke's outbursts p. 74).
 - Omens, portents, visions, the supernatural or inexplicable events (sightings of the 'Ice Man').
 - There is a mood or tone of impending doom, e.g. the suspicious, brutal death of Jimmy James before the journey begins p. 81.
 - Emotional speeches are frequent, e.g. Rouke's outburst in Hobart and his address to the crew after the death of Ivan, another on p. 169.
 - Use of metonymy – a subtype of metaphor in which the name of one thing stands for a concept to which it is logically related, e.g. rain suggesting grief or sorrow. Gothic fiction uses metonymies to suggest elements of mystery, danger or the supernatural, such as sighs, moans, howls, eerie sounds, footsteps, gusts of wind blowing out lights, crazed laughter, thunder and lightning. In this narrative you might consider the storm, the journal, Antarctica itself (consider Eaton's personification of the icebergs p. 171). Could Eaton's nightmares about which he can remember nothing except 'bone-numbing cold' (p. 108) be metonymic? What about the journal, which seems to exert a sort of power over Eaton?
 - Vocabulary to create atmosphere: 'terror', 'panic', 'shocking', 'anxious', 'furious', 'resentment', 'anger', 'rage', 'alarm', 'astonishment'.
 - 'the sound of the wind . . . became a banshee-wail that set the dogs howling in their kennels' p. 123
- As you read the narrative, monitor and record examples of Eaton's careful construction of the story through these narrative techniques. For instance, right from the beginning he builds a picture of foreboding:
 - 'Reading back over it, there is something about the letter that I find vaguely unsettling, but difficult to express.' p. 10

- '... the encounter had left me feeling quite unsettled and ... it was some time before I was able to get to sleep'. p. 16
- '... it took me several moments to realise what was unsettling about her ... the black ship was floating completely motionless' p. 35
- 'The room was filled with a remarkably pervading chill.' p. 39
- 'odd, leaping shadows' p. 40
- 'claustrophobic passageway ... looking at it I shivered, not just from the cold.' p. 40
- There is the air of mystery that surrounds the expedition. In contrast to his feelings on sailing to England during the war, Downes is 'aware of only a disconcerting sense of dread ... due to Jimmy's death there is a crew of thirteen.' (p. 97)
- Consider how Eaton assembles and describes the cast of characters, e.g. pp. 59–60. What do you think of each character? How might this affect your expectations of narrative events?

NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

This can provide another way of thinking about and analysing *Into White Silence*.

The language of the novel is not a language, but a medley of styles and voices, and it is this that makes it a supremely democratic, anti-totalitarian literary form, in which no ideological or moral position is immune from challenge and contradiction.

David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* p. 129

- Discuss why Eaton chose to tell the story of Rourke's grand folly, not as a straight adventure, but using first person narration which addresses the reader directly, telling of Eaton's own adventures on the Antarctic base, as well as the histories of some of his characters, and also through Downes' diary entries.
- What is the effect of the multiple narrations on the reader? If it had been a straight fictional telling of the fate of the *Raven*, how differently would readers feel about it and respond to it?
- What do you make of his comments on Downes' diaries, that as a writer he is envious of their contents, and is tempted to 'steal' them in a literary sense?
- How much do you trust Eaton, accepting what he is telling you? Do you have any misgivings?
- Downes' entries are chronological but Eaton's commentaries are not. Why? How are they interspersed? What do you make of the juxtapositions?
- What do you think of Eaton's adoption of the conventions of non-fiction: lists of crew of the *Raven*; diagrams of the ship, references to

articles in newspapers and libraries; visits to descendants living in the present day, etc.

- Such a structure allows Eaton to comment on his characters, participate in the story, give an illusion of life and invite the reader's sympathetic interest in them by referring to them as if they are real people. How effective is this?

CHARACTERS

As David Lodge tells us in *The Art of Fiction*, 'In a novel names are never neutral. They always signify, if it is only ordinariness . . . the naming of characters is always an important part of creating them' (p. 37).

- Before reading, discuss how the names of the characters in the list of expedition members on pp. viii–ix suggest characteristics and/or personality, and the associations we make.
- Talk about who are the main players and who are the supporting cast. Track their particular roles and functions through the novel.

