

TOURMALINE

First published by Macdonald 1963, Republished Text Classics 2015.

Tourmaline is an isolated Western Australian mining town - a place of heat and dust, as allegorical as it is real. Out of the desert staggers a young diviner, Michael Random, offering salvation to this parched town. The once comatose community is indeed stirred to life, by hate as much as by love, and its people find salvation neither in water nor gold.

<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/694677.Tourmaline>



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Abridged Review by Lisa Hill (audio book).

Randolph Stow's fourth novel wasn't well received after the great success of *To the Islands*. In *To the Islands* Stow's central character struggles with the metaphysics of the familiar Christian religion in conflict with ancient Aboriginal spiritual beliefs but apparently in *Tourmaline* the novel juxtaposes Revivalist religion with Taoism – about which I know nothing at all and so it all went completely over my head! Presumably that's how most of Stow's reading public reacted as well...

But the first chapter was wonderful. It was written in 1963, but it seems a story very much for our time in some ways. It takes place in a dying outback town called tourmaline after some kind of nuclear catastrophe. The town is depopulated, there are not children at all except possibly in the Aboriginal camp – but the White inhabitants don't know about that for sure since they have so little contact with the indigenous people. These townsfolk are marooned in a hostile landscape wracked by drought. The gold mine which brought the town into existence is all worked out, and there's nothing to do except argue and drink.

Into this sad microcosm of a society a stranger in extremis arrives. He has been rescued from the road by a passing truckie and hovers between life and death for a few days. Nursed by the locals, the stranger recovers, and turns out to be water diviner.

Against his will, the diviner becomes the town's hope for salvation. The drought, for some, has become a sign of God's anger. As ever in Stow's stories, the Aborigines of Tourmaline are fringe-dwellers, ever-present but not part of the town. They have adopted the Christian religion and so, with the simple prayers they know, they beseech the lord to bring water back to the town while the townsfolk hail Michael Random as the saviour who can bring prosperity and a future back to their miserable lives.

But Michael wants to be a savior of a different sort, and he brings his Revivalist Christian rantings to the town as well. Tom Spring is not impressed and provokes arguments with the more credulous inhabitants. From this point on the religious arguments became more and more confusing and I lost the plot, not recovering it until Random succeeded in finding a new seam of gold. After that he is pressured to find water but the people did in vain in the place where he said there was an underground spring. He ends up going back into the desert from which he so mysteriously came.

I'm still bemused by Stow's intent in contrasting these two religions. However Roderick Heath has written a review which makes me think that if I read a print version, I might have enjoyed it more.

Source: <http://anzlitlovers.com/2011/06/17/tourmaline>

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Review by Maria Nitsolas

Randolph Stow's 1962 classic *Tourmaline* is set in the future and despite its unlikely setting, manages to convey relevant themes which resonate even in today's modern society.

The apocalyptic tale is set in a community in outback Western Australia which is described in excruciating terms as a dying, waterless town. "I say we have a bitter heritage... and if I call it heritage I do not mean we are free in it."

The townsfolk seem resigned to their fate, although a few still remember the Tourmaline of yesteryear; a town of abundant water and blooming flowers. The narrator is such a person, but he frustratingly remains a faceless character. We know that he is one of the town's elders, referred to as "The Law", but that is all we know and he forever remains a mystery woven into a story which thrives on the unknown.

The arrival of a badly injured man instantly captures the attention of the townspeople. They are strangely compelled to save him, a task that is undertaken with complete reverence. When the man who calls himself Michael Ransom, eventually reveals he is a diviner and that he is confident water can be found in Tourmaline, his reputation reaches almost mythical proportions.

There is no shortage of colourful characters in the story, from the brutish Kestrel who openly opposes the diviner, to Byrnie the faithful disciple and Deborah who falls in love with the mysterious Christ-like figure.

The religious connotations are almost dizzying and when Random begins to spread the word of God to a willing audience, Stow manages to throw a curveball. Is Kestrel really as villainous as we think for opposing Random? Does Random truly have the town's best interests at heart? When we start to dig for gold rather than for water, questions are raised about his true intentions.

There are moments when you feel the story reach a crescendo, only for it to crash back down again. The tale could have gone a number of ways, but instead of allowing it to blaze, Stow prefers to rein it in until it peters out like an abandoned campfire.

This however, does not take away from the message, as Stow's atmospheric prose transports the reader to another time and place. We become invested in the town's fate and hope against hope that Tourmaline can eventually be restored to its former glory.

Source: www.nswwc.org.au/2015/10/book-review-tourmaline-by-randolph-stow

