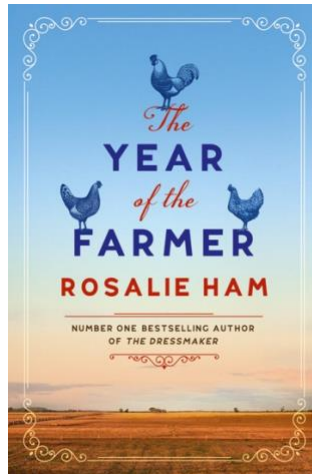


# READING GROUP NOTES



## Index

1. [Story](#)
2. [Factions](#)
3. [Irrigation](#)
4. [Characters](#)
5. [Landscape](#)
6. [Themes, topics or subjects](#)
7. [Motifs](#)
8. [The Donkeys](#)
9. [Symbols](#)
10. [Who is the body in the swimming hole?](#)

*The Year of the Farmer* is a story, a work of fiction, an expression through art, and thus it cannot solve the problem of disagreement between any factions, who each feel they know best how to manage water. *The Year of the Farmer* strives to give voice to farming and its role, often misinterpreted, and in the media, not allowed a bigger voice

against environment and water authorities. In a nation that suffers a 'bush versus city' divide, the story attempts, through humour and one lone farmer, to make a little clearer the conundrum of sustainable water use while respecting the environment and feeding the world. This dilemma is at the heart of Mitchell Bishop, the main protagonist. He needs to conserve his land to make it last, to leave it better than he found it, but he also needs to be able to produce.

Both rural and urban media tend to communicate portraits of people in rural areas in a cliché stereotypical way. ***The Year of the Farmer*** uses stereotypes for recognition and empathy, to engage, but the story also attempts to portray a more sincere depiction of rural Australia. The characters are not entirely predictable, and the assumptions made by those who look at rural people and draw conclusions from their outward personas are challenged. Rural Australia is populated by immigrants and a diverse range of people who are innovative, clever, cultured and resourceful. Rural Australia is a place of progress, experiment and science, a place of space and opportunity, community and nature.

***The Year of the Farmer*** leaves its main protagonist with an unclear, uncertain future and more obstacles to overcome, because this is the way of farming and always will be. It will always be difficult to run a business amid nature and the elements, politics and profits, but people will always want food to eat, fibre to wear and shelter, so they will always need farmers.

## 1. Story

***The Year of the Farmer*** is about water, survival, love and justice. It's a satirical look at the impact on one farmer, Mitchell Bishop, his family and community when the irrigation authority declares they will remove water from that community, supposedly to 'give back to the system', that is, the river system.

The main protagonist, Mitchell is working to nurture the legacy he has inherited and preserve the farm's viability so that it survives into the future. It is a task made difficult because Mitch cannot do anything about any of the obstacles thwarting his attempts. He is rendered helpless in front the elements, invading vermin and weeds, his ailing business, the pressure from the water authority, his unsupportive wife and uncooperative neighbours. Mitch is also caring for his aged and infirm father and enduring an unhappy marriage...and into all of this comes Mitch's one true love, Neralie McIntosh. Neralie brings Mitch peace, turbulence and drought-breaking rain, which ruin Mitch's meagre, struggling crop.

It looks as if things can't get any worse for Mitch, then his wife declares war on the entire community, already divided over water restrictions. Drought and the impracticalities of farming have impacted on all members of the factions in the

community. All personal relationships suffer but ultimately, the town unites for the sake of the greater good.

***The Year of the Farmer*** shows us that farming, or primary production of food and fibre, is essential but it is also an endeavour whose survival is pitted against nature and this draws attention to its 'irrational' aspect. How do primary producers manage to run a business in nature? ***The Year of the Farmer*** highlight some aspects of farming and how farmers manage to provide sustenance for all given the complicating obstacles such as banks, the water authority, vermin, and mother nature's temperamental presence.

## 2. The Factions

The town and district are loosely divided into four factions. At the bottom of the loose hierarchy is the **ferals**, or blow-ins, who have set up camp along the river. They can be viewed as the real heroes of the story given they are uncompromising when it comes to nature, though their attire and presentation means they are dismissed as no-hoper and hippies. These well-intentioned but badly organized environmentalists are also against the 'capitalist system' because of its destructive effect on the environment and thus oppose water being taken from the river preferring to have more water released back into the river system.

