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# Literary son spawns winning family saga

**S**ALT rain that falls sideways, scenes from a Gothic apocalypse, soap opera in the style of big family stories, post-modernist construction and deconstruction of landscapes and magic realism are just a few of the ingredients in the 1988 Australian/Vogel Award winning novel, *Oceana Fine*, by Tom Flood.

Winning with his first novel, Flood admits "was a bit of luck. I didn't have to get all those horrible knock backs and rejection slips".

A member of a leading Australian literary family, Flood's genealogy is thick with a cluster of literary branches, both creative, academic and discursive.

His mother, the playwright, poet and novelist Dorothy Hewett, was once described as a polemicist and La Belle Dame Sans Merci of letters. Her poetry and plays have caused more than a few carefully composed minds to become unseated.

Recently, when Hewett read her son's work in its initial form of "a very long short story" entitled *Lie Of The Land*, a murder mystery, Flood's instinct to run with his writing was set in motion.

"She is a narrative fiend. She likes answers and said, 'write the sequel. I want to know what happens'. I wrote a book which didn't tell what happened," says Flood with the perverse chuckle of a rebellious son getting away with something.

On the other side of his family Flood is the third son of boilermaker and union agitator Les Flood.

And from his stepfather who raised him from the age of three, Merv Lilley — poet, short story writer, stockman, canecutter and seaman — Flood has also gained a literary streak, and determination to undertake almost anything.

**F**lood may be a newcomer to the publishing world but as his heritage shows he is no stranger to writers, writing and family arguments about the differences between prose and poetry, and the rhythm and symbolism of the written word.

After growing up in Perth, Flood says he "hitched, cycled and surfed to Sydney".

Now living in Chippendale, one of the few remaining ungentrified patches of inner-city Sydney, he spends a major part of his working day in front of a word processor which he says he acquired by trading in his beloved old Citroen.

Almost a Renaissance man of careers, Flood, at 33, is a former rock band musician and co-founder of a Sydney band, Poles Apart. He has also worked as a tuna fisherman, bus conductor, wheat sampler, marathon Bongo van driver (Sydney to Perth), paperboy, matzo deliverer and theatre lighting assistant.

His interests cover "theatre, food, philosophy,

computers, plants, fashion and cemeteries" among other things. But *Oceana Fine*, he insists, is not autobiographical.

"I like to play that game between autobiography and novel. To me they're all fictions," he says.

Set in the West Australian wheatfields, *Oceana Fine* takes its title from a variety of wheat developed by one of the book's main characters and from the watermark of a ledger used for keeping the accounts of farming characters in the book.

He describes his book, with its murder mystery intact and now interwoven with a family saga, as "having a picaresque novel effect".

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the concerns of Australian literature and post-modern criticism. And within this theoretical structure there's a big soapie. It's to do with the construction of a landscape and its deconstruction," he says.

"The first section is very realist and becomes dream-like. This sets the scene for a landscape section called *Lie Of The Land*.

"From there it jumps to different characters and section two, *Another Time*, which is seen through the eyes of the main character, James Cleaver.

"Cleaver tells the stories he's been told and his own stories. Weird things happen to him. He's influenced by magic realism."

"Magic realism" is one literary strain which springs from sources other than the Hewett-Lilley clan.

For Flood it is connected to his interest in "the style of South American fiction writers like Garcia Marquez".

The "Gothic apocalyptic soapie" elements of *Oceana Fine* begin to take shape, Flood says, "when the elements of an ecological thriller begin to emerge and weave through (the) novel".



Tom Flood: 'I like to play that game between autobiography and novel'

"A salty rain starts to fall. It moves sideways and it forms ulcers on the earth and cleanses it. There's a bit of fundamental religion going on. By the last chapter events move in something like a series of thought flashes accompanied by a commentary," says Flood.

While working on his novel he experienced something in life that seemed to imitate art.

A central scene in the book is set at Wave Rock, Western Australia, where one of the main characters, Chloe Cleaver, a grandmother, goes to take photos.

Flood explains how a friend who helped him to edit the first draft of the book, Ali Burns, also a photographer, was helping to clean out the house of a deceased old woman. "The house was very Dickensian. Nothing had been touched for years," says Flood.

While sifting through the old woman's

possessions Burns made a strange discovery with an even more curious coincidence. In a linen chest she found two tourist tea-towels, unopened in their plastic covers, depicting scenes from Wave Rock.

"Ali sent them to me by courier with the message, 'The gods are with you'," says Flood.

Tea-towels notwithstanding, *Oceana Fine* makes more than a few daring connections between time, reality and place.

Flood understandably remains protectively circumspect on this aspect of his novel but he sketches a few details.

"Chloe spends time with Aborigines. There is involvement with alchemy. And there are attempts at making links between Aboriginal mythologies and white mythology," he says.

*Oceana Fine* will be published shortly by Allen and Unwin.