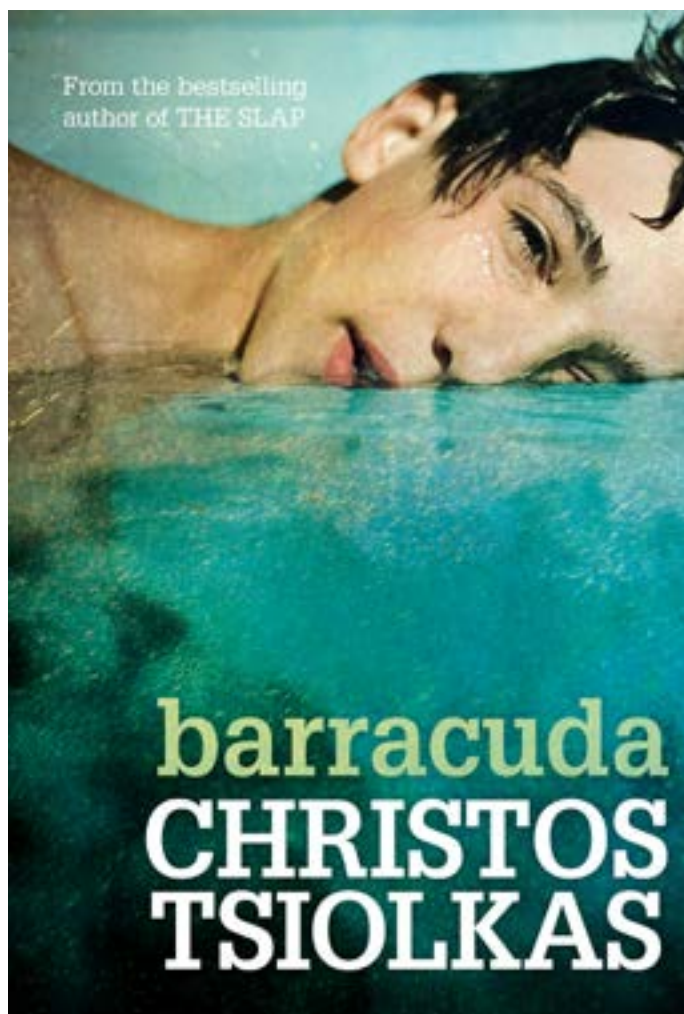


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

He asked the water to lift him, to carry him, to avenge him. He made his muscles shape his fury, made every stroke declare his hate. And the water obeyed; the water would give him his revenge. No one could beat him, no one came close.

His whole life, Danny Kelly's only wanted one thing: to win Olympic gold. Everything he's ever done—every thought, every dream, every action—takes him closer to that moment of glory, of vindication, when the world will see him for what he is: the fastest, the strongest and the best. His life has been a preparation for that moment.

His parents struggle to send him to the most prestigious private school with the finest swimming program; Danny loathes it there and is bullied and shunned as an outsider, but his coach is the best and knows Danny is, too, better than all those rich boys, those pretenders. Danny's win-at-all-cost ferocity gradually wins favour with the coolest boys—he's Barracuda, he's the psycho, he's everything they want to be but don't have the guts to get there. He's going to show them all.

He would be first, everything would be alright when he came first, all would be put back in place. When he thought of being the best, only then did he feel calm.

Should we teach our children to win, or should we teach them to live? How do we make and remake our lives? Can we atone for our past? Can we overcome shame? And what does it mean to be a good person?

A searing and provocative novel by the acclaimed author of the international bestseller *The Slap*, *Barracuda* is an unflinching look at modern Australia, at our hopes and dreams, our friendships, and our families. It is about class and sport and politics and migration and education. It contains everything a person is: family and friendship and love and work, the identities we inhabit and discard, the means by which we fill the holes at our centre. *Barracuda* is brutal, tender and blazingly brilliant; everything we have come to expect from this fearless vivisection of our lives and world.

About the author

Christos Tsiolkas is the author of four novels: *Loaded*, which was made into the feature film, *Head-On*, *The Jesus Man* and *Dead Europe*, which won the 2006 Age Fiction Prize and the 2006 Melbourne Best Writing Award. He won Overall Best Book in the Commonwealth Writers' Prize 2009, was shortlisted for the 2009 Miles Franklin Literary Award, longlisted for the 2010 Man Booker Prize and won the Australian Literary Society Gold Medal for his novel, *The Slap*, which was also announced as the 2009 Australian Booksellers Association and Australian Book Industry Awards Books of the Year. He is also a playwright, essayist and screen writer. He lives in Melbourne.

