



## Miles Franklin Literary Award 2009 Longlist

*Ice*  
**Louis Nowra**  
Allen & Unwin

### Reading Group Notes

#### **Synopsis**

A novel of hauntings, love, longing, memory and loss told with audacity and breathtaking imaginative power from one of Australia's most acclaimed writers.

*You have possessed me, let me go.*

An iceberg is towed through the Heads to the astonishment of colonial Sydney. As it melts, the iceberg is revealed as a tomb to the perfectly preserved body of a young sailor, who died forty years before.

A man lost in grief for his wife is haunted by his memories of her. His life becomes a memorial to her, in the hope of defeating the oblivion of death.

Ice tells the story of Malcolm McEacharn, the man who brings joy to early Sydney in the form of an iceberg and who later pioneers the first successful refrigerated voyage from Australia to London. He is a brilliant businessman who will later bring electricity to Melbourne, become its Lord Mayor and be one step away from becoming Prime Minister - but he is driven by an obsession that threatens to destroy him and his world.

Ice also tells a parallel story, set in contemporary Sydney, of a young biographer who lies in a coma, and her bereft husband's desperate attempts to resurrect her by unearthing the truth about her subject McEacharn.

Both stories are redolent with longing, suffused by regret, illuminated by extraordinary imagery, hypnotic language and the spectre of suspended life in the 'mythical country of ice'. From the frozen, desolate Antarctic to bustling Victorian London, from the Yorkshire moors to colonial tropical Cairns, to Imperial Japan and to the gritty streets of modern-day Kings Cross, Ice walks the line between life and death, fact and fantasy, grief and madness. It is a book about the power of love, told with audacity and breathtaking imaginative power. It will never let you go.

**Louis Nowra on writing *Ice***

*Where did *Ice* have its beginnings?*

The genesis of this novel goes back seven years when the image of an iceberg being towed through Sydney Heads possessed me. Always fascinated by ice, and its manufacture during the Victorian era, I researched the real-life figure of Malcolm (later Sir) McEacharn who began to feature as the hero.

*Where did your amazing opening image come from – a ship towing a huge iceberg through the Heads of Sydney Harbour?*

From a dream. All that I remember from the dream is the image of a giant iceberg being towed through the Sydney Heads by a tiny 19<sup>th</sup> century ship. The image haunted me for a few years before I started to think of it as the beginning of a novel. Later I was to learn that there had been people who seriously contemplated bringing icebergs to Australia. Even now Thames Water in the UK has floated the notion.

*How challenging was it to have real historical figures as main characters? What was it about McEacharn and McIlwraith that captured your interest in the first place? And how much of a responsibility did you feel to 'real' history once you started writing?*

McEacharn began to interest me when I was researching about manufacturing ice because of his importance in the frozen meat trade. The more I read about him the more interesting he became. He was not only close to becoming Prime Minister but he was also a curious mixture of the conservative (as regards women's rights etc) with the progressive - he hated the White Australia policy. Such a contradictory character was fascinating. His friend Andrew McIlwraith was his opposite. Andrew was cautious, came from wealthy stock, and was ten years older and yet Malcolm dominated the friendship. Once I understood I would never know enough about Malcolm and Andrew I felt free to invent, just as Rowan does.

*You've said you're not a fan of the historical novel. Why? Did that mean you brought a different sensibility to imagining the past?*

My problem with historical novels is one of suspended disbelief. I can never believe that a writer can truly conjure up the real feelings of a person born in an era that is more than two generations ago, that is, within the lifetime of our grandparents. It's why I get testy with writers saying their historical novel is a better reflection and or closer to the truth of historical events and characters than a historian can manage. Essentially historical novelists implant their own cultural and political attitudes onto the historical characters and events. I did want to make it completely obvious that Rowan, who is telling Beatrice, his wife, about the life of McEacharn, is giving his own interpretation of the man she wanted to write a biography of.

*Have you always wanted to write a love story? Is that what *Ice* is?*

There is not a great tradition of love stories in Australia and that has always puzzled me. Maybe it's that strong male tradition that runs from Lawson to Moorhouse where to write about love is to intrude on the female domain. I've written about love in such plays as *The Golden Age* and a weird kind of love in my first novel *The Misery of Beauty*, but I've always wanted to write a love story that avoided sopiness and yet love was the main theme. I think that to be able to write a good love story is a sign of maturity as a writer. Colette and Proust wrote about love very well and how essential it is to men and women. Maybe it's because they are French and don't feel embarrassed by the topic.

*Both male protagonists love their wives even to the point of madness. Is there such a thing as a male way of being in love, and of telling a love story?*

The hardest thing to write about is married love. It's easier to write about the trials and tribulations of young love and adultery. I wanted to write about two men whose love for their wives changed the way they experienced the world and how the more they knew their wives, the more they fell in love with them. If there is a difference between male and female writers is that I think men try to put the love affair into a larger social canvas. Colette's intimate stories are very different from the epic canvas of Marquez and even *Lolita* where constant travel is the lubricant of desire and love. It's strange but only now as I write this can I see that this aspect is also important in *Ice* where McEacharn's love for his dead wife sends him across the world from the Antarctic to Japan.

*What love stories have captivated you as a reader?*

Several that spring to mind are *Tristan and Isolde*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cheri in Love*, *Love in a Time of Cholera* and *Lolita*.

### **Suggested discussion points for *Ice***

- While in some ways it is an historical novel, *Ice* achieves a seamless fusion between real and imagined events. How does Nowra play with the idea of history?
- How are McEacharn and Rowan similar as characters, despite being separated by time?
- The motif of ice is woven throughout the story- what things might it represent? What is it about ice and that world which so fascinates us?
- There are two narrative strands to *Ice* – one historical, the other contemporary. How are the two narratives connected?
- In what way can *Ice* be seen as a love story? How does Nowra explore the ideas of love, memories and loss?

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Literary Award

**Recommended Reading**

*Deception* by Michael Meehan (2008)

*Possession* by A.S. Byatt (1990)

*Landscape of Farewell* by Alex Miller (2008)

*Oscar and Lucinda* by Peter Carey (1988)

*Leviathan* by John Birmingham (1999)

*The Cheated* by Louis Nowra (1979)