



ELEMENTAL

by Amanda Curtin

Some topics to consider while reading *Elemental*:

- Friendship between women
- Women's work
- Love and family
- Superstition
- Sacrifice and consequences
- The nature of heroism

Nearing the end of her life, Meggie Tulloch takes up her pen to write a story for her granddaughter. It begins in the first years of the twentieth century, in a place where howling winds spin salt and sleet sucked up from icefloes. A place where lives are ruled by men, and men by the witchy sea. A place where the only thing lower than a girl in the order of things is a clever girl with accursed red hair. A place schooled in keeping secrets. Moving from the north-east of Scotland to the Shetland Isles to Fremantle, Australia, *Elemental* is a novel about the life you make from the life you are given.



About Amanda Curtin

Amanda Curtin is a writer, book editor and Adjunct Lecturer at Edith Cowan University. Her first novel, *The Sinkings*, was published in 2008 and a short story collection, *Inherited*, in 2011, both to critical acclaim. She has been granted writing residencies in Australia, Scotland, Ireland and the United States, and the rest of the time resides in Perth, Western Australia.

www.amandacurtin.com

Discussion Questions

- 1 'They used to talk a lot about heroes and courage back then.' Do we use the term 'hero' solely to make others feel better about sacrifice and the senseless loss of life during war? Is Cooper a hero?
- 2 '*That's just superstition, that is. Miss Birnie says superstition is the friend of an ignorant mind.*' Do superstitious beliefs still have a place in the modern world?
- 3 Discuss Magnus and Meggie's relationship.
- 4 '*Where I come from, isn't any shame in married women workin', I told him. Everyone does. Everyone has to.*' Has this attitude to married women who work changed much in Australia since the early-twentieth century? What about our attitude to working mothers?
- 5 How well does Amanda Curtin evoke the novel's settings? Have you travelled in Scotland or the Shetland Isles? Had you previously heard of the Castlemaine Brewery, Uglie Land, or the Mills & Ware biscuit factory in Fremantle?
- 6 'She always thinks of her grandmother when she smells salt. Grunnie's skin seemed scented with it, clean and pure like the sea.' What smells, sounds, textures, or tastes trigger memories from your own childhood?
- 7 How did you react to the deaths of Kitta, Steven, and Brukie's Sandy? Should the other characters have intervened and saved them or were their untimely deaths tragically inevitable?
- 8 'Would she have responded differently, squeamishly, if she'd read her grandmother's love story as a brash, careless twenty-one-year-old?' In your opinion, does someone need to be of a certain age in order to be told something painful or private about their family history?
- 9 The first three parts of *Elemental*, 'Water', 'Air' and 'Earth', are narrated by Meggie, while the coda, 'Fire', is told from the perspectives of Avril and Laura. How did the shift in point of view affect your reading of the novel? Does the coda provide closure to Meggie's story?
- 10 'If we don't speak the names of our dead, it's as though they never were.' What did you think of Meggie's story? Does recording the lives of our predecessors enable their memory to live on? Should some things be left unsaid or unrecorded, for instance, family shames or secrets?

Q. What did you write as a child?

When I was a child I wrote my will on a sheet of kitchen paper, invoking the high melodrama and gushing sentimentality of Amy in *Little Women*. I very carefully divided my worldly goods, and wrote each lucky heir a tear-jerking message. I remember bequeathing ‘all my money’ to my father—probably because I couldn’t imagine him wanting a dress or a bluebird bracelet. My school account with the Commonwealth Bank wouldn’t have been much of a windfall for him.

Q. Who inspired you to become a writer?

It was not one person but a group of women in a writers group based at Edith Cowan University in the late 1990s. Each of them was brilliant, inspiring, and I held them in awe and just hoped I could keep up with them. Everlasting thanks to Carmel Macdonald-Graeme, Donna Mazza, Annabel Smith and Danielle Wood.

Q. What are your favourite books?

My favourite books include *Sixty Lights* by Gail Jones, *The Travel Writer* by Simone Lazaroo, *The Winter Vault* by Anne Michaels, *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham, *Perfume* by Patrick Süskind, *The Shipping News* by Annie Proulx, *Tirra Lirra by the River* by Jessica Anderson, and *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton.

Q. Where do you write your books?

I write in my backyard, in a studio that was once the store-room for a shop. But I wrote much of *Elemental* elsewhere: in a heritage cottage overlooking Mt Wellington in Hobart; in a castle near Edinburgh in a snow-bound Scottish winter; in a glorious stately home in Annaghmakerrig, Ireland, populated by writers, artists, sculptors, dancers, musicians and filmmakers.

Q. When do you write?

I write when I can, and try, when I can, to carve out blocks of time for full-time writing. I often use the mornings for research or for editing the previous day’s work because I’m at my best creatively in the afternoon, or sometimes very late at night.

Q. What are you working on at the moment?

At the moment, I’m writing a novella set in Paris.

Q. What do you do to overcome writer’s block?

When I’m stuck for an idea, word, or phrase, I have a cup of Earl Grey tea. (I drink many cups of Earl Grey.)

Q. What do you do when you’re not writing?

When I’m not writing, I’m reading, thinking, researching, editing, travelling, eating chocolate (I eat a lot of chocolate).