WILLIAM DOWNES

- Downes has returned home from distinguished service in France in World War One and is recruited to the expedition by his former comrade, Captain Smythe-Davis. He finds himself caught in the middle of the men and the leadership about which he is increasingly critical, although loyal. Perhaps he is a more complex man than he appears in his diary.
- Consider that we perceive all the events and characters through him and need to look at others' reactions to build up a sense of him. For instance, on p. 154 Alex calls him a 'fool'. Do you agree?
- When Eaton 'visits' Downes' relatives in Ballarat (pp. 134–5), Sam says that William was 'a bit too brave for his own good' and that had he 'followed orders instead of trying to be a hero, they'd all have come home intact'. Do you agree that Downes had a 'need to be a hero'? Can you read between the lines of how others view him?
- Is Downes chosen for the expedition because he is a 'yes man'? (e.g. p 190 he hides behind Smythe-Davis.) Does he lack moral fibre, or is he the loyal soldier who obeys superiors? He did defy Smythe-Davis's order at Bullecourt, so why does he acquiesce to Rourke?
- On p. 221 Lawson calls him 'Rourke's number one lackey'. Do you agree?

EDWARD ROURKE

- From the first meeting there is something obsessive and brooding about him – 'the man's eyes were a hard piercing grey and I could feel him assessing me carefully' says Downes (p. 109).

- Eaton explains his heritage in thorough detail, more thoroughly than any other character. Why is it necessary for the reader to know Rourke's background? Does it make it him more believable? Explain his secrecy and lack of trust in his carefully chosen crew? Suggest that his motives are 'noble'?
- He is a ruthless, volatile figure, who becomes more insane as the journey progresses: mark the stages of his descent into madness. What do you make of his death (p. 384)? Who killed him? Why did Rourke say to Downes 'You're free'? Is this the most awful irony – free *from* what? Free *to do* what?
- How did Rourke persuade reasonable men to come on his crazy journey that was shrouded in secrecy? Was that part of the allure? Was it due to the times, the context? (Might civilian life have seemed 'tame' after war?) What is Eaton suggesting about human nature? Would you have been persuaded by Rourke?

CAPTAIN GEORGE SMYTHE-DAVIS

- There is a long standing friendship between Rourke and Smythe-Davis and yet the latter seems entirely unable or unwilling to exert any influence over the leader.
- Downes takes his cues from Smythe-Davis's reactions to Rourke's brutal and dictatorial behaviour.
- What do you think is his purpose in the novel? What human behaviour does he represent? Find examples of his action and/or lack of action in the novel and discuss possible motivations.

CAPTAIN MCLAREN

- What is his purpose in the story? For instance, he seems to be the voice of reason and reasonableness and serves to heighten Rourke's irrationality and brutality. McLaren is focused on preserving the lives of his crew and adhering to the code of the sea.
- When he is confined to quarters (p. 190) this marks the beginning of the real disaster. Can he be seen as a sort of moral compass? What happens after he dies?

DOCTOR GEORGE DALBY

- He cares for the men on the ship and is one of the only crew members who stands up to Rourke when he sends Downes and Lawson out on to the ice. He threatens to withhold medical treatment from Rourke should he need it. What is his purpose in the story? Why did he join? What does he represent? Could he be seen as a sort of balance to the excesses of Rourke?

DICK RYAN

- Bosun of the ship and clearly not liked or trusted by Downes. He, like Rourke, is ruthless and represents thuggery, perhaps.

PIOTRE AND IVAN PETROKOFF

- Russian dog handlers. Ivan dies tragically early on the voyage. His son, fifteen year old Piotre, never recovers and is cruelly treated by Rourke. Russian-speaking Lawson tries to help the boy but he disappears, and until his body is discovered Piotre personifies the men's fear and paranoia as 'the Ice Man'.
- What does he represent? Consider his age, that language inhibits his ability to communicate and express his feeling to others, his vulnerability, and his emotional volatility.

RANDOLF LAWSON

- The photographer comes to the reader through Downes, who clearly doesn't like him. Do you find yourself agreeing with Downes or feel that he is misreading him?
- Eaton tells us on p. 179 that Lawson remains an enigma to him, telling us if he made up information about him it would be 'pure fiction' so 'all I can give you are the facts'. What do you make of this?

ALEX HOLDSWORTHY

- The meteorologist whom Downes initially appears to misread, and who stays to help with the ill men almost until the end.
- He sees the interplay between the men in terms of the roles of chess pieces, a game in which he always beats Downes. Does this suggest that his view might be more valid than Downes'?

CHARACTER ACTIVITY

- Use the idea of the chess pieces to identify characters. For example, who do you think is the King, Queen, Rook etc.
- Is it possible to 'play' the events of the novel as if it were a chess game?

