

Past the shallows: the power of nature and loss



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Past the Shallows by Favel Parrett is a novel that details the experiences of a family as they struggle to survive in the harsh environments of the southern Tasmanian coast. Each chapter is a vignette that provides a snapshot of the family's life as told through the perspective of Harry or Miles, who are brothers living under the rule of their father, a violent alcoholic. Alternating in perspective gives the author a chance to explore how events affect people in different and personal ways. For example, as the character of Miles is explored, the impact that the losses of his uncle, brother, innocence, and childhood had on him are brought into sharp focus. These losses make him regard the power of nature with a mixture of fear and awe, a potent blend that makes the reader very conscious of how the power of nature shapes the family's life in the same way it shapes the coastlines that are "worn by the water and by the wind and the rain until they were gone from sight" (10).

Miles' relationship with the power of nature is complex, and this is shown through juxtaposition in the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Miles is portrayed as someone who "knew the water. He could feel it. And he knew not to trust it" (10), but on page 43 he runs to meet Joe who is "waiting there for him when the boat came in. Waiting in the orange van," (43) to take Miles surfing. Pages 134-135 details a surfing scene where Miles says that he "lived for this, for these moments when everything stops except your heart beating and time bends and ripples - moves past your eyes frame by frame and you feel beyond time and before time and no one can touch you" (135). But even when Miles is joyously surfing, he remains aware of the power of nature. This is shown through quotes such as "He felt the lines punch hard underneath him, pick him up like he was just a leaf, a piece of

seaweed" (134) and " this wave was going to take him whether he liked it or not" (135). These quotes characterise the ocean, a technique that is first used when Miles goes on the boat and sees " places where the water was angry" (10). By the end of the book, Miles seems to have a spiritual connection with the water and feels as though he is " part of the deep water, part of the waves. Part of the rocks and reefs along the shore" (225).

The losses Miles has suffered are a large part of why he is so aware of the power of nature. For example, he lost his Uncle Nick when he out to check on the boat " and they never found him. Not one bit. Not his beanie. Not his boots. Not his bones" (8). The punchy alliteration in this quote helps emphasise the emotions that the loss of his uncle evoked in Miles, but it also affected Miles in ways far greater than just emotional distress. " Just like his brother before him, he must fill the gap Uncle Nick left" (7) on the boat, and this daunting job has contributed greatly to a loss of innocence. Uncle Nick's death is also a weight that the Dad carries and he says " he'd never forgive himself" (8). The guilt makes the Dad a cruel man, and his violence forces Miles to grow up quickly. The loss of Mile's childhood is shown through a flashback when he is staying at George's house and realises " he knew that smell. It was the smell of Granddad's house, the smell of rich, sweet pipe tobacco. And Miles could see Granddad sitting by the fire listening to the radio, his eyes almost closed, slowly puffing on his pipe. And he was there too. Just a small boy, playing on the floor with his Matchbox cars" (154). When Miles' brother Joe tells him he's leaving and starts to cry, Miles is indignant and thinks " he didn't have to live with Dad and work on the boat. He didn't have to look after Harry" (147). This emphasises for the reader how

much responsibility is placed on Miles' shoulders as a result of his lost innocence.

Favel Parrett's *Past the Shallows* uses techniques such as alternating perspectives, juxtaposition, personification, alliteration, and flashbacks to emphasise how loss and the power of nature can shape someone's life. Parrett uses the character of Miles to link these themes together and impact the reader in an emotional and relatable way. By focusing these themes on one character, Parrett gives the reader a chance to really see how factors such as these can shape and change lives in unique ways as they affect people differently.