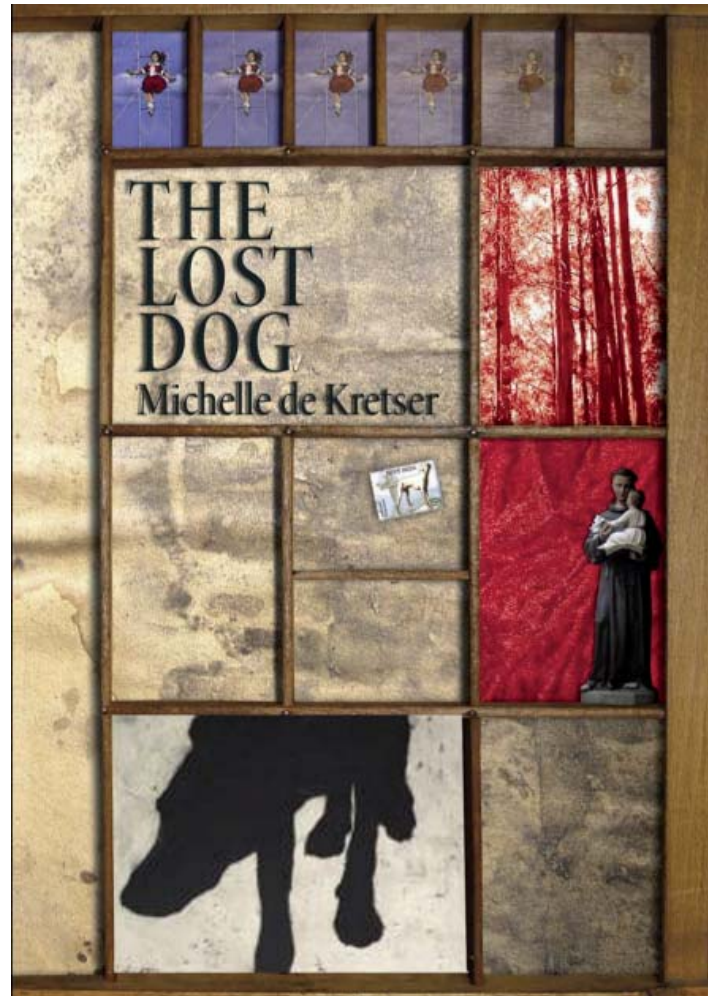


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

Contents: About the book (2) About Michelle de Kretser (2)
On Writing the Book (2) Reviews (3)
Suggested points for discussion (4) Awards (4) Further reading (4)

About the Book

Filled with luminous writing and startlingly wise observations, this is also a funny, moving and beautiful contemporary Australian love story and a juicy mystery all at once.

Tom Loxley is holed up in a remote bush shack trying to finish his book on Henry James when his beloved dog goes missing. What follows is a triumph of storytelling, as *The Lost Dog* loops back and forth in time to take the reader on a spellbinding journey into worlds far removed from the present tragedy.

Set in present-day Australia and mid-twentieth century India, here is a haunting, layered work that brilliantly counterpoints new cityscapes and their inhabitants with the untamed, ancient continent beyond. With its atmosphere of menace and an acute sense of the unexplained in any story, it illuminates the collision of the wild and the civilised, modernity and the past, home and exile.

The Lost Dog is a mystery and a love story, an exploration of art and nature, a meditation on ageing and the passage of time. It is a book of wonders: a gripping contemporary novel which examines the weight of history as well as different ways of understanding the world.

About the Michelle de Kretser

Michelle de Kretser was born in Sri Lanka and emigrated to Australia when she was 14 years old. She was educated in Melbourne and Paris. Michelle has worked as a university tutor, an editor and a book reviewer. She is the author of two other novels, *The Rose Grower* and *The Hamilton Case*.

On Writing the Book

In 2001, my dog Gus, a 12-year-old English setter cross, went missing in the Gippsland bush. At the time, I was still working on my previous novel, *The Hamilton Case*, and it never occurred to me to consider the wrenching experience of losing Gus as a springboard for fiction. But as time passed, the experience began to recede from reality and acquire a literary shape. I believe this is a necessary process for translating life into fiction; at least in my case. So although what happened to Gus was the seed from which *The Lost Dog* grew, almost every aspect of his story was transformed in the writing of the novel. It became a way into thinking generally about different kinds of loss, and how people – and indeed nations – are haunted by absences: by what we have lost, and what we wish to be rid of, and what we don't even realise we no longer possess.

