

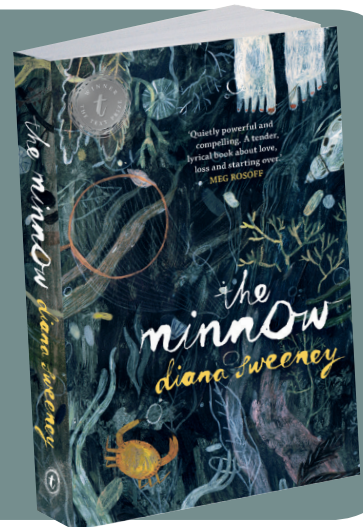
# The Minnow

Diana Sweeney

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Fiction, Paperback



## Praise for *The Minnow*

'Quietly powerful and compelling. A tender, lyrical book about love, loss and starting over.' Meg Rosoff

'Diana Sweeney gives Tom a believable voice: innocent, headstrong, anxious but determined...this strong debut will resonate with young people and adults alike.' *Books+Publishing*

'*The Minnow* has all the breath-holding intensity and aching beauty of swimming underwater.' Romy Ash

## About Diana Sweeney

Diana Sweeney is a university lecturer and fashion model. She was born in Auckland, and moved to Sydney at the age of twelve. She now lives in northern New South Wales. *The Minnow* is her first novel.

## A reader's introduction to *The Minnow*

How can we live after tragedy? After her mother, father and sister die in a flood that sweeps away many people in their country town, Tom must figure out who she is, how she can live, and how she can love. She still has her Nana, who lives in the old folks' home, and Jonah, her best friend. She also has her Papa, who died thirty years ago. And then there is the Minnow, her unborn child, with whom she has long conversations, and with whom she forms a profound bond.

Tom moves out from the house she shared briefly with Bill (the Minnow is 'half Bill's baby'), she renews her friendship with Jonah, and the two form their own version of a family. Meanwhile Nana is finding love with Jonah's grandfather. But then death comes again.

After Nana's death, Tom talks to Jonathan:

'Will you be all right?' I ask.

'Will you?' Jonathan replies.

*Neither of us knows the answer* (250).

Even after death, people look for and find love. *The Minnow* clearly stands for renewal.

One might think that Tom's conversations with the Minnow and her Papa, as well as the many fish and other watery creatures she talks to, are figments of her imagination, a way of coping with her grief. But there are hints, especially after the halfway mark, that this might not be so. For example, Papa tells her that Sergeant Griffin was speeding, Betsy Groot tells her that Nana is ill, and Jonah hears the Minnow speak.

That said, we are never given enough information to know exactly what the truth is. And this applies not just to the fish and the ghosts, but also to what happened when, and about how Tom is feeling. Tom herself is slippery as a fish sometimes. This is a mysterious and evocative book that leaves its readers wondering.

## Questions for discussion

1. There are many unanswered questions in the novel. Did you enjoy trying to work out the answers? Do you think there are answers? Does it frustrate you that so much is left unresolved? Or did you enjoy the mysteriousness of it?
2. Sometimes it seems like what Tom is describing is purely a figment of her imagination. Sometimes it seems that impossible things are really happening. More often it is hard to tell. Does it matter which events are real within the novel, and which are imaginary?
3. Given the frequent use of water as a metaphor in the novel, is the event of the flood (and the drought before it) in itself a metaphor? What for?
4. The narrative does not always have a clear chronology. Why has the story been written in this way?
5. What do Nana's sayings tell us about her? What does Tom's love of those sayings tell us about her? What about her passion for learning and using new words? How else is language important in the telling of this story?
6. When Bill hits Tom she reaches her 'tipping point' (170). Why hadn't she reached it before? Why did Tom

continue to see Bill after she moved out? What are we to make of their interactions?

7. Tom tells us that 'Nana knows I'm tough.' She also tells Oscar that she's tough, and Oscar agrees. But Tom can also be passive, and she cries at times. How tough do you think she is?

8. When Tom wonders about the twins her mother miscarried, Jonah tells her to 'let it go'. Tom says: 'I have never understood the let-it-go advice. What does it mean? Let what go? And how do you let something go if you're not even sure you're holding on to it? And anyway, what's so wrong with holding on?' (40). What does Tom hold on to and what does she let go of? Discuss the other scenes in the novel where the concept of letting go is explored (e.g. Papa's inability to let go of his love for Nana; Oscar's advice not to discard your past). Do you think letting go is desirable?

9. Jonah tells Tom that she's 'so wrong about people' (85). Is Tom naïve or knowing about other people?

10. Tom is a tomboy. Bill didn't even realise she was a girl at first. Then this tomboy becomes a mother. What does the novel say about gender roles? You may wish to think about Jonah too when talking about this.

11. What do you make of the character of Annabel? Is she real? Is she a mermaid? What does she signify?

12. 'Nothing much changes. You love someone, they die. You miss them. You grow older,' Tom says before

she sees Sarah at the end of her bed. (185). Is this an accurate summation of love, life and death?

13. Many novels about teenagers are about their coming of age. How does Tom come of age? Does she 'find herself'?

14. In a counselling session, Tom reminds the counsellor of the enormity of her loss – not just of her family but also of her imagined future: 'I used to think I'd be living at home with Mum and Dad and Sarah forever...or at least till I was old enough to leave school' (74). Later she tells the reader 'As much as I miss Mum, Dad and Sarah, I love my new life with Jonah and the Minnow. I don't think I could ever go back either' (231). Is this a happy ending?

15. How are we meant to discover truth in the novel? We can't trust Tom to tell us the whole truth, but can we trust her to tell us nothing but the truth? Which characters lie? Why?