

# Finding their place in society: the characters of cloudstreet



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It doesn't take very long for your life to change forever. The characters of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* are a testament to this, most significantly, Oriel and Quick Lamb, two individuals who had found their place in society. Oriel was the wife of an ANZAC, a farm person, and a "Godfearing" woman. Quick was admittedly the inferior to his brother in looks, intelligence, and likability, a fact that he accepted contently. Following the event of Fish's revival and subsequent disability, and the move from farm-life to the city, both Oriel and Quick are geographically and emotionally displaced. Oriel struggles to fulfill her role as a mother to a child that doesn't recognize her, and to feel at home in a house that does not accept her. Quick experiences difficulty in overcoming his survivor's guilt and in finding a location that provides the same sense of comfort that the farm once did. Quick and Oriel begin their personal journeys to understand the ever-changing world around them and their place within it, an enduring need that plagues them over the twenty-year course of the saga. It is to a great extent that Winton explores this.

Oriel Lamb's need to find her place in society begins in her youth. After a fire decimated her family and her home, she suffers the same survivor's guilt that plagues Quick: "Oh how she hated to be a survivor, to be left... she was a leftover from some other time..." The word leftover is particularly powerful within this quote because it exemplifies the lack of connection that Oriel had to the world around her, and this continues through to her adulthood, after Fish's death and revival. Once brought back to life by his mother, Fish is unable to recognize her. Oriel's motherhood to Fish ultimately disappears, becoming only memories. This event displaces her immensely, as it is clear

that she can no longer belong to the life she once had, and it spurs within her a need to find her place in society once more.

As the Lamb family make the difficult move from the farm to the city, Oriel struggles to feel a geographical sense of belonging. Winton characterizes the hard-working mother as the “sergeant-major” of the successful Cloudstreet shop, which emotionally detaches her from the home itself, and this is further demonstrated when she moves her belongings from the house into a tent in the backyard, in an attempt to find a sense of personal place.

The darkness from Cloudstreet’s past that had kept the stubborn Oriel from fully connecting to the home, however, is finally released with the birth of Quick and Rose’s son, Harry. Oriel begins to soften, allowing herself to feel a sense of belonging to the place that had been her residence for twenty years, stating figuratively that she “found herself needing the walls to hold her upright”. In an effort to convince Sam not to sell the house, she spoke in a tone of endearment, “you might say I’ve come to love this awful old house... We’re halfway to belongin here”. This quote suggests that Oriel has found her place in society, but in fact, it is a need that endures. Oriel remains in the tent until the carefully constructed cyclical end of the saga. With the passing of the child that she couldn’t be a mother to, Oriel is set free, able to move on from her past and connect fully to her home, Cloudstreet, and the people within it: “The little boxy woman and the big blowsy woman folded end to end till the tent was a parcel... then they went back inside the big old house whose door stood open...”

Quick begins his process of searching for belonging young, as his mother was, and before he even arrives at Cloudstreet, his old home and self nostalgically referred to as “ his old life”. After having such a close connection with his brother, losing part of him when “ not all of Fish Lamb had come back” only intensified the effect of Fish’s death upon the guilt-ridden Quick, and magnified his struggle to find a sense of place. This struggle is only further exemplified in the move to Cloudstreet: “ In the new house, Quick has a room of his own for the first time in his life, and he’s not real sure how he likes it.” The monosyllabic rhythm of the line emphasizes monotony and the lack of emotion and connection that Quick is feeling in regard to his new physical situation.

Quick eventually decides to leave Cloudstreet in search of the familiar comfort that his farm life had once provided. Winton dedicates many episodes to Quick’s life in the bush, indicating that much has happened and time has passed, but the distance from Fish doesn’t eradicate the accountability he holds, or allow him to feel a sense of place. It is with a figurative statement that this is clearly defined: “ he was miserable, lost, drifting, tired and homesick as a dog.” Drawn back to Cloudstreet to find reconciliation, Quick finally recognizes a sense of physical belonging, as the house assumes ownership of him, “ Cloudstreet had a hold on him”.

At this stage of the novel, Winton has developed Quick’s character considerably. Quick has an understanding of who he is and where he belongs, which is significant because it draws attention to the fact that he still has not yet found his place in society. To fulfill that enduring need, Quick continued to search. It is not until he discovers the lifeless body of a young  
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boy in a river that his story comes full circle, and he is able to let go of the guilt that had been tormenting him since Fish: “ that boy he’d been... trying not to weep over in front of a crowd. He’d seen himself, Harry, Fish in that dead boy’s face.” After this incident, Quick realizes “ There’s no monsters, only people like us.” This liberation allows him to move on with his life, and find his sense of place in society, within his family and at his home of Cloudstreet, concluded metaphorically, “ Quick felt safe here, he felt within his boundaries.”

Within Cloudstreet, Tim Winton has characterized Oriel and Quick Lamb as both a parallel and a foil to each other. The idleness of Quick juxtaposes the absolute order of Oriel. Oriel’s stoic front contrasts Quick’s sensitivity. These two individuals, however, share an enduring need to find their place in society, one that stems from, and ends with, Fish. Winton explores this greatly within his episodic saga, the cyclical nature of it drawing attention to the reality that lives can change in a matter of seconds... the seconds it takes Fish Lamb to die.