THEMES

AMBITION

- Ambition with no regard for consequences is a central theme of *Into White Silence*.
- In this novel, Rourke's ambition can be likened to ambition in some of the great Shakespearean tragedies, such as *Macbeth*. Identify points

of comparison, such as ruthlessness leading to multiple deaths; ambition that overrides common sense; obsessive secrecy, etc.

MANKIND AGAINST NATURE

- What defeats the expedition in the end – the forces of nature, or the human factors involved?
- Set up the drama activity of 'Conscience Alley' using the above opposite positions and have one student, as Downes, walk through and decide which is the more powerfully presented case. Have students change sides to present the opposite view and repeat the drama. See if the opinion changes, not only for the student playing Downes, but for all the others.

THE JOURNEY

- The journey is itself is a theme. The physical journey is paralleled with each character's journey. The isolation throws each person on their own resources and tests their moral fibre.
- It asks the reader to consider how the individual copes when civilising influences gradually fall away. Do human beings revert to savagery, as in *Lord of the Flies*?
- When all is taken away what qualities do we find? Who represents them in the novel? Who convinces you the most?

POWER AND AUTHORITY

- On a secondary level the novel can be seen as a study of power and authority, and its effects on people.
- Why do the men aboard the *Raven* accept the authority of Rourke, even when it is apparent that his actions are inhumane and abhorrent to anyone with a semblance of humanity and decency?
- Does accepting such authority take away the need for personal responsibility? Can it be used to hide behind? Think of instances throughout history when atrocities were excused because perpetrators were 'obeying orders'.

IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM

- Lodge's comments about character names can apply equally to the *Raven*. What sort of bird is the *Raven*? What has it traditionally symbolised/been associated with?
- Is the raven an appropriate bird for the gothic landscape Eaton is constructing? How differently would we view the ship if it were called the *Black Swan*?

- Students might like to consider parallels with Edgar Allan Poe's 1845 poem 'The Raven' which has a potent line symbolising the black, macabre aspect of the *Raven*:

*Take thy beak from out of my heart
And take thy form from off my door!*

The black colour of the *Raven* is perhaps symbolic of the black heart of Rourke.

- Does its black colour portend its doom in the pack ice, forever caught and moving with forces beyond its control – a prisoner itself, just as its crew are prisoners to their base or ineffectual natures? Such an image suggests links to Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', where the mariner is condemned to travel the ocean forever.
- Is the ultimate message of the book that man should not have trespassed on that great continent? Consider Eaton's personification of Antarctica:

It is worth remembering, though that Antarctica is, in many ways, the parent of us all; that millennia ago, it was the great continent of Gondwanaland which broke apart and gave birth to Australia, the Americas, Asia – along violent and shuddering labour which took thousands upon thousands of years, and left its mark indelibly upon the entire planet. (p. 369)

- Eaton goes on to describe Antarctica as only a fraction of its former self as the other continents move slowly north. She has become a frozen wasteland 'shrouded . . . in ice fogs and storms' and 'always watching' (p. 369). Yet 'Antarctica has over the years extracted some terrible wages for . . . trespass' (p. 369).
- In the light of this consider the significance of the title.

AFTER READING: RESPONSE ACTIVITIES

WRITING

- You have survived the terrible ordeal in Antarctica and are invited to write about the journey to the Pole for a special issue of the journal *Ice South*, to be published for the December 1923 issue. You will need to adopt the tone and style appropriate to that era and use technical knowledge and vocabulary to show your expertise. You may like to include visual images to add to the realism of your piece.
Useful vocabulary: ice floe, blizzard, snowdrifts, chill, ice dunes, pack ice, hard blue ice, brash ice, pack ice, sea cave, puffs of snow, pressure ridges, rotten ice, open leads, sea ice, etc.
- We perceive all events through the view of Downes. Rewrite an episode through Lawson's point of view (such as when Downes eavesdrops on Alex and Lawson, pp.145–6).
- Using your knowledge of the textual features, language and motifs of gothic fiction, write your own gothic story of a macabre event with supernatural undertones in a stark setting.
- Write the final chapter of Downes' journal once he has left the *Raven* and walks into the white silence. Make sure your 'voice' is consistent with the existing diary entries. What happened in the cave? Can you locate on a map of Antarctica where the final position of the *Raven* would be and how far away the ice cave was?

