

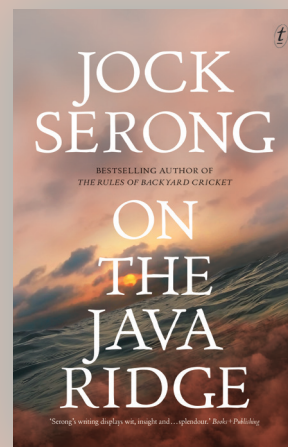
On the Java Ridge



Jock Serong

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PRaise for *ON THE JAVA RIDGE*

'Jock Serong creates a sense of foreboding from the very start of his third novel, and then constantly ratchets up the tension with a keen sense of pacing.'
BOOKS + PUBLISHING

'I'm reading an advance copy of Jock Serong's third novel. Set in the near future, an asylum seeker boat capsizes and sinks near a remote island, coincidentally where an Australian tourist boat is safely anchored. It's three days from a tight Federal election and the government—who has outsourced Border Protection to a murky company—doesn't want to help or let anyone know about what's happened, even though there has been huge loss of life and more are in imminent danger. With this book, Serong cements his growing reputation as the thinking person's adventure writer. *On the Java Ridge* is such a strong piece of writing on so many levels. Andrew Bolt would hate it!' *MARK RUBBO*

'It is quite apparent that Serong has his finger firmly on the pulse of current events: this is a thoroughly credible hypothetical, a truly intriguing and frighteningly believable "what if?" that is brilliantly executed, acutely topical and extremely relevant.'
MARIANNE VINCENT, BOOKMOOCH

Jock Serong, a Victorian lawyer and surfer, has enjoyed a rapid rise to prominence as an author, this being his third novel in as many years. His experience on the ocean is evident in several bravura passages, such as the description of the refugee boat capsizing, the desperate rescue attempt by Natoli and her crew, and gut-churning scenes of grisly triage performed on the beach. *THE SATURDAY PAPER*

ABOUT JOCK SERONG

Jock Serong's debut novel *Quota* won the 2015 Ned Kelly Award for Best First Crime Novel. In 2016, *The Rules of Backyard Cricket* was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Award. *On the Java Ridge* is his third novel. Jock teaches law and writes feature articles in the surfing media and for publications such as *The Guardian* and *Slow Living*. He lives with his wife and four children in Port Fairy, Victoria.

A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO *ON THE JAVA RIDGE*

Through three different perspectives we see a tragedy unfold.

Nine-year-old Hazara girl Roya is hoping to find refuge in Australia. Brave, protective and curious, she shows inner strength beyond what any child should have to.

Australian woman Isi is captaining a surf tour boat. When confronted with people in peril she does her best to save them.

Cassius Calvert is the Minister for Border Integrity. He goes from demanding 'plausible deniability' (pp. 7) to finding what he can no longer deny to himself—both his complicity and helplessness—unbearable.

On the Java Ridge brings to vivid life the refugee crisis, political expediency and ruthlessness, and the trend for governments to outsource what was once seen as their essential responsibilities (with the decline of the national press into 'national clickbait' making these last two easier).

At the same time, the novel is a fast-paced thriller, with a driving storyline and real dramatic tension. As well, Jock Serong draws his characters and the relationships between them with finesse.

Serong is particularly interested in teasing out the moral responsibilities of the characters he puts in the different situations he creates. Some of the characters abrogate their moral responsibility; others feel it keenly.

Towards the end of the novel we get some other narrative perspectives: of the man who carries out the command to kill those on the Java Ridge; of Stella, who has a moral choice to make; and of the Prime Minister who will no longer be able to plausibly deny what he knows, whose moral corruption will be exposed to others well before Cassius hoped it would.

By giving us all these different perspectives, Serong prompts us to imagine what we would do in each of the situations his characters find themselves in. What moral decisions would we make?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How realistic do you think this novel is? How close to political reality, and to events that might really happen?
2. Do you think 'plausible deniability' has an impact on politics today? How?
3. How do you think Serong balances the political points he is making in the novel with the tension of the storytelling?
4. There are many different kinds of leaders (or captains) in this novel: Isi, Ali Hassan, Neil Finley, Joel, Cassius, the PM. Discuss their different ways of leading. Is one more effective than another? What might effective mean? Does morality come into it?
5. Discuss the way Serong depicts the power plays between people (the manoeuvring between Cassius and the departmental secretary, for example, or Isi's need to establish herself among the males on the Java Ridge). What gives one person power over another?
6. Does Isi's gender determine the way she acts?
7. Why do you think Serong has portrayed Roya as she is—wise and brave beyond her years? Isi thinks of Roya's 'singularity' and 'ubiquity'. (pp. 254) In what ways do you think Roya is representative or unique?
8. How does Serong balance the three main narrative perspectives?
9. Ali Hassan says that 'Most people want...going somewhere. Not many people already are home'. (pp. 215) Is this true of the Australians as well as the survivors of the Takalar? What might home be? Is this statement true beyond the novel?
10. Ali Hassan also tells Roya that no-one on the boat cares about her, only themselves. Is this true? Who in the book is more and less selfish? How does the selfishness of someone like Carl (whose surfer physique signals his selfishness to Isi) compare to someone like Ali Hassan?
11. When Ali Hassan kills Sanusi, he screams with distress: 'For an instant he was other than a man who could do this, could open someone's artery—for a second he was a man who would shrink from such a thing'. (pp. 219) Do we all have this capacity within us, as much as it might surprise and distress us? Can you understand Ali Hassan's desperation?
12. How does Cassius's relationship with Rory influence his reaction to the Java Ridge, and vice versa?
13. How did you react to the characters we had come to care about being killed, especially those whose perspectives we had seen the action through? Did it surprise you or did it seem inevitable?
14. Do you think politicians would act as Cassius eventually does before his walk into the lake? Do his actions make Cassius a 'good' person?
15. Do you think the novel ultimately agrees with the points Carmichael makes in his discussion with Cassius? Or is much of it 'merely Carmichael admiring the sound of his own bullshit'? (pp. 247) Is Carmichael more or less moral than Cassius?
16. Carmichael asks Cassius if it feels a 'little sharper' now he knows the deaths are Australian? (pp. 252) Do you think it does make Cassius feel this way? Does it to you as a reader? What about to most Australians?
17. In response to Shafiq's retelling of a story from *Arabian Nights*, Roya knows the moral is supposed to be that 'we can defeat the demon with reason'. (185) But Shafiq says, for the first time, that the demon might still be threatening. Do you think Shafiq is right, or is there still a place for reason in defeating demons?
18. Who do you believe is ultimately responsible for the deaths on the Takalar and the Java Ridge?