I write slowly, and rewrite a lot, and *The Lost Dog* was no exception. I've lost count of the number of drafts it went through in the thirty-odd months it took to write. I admire the purity of minimalism, but in life, as in my work, I am no minimalist. I have always loved the kind of room that contains many disparate and intriguing objects, and that

is the condition to which my novels aspire. I would like to offer readers patterned writing rich in anecdotes, images, characters, sentences, ideas; the kind of stimulating and pleasurable clutter that asks to be lingered over and turned in the hand, within a fiction that takes on different aspects as time passes and the light changes.

Reviews

'It is a wonderfully written novel that is often funny, but, despite its sharp critical intelligence, it is not at all cynical.'

– James Ley, *The Age*.

'*The Lost Dog* is ... a richly complicated book, in which the author seeks to recast Henry James' ambiguity, his dramas of irresolution, in postmodern terms. Where James explored the enigma of character, de Kretser explores the equally enigmatic categories of ethnicity, sexuality, gender ...' – Geordie Williamson, *ABR*.

'*The Lost Dog* is a haunting, beautifully written work that brilliantly counterpoints new cityscapes and their inhabitants with the wild, ancient continent beyond ... a gripping contemporary novel which explores the weight of history as well as different ways of seeing and comprehending the world.' – *Readings* review.

'This book is so engaging and thought-provoking and its subject matter so substantial that the reader notices only in passing how funny it is...Michelle de Kretser is one of those rare writers whose work balances substance with style. Her writing is very witty, but it also goes deep, informed at every point by a benign and far-reaching intelligence.' – Kerryn Goldsworthy, *Sydney Morning Herald*

'This is a stunning book, each sentence handcrafted with precision, each theme hauntingly explored...de Kretser weaves a magical web, juxtaposing continents, attitudes to literature and art, the wildness of the natural world with the empty heart of cityscapes. She highlights the fragility and selectiveness of memory and contrasts the brash soul of 21st-century living with the poetry of what we have lost. What emerges is an achingly personal perspective on history. And it is a joy to read such gloriously paced, beautifully written prose,' – *Good Reading*

'It's quite an achievement; with de Kretser's trademark densely textured language, rich visual imagery and depth of description making *The Lost Dog* a delight to savour as well as a tale to ponder.' – David Gaunt, co-owner of Gleebooks, Sydney.

Some Suggested Points for Discussion

- ☞ The central character of *The Lost Dog* is Tom Loxley, an academic of Anglo-Indian background, who develops a relationship with Nelly Zhang, an artist of Chinese ancestry. What does the author have to say of cross-cultural identities?
- ☞ The lost dog and the subsequent search for it haunts both Tom and the reader. Even when the reader is lost in another narrative strand, there is no escape from a niggling sense of panic about the dog and where he is. Consider some of the other depictions of loss in the book, and way other characters are haunted by absences.
- ☞ What does *The Lost Dog* have to say about our relationship to The Wild, being both nature in a general sense and the animals we share our lives with, both domestically as loved pets and as soul-less 'products' for humans?
- ☞ This is also a book about 'seeing' - the world, art, ourselves, other people, the everyday, the otherworldly. Are we losing our ability to really 'see' things as they are? Have we ever had it?
- ☞ *The Lost Dog* illuminates the collision of the wild and the civilised, modernity and the past, home and exile. How are these ambiguities articulated and explored?
- ☞ The relationship between Tom and his elderly mother is beautifully drawn - he is frustrated by her and even by her infirmity but also realises that he owes everything to her. What does the final scene of the book say about what Tom has learned about himself and his mother by the end of the book?
- ☞ How do the Henry James epigraph at the beginning of the book and the Rilke quote at the end contribute to your understanding of de Kretser's intention in *The Lost Dog*?

Awards

Winner of the NSW Premier's Literary Awards Book of the Year 2008

Winner of the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction 2008

Shortlisted for the ALS Gold Medal 2008

Shortlisted for the 2008 Commonwealth Writer's Prize (Best Book)

Further reading

The Rose Grower, Michelle de Kretser (Vintage, 2000)

The Hamilton Case by Michelle de Kretser (Vintage, 2004)

Ghost Stories of Henry James, by Henry James (Wordsworth Classics)