The **riparians**, or river dwellers, have lived off the river and its flood plains for generations but they are conscious that they are part of, and depend upon, the wider community. The riparians understand the ebb and flow of the river, can see how drought, water buy backs and irrigation have affected its health and seek consideration in the river's management for balance between irrigation and the environment.

The **townies** – shop keepers, businesses and service providers – immediately feel the pinch when the farmers cannot pay their bills, earn or spend money in the community. Everyone suffers. It is the **irrigators** upon whom everyone relies, and it is their livelihoods that are most at risk from world-wide financial, environmental and political fluctuations. If the farms die, everyone dies.

## 3. Irrigation

Mitchel Bishop, the main protagonist of ***The Year of the Farmer***, is an irrigation farmer and this requires many skills, like knowledge of machinery, information technology, chemistry, botany and much more. It also requires a gamblers grit and the tenacity to interpret government regulations, financial markets and most specifically, the water market.

Basically, to grow all of our food and fibre irrigators are allocated water according to what's made available to them by the water authorities in their respective catchment areas. When water is scarce, whole towns and districts are affected. Irrigators are rarely awarded 100% of their allocated water entitlement, which means they can grow only what their water allocation allows. Often this means irrigators cannot grow what they need to meet existing costs, nor the costs of sowing and selling their crops. Subsequently, the general wealth of the community declines. Years of drought means that Mitch is allocated only 20% of the water he's entitled to so he can grow only a percentage of what he'd like to grow and thus, he cannot repay debt. His existing financial crisis deepens. That crisis, ignited by the drought and years of mismanagement by his father, is further complicated by the water market itself. The price of water, per megalitre, varies depending on the water brokers, the weather and availability. For example, in the year 2000 water was worth \$2 a megalitre but during the Millennium drought (2010) the average price ranged from \$1300 to \$2400 a megalitre. These fluctuations have a huge impact on farm equity. In the year 2017, the July statistics showed Australian farming businesses used an average of 107 megalitres of water each. In that same month water was trading at \$295 - \$350 per megalitre...so 107 megalitres @ \$350 costs \$37,000. For some, water is worth more than their land and even if irrigators don't get any water, they still pay administration costs, channel and water maintenance. In ***The Year of the Farmer***, Mitchell Bishop faces paying \$40,000 per annum for infrastructure upkeep alone while facing the cost of compulsory water distribution upgrades. The expenditure will result in loss of equity in his land and ruin his business plan (See Department of Agriculture and Water website for up to date and accurate information regarding water). But Mitch is paralysed, there's not much he can do to change the weather, or how farming industry and governments worldwide stipulate what farmers are expected to do – it's like waiting out a drought. If there was sufficient water and Mitch's allocation allowed him to trade, he would. Or he could sell or even lease some of his allocation for a season, provided it didn't adversely affect his business, or his farm equity. He could even 'roll over' water to the next season but that would mean a year without any crop which would impact on his feed stockpile (he also runs sheep) and deny him a chance at a good crop should the drought break. And ultimately, he is at mercy of what the water authorities and the weather allows.

Mitch resists pressure from the bank to sell some of his irrigation allocation water to ease his Mortgage and general financial stress. If he sells water, he'll still be paying the same amount of money for his debts on a farm that isn't worth what he's paying. Farmers generally sell retail, buy wholesale. At the same time, if Mitch doesn't sell water, he won't be able to pay his bank, mortgage and general finances. Either way...he faces ruin. He might lose the family farm he has inherited. This is the Burdian's Ass philosophy...Mitch is like the donkey stuck between a bale of hay and a bucket of water, between selling or not, between Mandy and Neralie. Unable to make a rational decision whether to drink or eat first, the donkey dies.

But Mitch is facing ruin from many fronts. Wild dogs are roaming and destroying his stock – his sheep, and therefore his future. Apart from his mortgage he owes money on

ancient, worn harvesters, his crop has suffered because of dry seasons and he's married to Mandy, who he doesn't love.