COURTROOM DRAMA

- Conduct the trial of Edward Rourke for his actions during the expedition to the South Pole in 1922.
- Appoint a defence counsel who has to defend Rourke's actions, and a prosecutor (and their appropriate court supports). Class members can be called as witnesses – as the various men who were present on the *Raven* – or as expert/character witnesses, etc.
- The class members appoint a jury who will determine Rourke's fate.
- The teacher can be the Judge to ensure proper court procedures will be followed and pronounce a sentence should that be appropriate.
- Students will need to go back into the book to identify pivotal events, witnesses etc and are reminded that most events are from Downes' point of view.

MULTIMEDIA

- Have students work in groups to do the following:
 - Using either PowerPoint, iMovie, Movie Maker, Photo Story or Comic Life, produce a three-minute documentary entitled *Living with Pack Ice*. It can be images and music only (choice of music

is critical) or it can incorporate sound effects, text, voiceovers etc.

- The class is to have a mini Film Festival and winners will be peer assessed according to class-developed criteria.
- Filmmakers will be given four minutes to introduce their documentaries.

DEBATE

- Form two teams of three students each. Your topic is 'Antarctic exploration is a violation of the sacred'. Divide teams into Affirmative and Negative. Use the novel as a primary source document.
- **Affirmative planning**
 - First speaker: define topic (key words and their meanings) in a way that best suits your case.
 - Introduce team theme and other speakers' topics, as well as your own.
 - Make arguments to cover the entire length of the speech (first speaker affirmative has no rebuttal).
 - Third speaker can only introduce one new point in addition to their overall summary of the team's case and rebuttal of the opposition's argument.
 - Second and first speaker should have two or three points per speech which need to be developed and linked back to the team theme/case.

Negative Planning

- All speakers have to rebut the opposition's argument.
- Third speaker for the negative does not introduce new points.
- Plan for the event that the affirmative team may define the topic into an unlikely argument. Be prepared to redefine and correct opposition's definition.
- First speaker must state whether or not the team agrees with the opposition's definition.

ROLE-PLAY

- Eight sailors have arrived safely back in Hobart after the epic voyage on board the *Raven*. All have been invited to take part in a forum at a public meeting at the Hobart Town Hall, to speak personally on the topic of 'How we survived'. There is much interest and excitement about this event. Media deals will be signed for story features and books.
 - Create and display posters (in the style of the 1920s) advertising it. (This may include images of the sailors.)
 - Allocate the following roles to class members:
 - Edward Rourke
 - William Downes

Dick Ryan
Alex Holdsworthy
Captain George Smythe-Davis
Doctor George Dalby
Captain James McLaren
Randolph Lawson

- Designate remaining class members as media and members of the general public. Invite them to ask questions.

TELEVISION INTERVIEW

- You are the explorer James Housemann (consider what your name suggests about your character) and you have been invited onto either the *7.30 Report/Lateline/Rove Live/Enough Rope/Oprah* to talk about your discovery of the cave where William Downes' journal was found.
- One classmate will act as Kerry O'Brien/Tony Jones/Rove McManus/Andrew Denton/Oprah Winfrey and will probe the circumstances of your remarkable find.
- The class might like to do more than one interview to compare styles, information revealed etc.

POETRY WRITING

Eaton's writing is poetic and often uses personification. Respond to the following example by writing a series of images (either in the form of a cinquain, haiku, tanka or free verse) based on the beauty and isolation of the Antarctic wilderness:

. . . I amuse myself with the notion that the Raven is breathing around me; the occasional creaking groan of the ice shifting against the hull only adds to this impression. Most mornings, the walls of the 'tween deck are slick with a thin layer of frozen condensation from the breathing of the men sleeping in there and, during the evenings, the hollow echo of wind down in the funnel can sound something like distant heavy breathing.

It is as though all of us live in this steel and wood womb, and from it we emerge every so often into a bright, harsh and beautiful world and, when we do, the first breaths we draw feel like those of a newborn. (pp. 318–9)

LITERARY ANALYSIS

- How does Eaton position readers to accept the authorial point of view? What strategies does he use in the narrative?
- What do you think is Eaton's position in terms of Antarctic exploration?

- What evidence in the novel suggests the author's personal opinions on exploration, environmentalism and conservation? Do you think it is possible to separate out Anthony-Eaton-the-author and Anthony-Eaton-the-character in this regard?

FURTHER READING

Any of the texts listed in the author's bibliography (pp 392–3)

Tim Curran, *Hive*

Geraldine McCaughrean, *The White Darkness*

Michael Morpurgo, *Alone on a Wide Wide Sea*