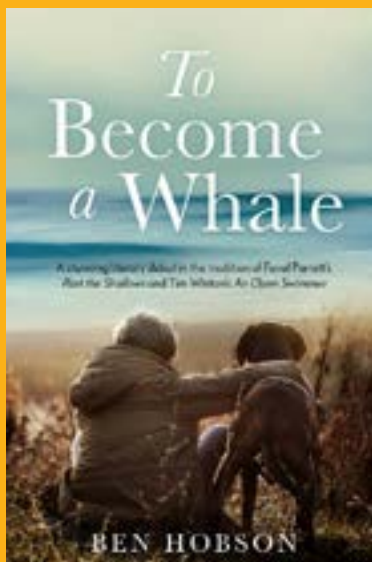




ALLEN & UNWIN'S

Book Group Guide

Conversation Starters



Contents

Conversation starters	2
If you liked this book ...	3
Praise	3
About the book	4
About the author	4

To Become a Whale is a luminous, life-affirming and irresistible coming-of-age novel set in Queensland in 1961. Why not take your book club event back in time to set the scene?

For a perfect blending of the sixties and seafood theme, serve classic prawn cocktails, tuna mornay vol au vents, tinned crab toasties or smoked salmon blinis with a dollop of sour cream & black caviar. Of course, enjoying a platter of sashimi would also provide a delicious taste of the ocean.

Don't feel the need to restrict yourself to the beer-drinking culture of the whaling station either. A Riesling wine would be ideal and for the more adventurous there is always ...

The Harpoon

Pour 1½ shots vodka, ¼ shot lime juice and 2 shots of cranberry juice into a mixing glass with ice. Shake briskly and pour into a martini glass. Add slice of lime to garnish.

Conversation starters . . .

- ☞ Why do you think the author mostly refers to Sam and Walter as 'the boy' and 'the father' throughout the book? What effect does it have?
- ☞ There are many instances throughout the novel where male characters communicate without speaking. Do you think men are more likely to have shared understandings that don't need to be verbalised?
- ☞ "It just seems when I'm not there I'm not really in my life, you know?" (p.99). Why do you think Walter feels more at home on the whaling station?
- ☞ How does Walter's approach to training Albert the puppy reflect his understanding of parenting? Do you think Sam's father is trying to be a good parent? Is he?
- ☞ When Sam neglects to sift the sand before mixing cement, his father says he should know how to do it as 'it's common bloody sense' (p. 73). Is it? Is this a reflection of Sam's limitations or Walter's?
- ☞ Do you think either Sam or Walter effectively express their grief for Elizabeth?
- ☞ "I used to be like you but Papa knocked it out of me early on. Bit hard on a farm if you've got a kid worrying about the cows you have to send off to the abattoir. So he taught me to grow up about it, be a man" (p. 196). Do you think that the idea of being a man has changed since the 1960s?

- ☞ When Sam visualises hurting his puppy Albert (p.276), is this a sign of his emerging masculinity or just a reflection of his experiences? What impact do you think Sam's time at Tangalooma has on him?
- ☞ When Sam expresses his dislike of the whaling industry, his father asks him how it is any different from the meat industry and killing a cow. Do you think there is a difference?
- ☞ Do you think the novel accurately captures the experience of adolescence? If so, in what ways?

If you liked this book . . .

May we suggest the following?

- ☞ *Jasper Jones* by Craig Silvey
- ☞ *Past the Shallows* by Favel Parrett
- ☞ *An Open Swimmer* by Tim Winton
- ☞ *The Highest Tide* by Jim Lynch
- ☞ *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* by Randolph Stowe

Praise

'Hobson takes us to the depths of cruelty to show us life. A boy tries to be a man, a man tries to be a father, and both struggle to navigate what it means to be men. A great study in masculinity.'

Willy Vlautin, author of *Lean on Pete* and *The Free*

'A powerful tale of fathers and sons and all that can't be spoken between them. The writing is honest, rich and clean, and it made me feel so much. Too many writers fuss things up, but Ben tells it simply, which is so affecting.'

Sofie Laguna, author of Miles Franklin-winning *The Eye of the Sheep*

About the book

To Become a Whale tells the story of 13-year-old Sam Keogh, whose mother has died. Sam has to learn how to live with his silent, hitherto absent father, who decides to make a man out of his son by taking him to work at Tangalooma, then the largest whaling station in the southern hemisphere. What follows is the devastatingly beautiful story of a gentle boy trying to make sense of the terrible reality of whaling and the cruelty and alienation of his new world, the world of men.

Set around Moreton Island and Noosa in 1961, *To Become a Whale* is an extraordinarily vivid and haunting novel that reads like an instant classic of Australian literature. There are echoes of Craig Silvey, Favel Parrett, Tim Winton and Randolph Stow in this moving, transformative and very Australian novel.

About the author

Ben Hobson lives in Brisbane with his wife, Lena, and their two small boys. He currently teaches English and Music at Bribie Island State High School. In 2014 his novella, *If the Saddle Breaks My Spine*, was shortlisted for the Viva La Novella prize, run by Seizureonline. *To Become a Whale* is his first novel and was shortlisted for the 2016 Australian/Vogel's Award