To add to Mitch's dilemma, the corrupt and Machiavellian irrigation authority announces they must seize water from the catchment area (through on farm improvements to water delivery and buy backs in return for infrastructure upgrades). The loss of water to the area means all livelihoods are put in jeopardy. The community divides. Factions are pitted against each other - the townies (retailers and suppliers), farmers (primary producers) and river dwellers (the riparians) against each other. There are also the ferals, well meaning 'greenies' who hold the health of the land in their hearts, but they don't really understand the way of farming and that the farming industry is both vital and doing its best to adapt to current trends while remaining viable.

This division plays out at a town meeting where all factions articulate their concerns.

In the middle of Mitch's terrible dilemma, his true love, Neralie McIntosh, returns to the town and buys the local pub. Neralie also brings rain, the drought is broken, but ironically, the rain causes more ruin.

The rain makes Mitch's miserable crop completely worthless. It's is 'shot and sprung', that is, the seed heads 'shoot' from being wet and exposed to nice warm sunshine and no breeze to dry out the grain. 'Shot and sprung' grain is suitable only for stock feed and worth very little, but it costs money to harvest it, transport it, store or sell it.

This is when Mandy, Mitch's wife, decides to wage war. Mandy's jealous of Neralie, sees her own life ruined – the pub is the only place to socialize – and so sets about ruining everyone else, especially Mitch, by siding with the water authorities.

This small community thrives on unity. Disharmony threatens the equilibrium, so the corrosive elements, like vermin, pests, weeds and any form of threat, must be eliminated. So finally, the town reunites to survive, and a kind of justice is achieved.

## 4. Characters

### **Mitchell Bishop**

At the heart of *The Year of the Farmer* are Mitchell Bishop and his problems. Mitch is the kind of man who travels broadly but never leaves home, knowing that the best and worst that life can throw at you is right where he is. He has grown up knowing he will be a farmer and understands the farm he has inherited is too small farm and has been depleted by drought, and lack of investment, a consequence of his mother's ill health.

Mitch will be ruined if he sells water or land to survive and if doesn't sell, he'll be ruined trying to meet rising debt. The banks want money, there are bills to pay and loans to

honour, but Mitchell is trying to honour the legacy he has inherited and stay afloat. He is happy farming, it's all he knows, and he wants to continue contributing to the community, maintain his role in primary production growing food and fibre for the world.

On top of his mortgage debt and loans, Mitch has a wife he doesn't love, an ailing father, a problem with pests and vermin and the accumulated losses after a destructive five-year drought. His only crop is poor, and his machinery worn and costly. He is torn between spending time and fuel to plough in his crop or holding out for the promised rain. Then it is too late, it finally rains, and the rain means his thin weak crop is shot and sprung. Mitch must now spend money to harvest the crop to use for stock feed.

Mitch has been gifted a compromised situation and is further compromised by the industries and elements that control him – banks, insurance companies, vermin, weather, markets, commodity prices, trade terms, rising costs, increased competitive markets, production squeeze, loss of equity, complex business structures, politicized rural and production issues, People for the Ethical Protection of Animals, environmentalists, the media, prejudice and ignorance etc

In the end, Mitch acts on his free will, his instinct to survive...he understands the will of the marauding wild dogs and knows it is his fate to be a farmer, and he is almost resigned to accepting fate...the death of the farm (like Cleopatra who loses the will to live once her brother is no longer by her side). Then Neralie takes matters in hand and acts, and so Mitch subsequently acts on his instinct to survive.

It's all about survival, instinct, but his sheep are food. But there are dogs that are useful, working dogs that are loyal, and there are feral dogs that are destructive, cruel and hurt the community.

At first Mitch is frozen by the circumstances and his inability to do anything to save himself, then he sees Neralie take action to shorten Cleopatra's pain as the donkey declines towards her inevitable death. Mitch makes a decision; he will act for the sake of survival and so he rises up against the overwhelming machinations of bureaucracy and corruption and ploughs the channel flat. Mitch can't do anything about the weather, banks or world price influx, but he can make a stand against unfairness and corruption and at least attempt to survive.