The author, Christos Tsiolkas, on writing *Barracuda*

"You remember Nick D'Arcy? I heard the story and I misheard it. I thought 'This is just another working-class kid who didn't fit into the whole sporting milieu'. I read up and I realized that's not the real story. Then I thought, 'Well, I'm a novelist: I can write that story'. And that's what I did." - *Weekend West* interview October 13

"My parents were both migrants from Greece and were both factory workers. We had a working-class life. Danny getting a scholarship to that high school was like my going to Melbourne University. Both were making breaks with that working-class life." - *Daily Telegraph* interview, October 13

"Sport is our obsession. For a writer or an artist, it doesn't matter how successful you are, you're always thinking either you're no good or you're a fake and you're going to be caught out. Whereas it seems to me that the successful sports person, the first across the line, knows they're the best. I admire, I envy, the surety of that. I also wanted to know what it would be like to have a dream, to be that obsessive about something and to have that taken away from you." - *Weekend West* interview October 13

"[Anger] is an undercurrent in all my writing... Part of my masculinity has been about how you deal with anger. Those savage feelings you can have as a man and the damage that can do. I've been fortunate because one of the spaces where I can deal with that has been in my writing. Danny doesn't have that. He had his sporting ability but once that is taken away from him there is no space for him and he has to learn how to deal with that anger, that fury." - *Weekend West* interview October 13

Reviews & Quotes

'The beautiful ugliness that is Australia has found its chronicler in Tsiolkas, and we know ourselves better and are the richer for it. Our world has been Tsiolkasised. On the strength of *Barracuda*, there is not a more important writer working in Australia today.' - Martin Shaw, *Bookseller & Publisher*

'Tsiolkas is a true storyteller and a hundred sentences could be plucked from the text to demonstrate his genius for establishing place, mood and character in a handful of words.' - David Marr, *Sydney Morning Herald*

'In *Barracuda*, Christos Tsiolkas once again holds up a mirror to the deepest insecurities and most dearly held dreams of middle-class Australia, delivering a searing exploration of failure, and how to come back from it.' - *Readings*

'Tsiolkas explores the extremism of our mainstream and brings us to an awareness of the animal urges that trouble our civilised hearts. As such it's vital.' - *Weekend Australian*

For discussion



In what ways does Danny's dream affect the lives of his family? What sacrifices are made and at what cost to each of the family members?

- ☞ In what ways does *Barracuda* articulate and challenge notions of the Australian identity? How do the characters both reflect and deflect any sense of national identity? Consider the book's setting against the backdrop of the Sydney Olympic Games, and the view of the nation from both at home and abroad.
- ☞ In writing *Barracuda*, Tsiolkas invokes a split narrative, alternating between first and third person narration, backwards and forwards momentum. What affect does this narrative device have on the way the reader experiences the unfolding of Danny Kelly's story?
- ☞ Throughout the book, issues of class in Australia frequently collide. How do the characters in *Barracuda* struggle with their own sense of class identification? Particularly consider the class conflicts between Danny and his father, Demet and Clyde, and Danny and his classmates.
- ☞ What is the role of literature and music in the lives of both Danny and his parents? What do they represent for these characters?
- ☞ 'A life lived in and only through shame, it clings to him, it rises like the sun within him every morning, and it is there waiting when he sleeps.' (p.412)
- ☞ How does the feeling of shame manifest itself in the character of Danny? How does it shape his life and affect his sense of self? In what ways does it define his relationships with the other characters in the book?
- ☞ Consider the journey that Danny and his mother take to visit Stephanie's family. What significance does this experience hold for both the characters? And what do Dan and his mother have to learn and teach each other about the importance of family and forgiveness?
- ☞ 'I have to learn to breathe again.' This sentiment is repeated throughout the book as Dan attempts to piece his life back together. What do you think this means to Dan? What stages does the character move through in his attempt to reconcile his sense of self?
- ☞ Discuss the significance of Martin Taylor as a figure in Danny's life. Consider his role in shaping both Danny's past and future.
- ☞ What role does Dan's job assisting persons with brain injuries play in supporting his own recovery? In particular, consider his relationship with his cousin Dennis.
- ☞ In the final scenes of the book we discover a shared feeling between Coach and Danny that they have failed one another. How does this sense of failure carry them throughout both their lives? Is there any sense of resolution between the two men?
- ☞ '...none of it could settle the question that had mattered most to him since he'd found himself moored on dry land: was he – Danny Kelly, Psycho Kelly, Danny the Greek, Dino, Dan, Barracuda – was he a good man?' (p.508). This question is posed by Danny in the final pages of the book. Looking back at the life of this character, what is your opinion?

Suggested further reading

The Slap – Christos Tsiolkas

The Jesus Man – Christos Tsiolkas

Loaded – Christos Tsiolkas

Dead Europe – Christos Tsiolkas

Jasper Jones – Craig Silvey

Looking for Alibrandi – Marlina Marchetta

The Life – Malcolm Knox

How the Light Gets In – MJ Hyland

Suggested viewing

Anabel Crabb interviews Christos Tsiolkas on ABC TV 7:30 Report, 17/10/2013

Interview and transcript:

<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2013/s3871583.htm>