## **Isobel Prestwich**

One of the many strong women in this story, Isobel is one of the new generation of farmers who fight for equality for both her children, a boy and a girl. Isobel represents the future and the past; the effort most rural women have always put into the farm and their capable adaptability to grasp the future and become farmers themselves, have their partnership in a farming business acknowledged. She reflects a way of life that is true in these times of fast reliable vehicles and internet connections, a rural person who is equally at home in a city or a vast property, someone who understands the

importance harmony in a family and community harmony to keep everything functioning, despite the hardships. Her husband, Digby, observes on Page 260;

'It was when he was squeezing his morning orange that he saw, beyond his lovely wife on the treadmill, a dead bird nailed to the fence at the yards. The rifle rested on the verandah.

'Bel, you shot a raven?' They were the hardest things in Australia to shoot.

'They're corpse-eating scavengers and murderers of the innocent. They're cruel, selfish and entirely unnecessary to anyone. Vermin. I will get rid of every one of them.' She stopped the treadmill and started crying.

Digby went to her. 'This is no good, Bel, old thing. I can't have you upset.'

'Mitchell will lose the farm.'

He handed her his breakfast napkin. 'But Philippa will still get the sheep.'

'Oh, bugger the fucking sheep. Why can't she have a whole farm? Rory will get one.' She blew her nose. 'And I don't know what to do about Christmas. It's a mess, Aunt Opal hates me.'

As in other books by Rosalie Ham, there is a compliment of strong women. In ***The Year of the Farmer***, the women hold prominent and strong positions in society. They are vital to the whole area and they are afforded due respect by all. Even Mandy enjoys a place and a kind of respect. The men know the worth of women and that they contribute 50% to farming life. In ***The Year of the Farmer***, Isobel represents the kind of women who is typical in the country – a capable, strong, canny, businesswomen, mother, daughter, clever, artistic and a hard worker enmeshed in her community and her family farm and happy to fight to protect any part of it.

## **Mandy**

Mandy went against the community, was subversive, corrosive, and did damage intentionally. Mandy flaunted her allocation of 'a fair go' and used it against those who awarded it to her, defying the very people who depend on her and that she depends on. Mostly everyone is tolerated – even the ferals who spend their dole cheques in the town and swell the enrolments at the local school. And so, Mandy's past indiscretions were largely tolerated and ignored but when she defies her community, they are used against her. There is always someone in a community that grates, runs on resentment, for whatever reason. Perhaps Mandy reminds everyone that they carry their own past indiscretions, that those indiscretions are a weight and a weak spot, and a hypocrisy.

As Mandy says on page 217; 'There's not one single person in that entire town who hasn't got something in their past to regret.'

On page 288, Mandy muses about her husband, Mitch, to Stacey, the new water trader in town;

'His debts could ruin him any second, his crop failed, and his best friends are dead or dying and he wants the barmaid . . . and her old boyfriend has just arrived in town. I'll let Mitch have the barmaid if he keeps the channel, and I'll be happy because you'll let him have Esther's water and he'll still have his own water so the farm'll be worth lots and lots more money and I'll take as much of it as I can get.' Then she smiled and leaned down to him. 'I might even try to take some of his water if I can, sell it to you . . . and Glenys Dingle.'

'Jesus,' he said. 'You sure are something, aren't you?'

'Yeah.' She smiled. 'I'm sick of being nothing.'

But Mandy was never nothing, Mandy was always a force to contend with, but that force now sees her as a pursued outsider, no longer tolerate/included in her community.

## **Neralie**

Neralie is both the ideal partner for Mitch, and yet not. She has no interest in farming and is not the supportive partner a farmer ideally needs (like Isobel). Neralie wants no part of the farm. She has a business of her own. This means, in terms of succession, Bishops Corner, will go to Mitch's niece, Philippa. Neralie's interest are in the health and harmony of the community, and Mitch, who she loves. Neralie represents those who set forth into the world to see what it's like only to discover where home is, and when she gets back, she must remain neutral for her own sake but acts to save Mitch. She solves the problem of Cleopatra (Mitch's donkey) who is has relented and is being destroyed by grief. When Neralie's reads a text from Mitch, her instincts tell her all is not well. She finds him in his ute (P 306), and their conversation reflects the Burdian's Ass debate, (see 'Twelve. Analysis') that is, a paradox philosophy about free will. It refers to a hypothetical situation where a donkey is placed midway between a stack of hay and a pail of water. The paradox assumes the donkey will go to whichever is closer, but it can't make a rational decision between the hay and water so dies of both hunger and thirst. Buridan suggests a human "...must always choose the greater good."

Neralie; 'I'm about to employ my free will to satisfy my instinct,' she said, removing her shorts.

'I've decided to act for the greater good,' he [Mitch] said, as Neralie pulled his shirt over his head. 'Though it isn't rational.'

'I'm perfectly rational.' She helped him remove his pants.



Reference to *Moby Dick* tells us that the whale attacks on instinct to survive, and Mitch, taking Neralie's lead when she ends Cleopatra's pain, stops being a representative to Burdian's Ass and makes a decision to act for the sake of survival.

### **Kevin, Jasey and Lana**

These characters represent both tolerance and hypocrisy in the community. They dislike Mandy, ridicule her for her past multiple partners but fail to see the same in their own unique relationship. Despite faction fighting and differences, they stick together. Kevin parallels Mitch's situation in that he does not know what to do to make his relationship with Jasey and Lana manageable. Fate intervenes for Kevin though, and they will live with the situation, (in harmony for the sake of all three of them) and it will be tolerated (for the sake of the greater good).

### **Esther and Callum**

These two are the past and their presence has implications on Mitch's future. They are no longer as useful as they once were, and Mitch can't progress until Esther and Callum let go of what they hold. Esther and Callum are irrational in many ways and carry prejudices and suspicious from their past. With good reason, (internet availability, costliness, maintenance etc) they are sceptical about new technology but at the same time carry great wisdom about the history of farming and how once it functioned quite well and was mostly just about the farm and the weather. They have always lived in close proximity to the life cycle and are familiar with, and respectful of, the battle for survival. They know the value of community and cohesiveness, and do not like the way things are headed, and advocates the culling of vermin, but also has let her farm deteriorate and thus provide shelter for vermin. She must decide what to do about her short future since she is getting older.

Page 204: "She [Esther] retrieved the 1943 Remington .22 from its hidey-hole and was careful to close the barn doors behind her against mother cat. In the house, she gathered her father's butcher's knife and the one plate that remained from her mother's dinner set and told the kittens that they were responsible for millions of deaths every hour and that seven fewer cats equalled seven million live animals less than eighteen inches tall. Then she blithely ended their killing future."

**Cal** sees that the community is no longer 'cohesive' given the corrupt and controlling water authority, and his son's unhappy marriage.

On page 180 Cal complains the TV is not clear;

Mitch put his newspaper aside, took his father's glasses, polished them and put them back on Cal's face. While Mandy played online solitaire, father and son watched the documentary on qanat water distribution systems in North Africa. As he crept off to bed, Cal said, 'A community around water. Cohesion in the society. Marvellous.'

On page 189, when he visits Esther in hospital, Callum tries to explain to her;

'The qanats,' he said, 'are a very efficient irrigation system. The Persians started digging it in the early part of the first millennium BC. They raise water in animal hide from deep beneath the desert through man-sized shafts burrowed into the sand and rock. Plenty of water down there.'

'I know.'

'Rivers of the stuff. Clean too. And they still use it to this day. They gather and swap information and it builds a cohesive –'

'I saw it! They have television in the hospital.'

And finally, "...the very last thing Callum Bishop saw was a string of villages across North Africa, a few mud abodes sprinkled around a hole on a vast orange plain, and the smiling community were gathered, working at pulling an animal-skin bucket from a well that went deep in the earth. They spilled the fresh water into a trough, just enough for their needs, no more, and Callum rose high through blue sky and folding rain clouds, and a word came to him: marvellous.

### **Stacey Masterson**

A young man trying to make his way in the world, succeed and triumph but for purely material possessions, it appears. He tries to figure things out as he goes but Stacey makes mistakes by not thinking things through, not seeing the future or what's really going on around him. In the end, through Mitch, Stacey sees the error of what's being done and understands that there are many sides to the issue of water. Ultimately, Stacey sees that he is being used and errs on the side of the greater good.

On page 279, one of the ferals explain that he has been studying Moby Dick; Captain Ahab, in his madness, chooses his fate...to pursue Moby Dick. But the novel also advocates that humans have freedom, an ability to reason and interpret, they are rational, and have a primary ability to feel and love. The ferals adopt Melville's theory that "the greater the development of one's humanity, the greater one's free will, under the circumstances."

"He [Stacey] didn't fully understand what the hippies had said about 'ruins', but Stacey was more unsettled than he'd ever been, and he knew for sure he was part of something with far more reach than he'd realised. He had not dedicated enough thought to this topic, it was clear, but instinct told him he no longer wanted to trade water." Despite his drive to succeed, Stacey is primarily a free-thinking man who has empathy and can be rational.

### **The regulars**

These three are part of the chorus of the pub, and like the single mothers and others, are included, given a voice and supported, and they in turn support the town in their own way. They work seasonally, and are wise observers, see all, know all and say nothing, unless it's necessary. The regulars offer safe harbor in the only social centre in the town, the place where jobs are allocated, marriages made and broken, victory and defeat celebrated, business contracts made and broken, births and deaths celebrated, skulduggery conducted, family life played out. When there is no one else, there is always the regulars to open up for and serve beer to and to talk to.

## **The ferals**

The ferals are the conscience of the book. They are newcomers to the town, nature lovers and conservationists who thrive far from any government Centrelink office, and the constraints of social conventions. Happily, the ferals have kids who attend the local school inflating numbers and allowing it to remain functional. They increase the general population and social variety of the town, and also spend their cheques locally. They are harmless, peaceful, and live sustainably along the creek. They have the interest of the river and its ecology at heart, but they have no real insight into farming, its function and what farmers are forced to do to survive. They are ignorant about their own murderous, destructive dogs and when it comes to money, they are corruptible after all.

## **5. Landscape**

*The Year of the Farmer* is about irrigation water so could only have the setting it has. Mitch travels his farm, and this provides an opportunity to explain the farm and the relationship Mitch has to it, and to the animals on it. The landscape he traverses provides an opportunity to convey a sense of why farming is vital and how vermin, weeds and pests, weather, politicians, and division can destroy one farmer, and therefore, all of them. The setting allows a picture of a 'desolate' landscape that is actually beautiful, productive and valuable. It is in Mitch's best interests to conserve the land, adhere to the science of preservation and ensure the earth's longevity.

The full drama of life is played out in the rural setting. Having Mitch ponder at trees, the Eagles, the weather, the wild dogs and himself in the vast universe tells us the relevance of those creatures in the big picture, along with the life cycle. We see that some dogs are useful workers and friends while others are predators destroying because of their instinct to survive. We see the need for balance, and that everything we need comes from the land.

## **6. Themes, Topics or Subjects**

**Water**, the source of life

**Farming** and how the farmers, primary producers, are expected to adapt to meet standards set by politics, bankers, (commodity) markets, the weather and machinery

**Women** in farming, their strength and their contribution to farming and the community

**Community** and the need for unity for survival, eradication of anything harmful to community survival (Vermin)

**Love**, partnership, loyalty

**Justice** and revenge

**Management's** inability to fully understand the source of their occupations

"The iron groove of **greed**" Mitch's wife, and the water authority

## 7. Motifs

**Wildlife** and the life cycle, the eagles as prey for man and as raptors, the 'cleaners' of the earth, an enemy and friend

Mitch's **sheep** are food and fibre, they are eaten so that humans can stay alive.

**Human inability to control nature**, the parallel with Burdian's Ass is both Mitch's and Kevin's – both are stuck and can't see a way out without losing things that are vital to them

**Technology** as a new helping tool that is essential for progress, but infrastructure means it cannot work for everyone, and is not reliable in all environments. The race ahead without due consideration to the unique, individual circumstances

**The wild dogs** hunt and destroy sheep for survival, and sport. And the Water Authority, it seems to Mitch, are playing sport with the very thing (farmers) that keep them, and everyone else, alive. Like the whale, Moby Dick, the wild dogs act on instinct to survive. Some dogs are useful workers, pets and loyal friends. Others are predators.

**Moby Dick** - In Moby Dick, Ishmael and Queequeg represent the relationship between free will, fate, and chance. There are some things in life that cannot be changed, like Captain Ahab's madness, and in that madness he has chosen his fate –he will pursue the whale, Moby Dick. The novel, Moby Dick, also presents that the primary freedom of humans is their ability to reason and interpret, and their ability to love. The character of Ishmael has a healthy mind and heart and so feels at home in the universe. Ahab isolates himself from affection and common sense and gives himself over to "fate." The

ferals adopt the idea that **Melville asserts, “the greater the development of one’s humanity, the greater one’s free will, under the circumstances.”**

## 8. The Donkeys

The donkeys, brother and sister, have lived together (and with the Bishop family) since they were born. They are employed to guard the sheep against foxes and wild dogs, and they are also pets (Mitch’s best friends), useful and loyal. And like working dogs, earn their own keep and contribute to the community (ANZAC day, nativity scene, nursing home pets). They are victims of the drought. Mitch has worked hard to keep them alive and well, but nature and fate intervene. When Cleopatra, the ‘alpha’ equine, is faced with her future, her world now cleaved, she cannot make a decision and is consumed by sheer animal grief, her fate before her. (At first Mitch is frozen by inability to do anything to save himself, then he sees Neralie take action to shorten Cleopatra’s pain as the donkey declines towards her inevitable death. Mitch makes a decision; he will act for the sake of survival and so he rises up against the overwhelming machinations of bureaucracy and corruption and ploughs the channel flat)

**Burdian’s Ass** is an illustration of a paradox in philosophy to do with free will. It poses a hypothetical situation where an ass, or donkey, is placed precisely midway between a stack of hay and a bucket of water. The assumption is that the donkey will go to whichever is closer, but a donkey can’t make a rational decision so fails to do anything and dies of hunger and thirst.

This is at the heart of Mitch’s indecision; he doesn’t know what to do, the situation is impossible, but he must do something otherwise he will ‘die.’ Concurrently, there is the position posed by the ferals who live by the philosophy presented in the novel *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville (1851).

Ironically, it’s the caravan park proprietor who vocalizes the ‘under the circumstances’ meaning on page 279. He only has one appearance and one speech that is 8 lines long, and it’s about the dogs that belong to the feral campers who live on, and from, the river, and it also disagrees with Captain Ahab, who is resigned to his fate to die trying to kill the white whale;

The skinny feral with the ropey hair said, ‘We don’t like to tie creatures up. The greater one’s humanity, the greater one’s free will.’ Then he started talking about Queequeg, and Captain Ahab’s great ship Pequod: ‘We look like the devil but we’re angels, saviours. We settled in this peaceful place to embrace the symbol of nature and freedom . . . Ahab’s great white whale.’

The caravan park proprietor says, ‘Two things, mate: there are no whales in the river and there’s no such thing as free will. It’s all about instinct, so that’s why you have to tie up your dogs, and their instinct.’

## 9. Symbols

The donkeys are like Mitch. They are loyal, dependent on others for everything, good at their job and helpless against nature. They are compromised by the drought and cannot live without one other. In the end they are victims of themselves, and of fate. It is Cleopatra's fate to die but Neralie acts on instinct against suffering. Has Cleopatra decided to die? Or is it instinct, like her instinct to attack vermin to protect her sheep?

## 10. Who is the Body in the Swimming Hole?

An isolated, besieged community needs to be united against a common enemy to survive

In the story there's a sub-theme about vermin, its context with the greater good, and three reasons to kill (P.256)

Things that don't contribute are culled...ewes that are barren, wild dogs as opposed to working dogs, useful dogs

There are meetings at the pub to plan the cull, and at one of these meetings it is revealed that Mandy has put filing in Mitch's harvester...which is essential to his survival. Mitch does not attend all of the meeting at the pub

On the night of the cull, Esther was at the pub with her truck, and its sling. She left with her old friend, Callum. Both had outgrown their usefulness to a large degree, Calum suffered heart problems and Esther had relinquished her reason to live, that is, she had honoured the legacy left to her and handed the whole thing over to someone who wanted to give it a future, to pursue farming and who she felt should be given the best chance

Neralie's dialogue on page 313, 'It's all over ...'

Elsie turns the lights out (a signal?)

Shots rang out until dawn

Dialogue page 317 – 318

Mind you, it could have been an accident.