



The Surviving Lambs

by Lisa Shaw

In Tim Winton's novel *Cloudstreet*, the author sets up the book with two very different, very flawed families – the Pickles and the Lambs. After their initial introduction, these two groups end up cohabitating in the same old, broken house, developing new manias and playing off one another's affinity for extremes, all the while trying to raise their respective families. And while it is immediately apparent that both sets of relatives have deep-seated problems and societal issues, the Lamb family in particular can't seem to fit in just right. Specifically, the main three Lamb frontrunners – Quick, Oriel, and Lester. Coincidentally, these characters all suffer from the same affliction that is commonly referred to as “survivor guilt” or “survivor syndrome.” The term “survivor guilt” is a fairly straightforward one, and generally refers to the “deep sense of guilt, combined often with feelings of numbness and loss of interest in life, felt by those who have survived some catastrophe. Survivors often feel that they did not do enough to save those who died or that they are unworthy relative to the perished” (Hirsch). Survivors usually have trouble dealing with life after experiencing these traumatic situations, and acquire a certain attitude of indifference towards people, events, and simply existence in general. Along with this tendency to feel apathy towards life, other behavioral alterations that a survivor might experience include: the developing of trust issues (or the complete inability to trust), overcontrol tendencies to compensate for lack of control in other aspects of life, an abnormal preoccupation with death, detachment from relationships, self-loathing, and becoming mentally stuck in past events with no outlook towards future goals. With all of these symptoms in mind, then, it is the Lamb trio that illustrates how survivor guilt can completely change aspects of an individual's character, and impact one's ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships with other people, both in and outside of their immediate family.

The character that suffers the most complicated and extreme case of survivor guilt is Quick Lamb, without question. Because of the integral role he played in his brother's drowning, the dynamics of their relationship, and his young age at the time the event took place, Quick is the most affected. His reaction, directly implicit as a product of survivor syndrome, is stated clearly in the first few chapters of the novel, when Quick is alone in his room contemplating the accident, and thinks to himself, “. . .and his brother, Fish – the handsome kid, the smart kid who makes people laugh – Fish was under, and the net was just floating across him like the angel of death. He knew it should have been him, not Fish” (Winton 60). Instead of accepting the accident for what it was – an accident – Quick rations out most of blame to himself, truly believing that he has less of a right to live than his younger brother, who was everyone's favorite. Because of Quick's inability to deal rationally with the situation, it leads to acute character changes, including an unhealthy obsession with death. Dr. P.G.

White, an expert on sibling loss and survivor syndrome, found that “the surviving sibling’s ideas about death may change as time progresses after the death. Some bereaved siblings said that the realization that death is part of life was a positive result of their experience with loss. Others became preoccupied with death, possibly as a way to master the trauma of loss.” Although Fish did not die in the medical sense, some essential part of the nine-year-old was lost during the drowning accident, leaving him with a mental handicap that renders him infantile and affects his capacity to learn and interact. Unable to cope with these changes in his brother, Quick fixates all of his attentions on death, serving as kind of self-punishment. To fuel his morbid fascination, Quick resorts to combing through articles in the newspapers, looking for all kinds of stories that feature pictures of the unhappy, the wounded, or the dead. Winton describes the process in detail, noting:

Now and then [Quick] opens a [news]paper and sees a blinded prisoner of war or a crying baby or some poor fleeing reffo running with a mattress across his back, and he’ll tear it out with care, take it up to his private room and pin it to the flaky wall to remind himself that he is alive, he is lucky, he is still healthy, and his brother is not. When he works on his spelling assignments he looks up and sees the gallery of the miserable; it grows all the time and they look down at him, Quick Lamb the Survivor, and he knows he deserves their scourging stares. (61)

While it is assumed that Quick grows out of this particular method of dealing with the trauma of Fish’s misfortune, his preoccupation for the dead and the living remains present, revealing itself later in the novel in the form of Quick’s career choices.

At his first official job out in the bush, Quick is responsible for controlling the kangaroo population and keeping the animals off of certain parts of the land, specifically farming properties. Because he is such a good shot, the eldest Lamb excels at his new profession, but the intensity that he delivers with these executions indicate Quick’s underlying mania for life and death, and the ability to control life’s two extreme variables. At one point, when Quick is gunning down the kangaroos, he actually thinks of the living animals as “survivors”, and identifies them as such towards the end of the scene, when Winton writes: “When finally the survivors began to stagger away, Quick took fast shots, moving the spot with his elbow, until he was taking them down in their stride. ... He loaded up his gun again, left the light on, and went down among them, killing” (198). By exercising a God-like power over these creatures, Quick is able to recover some form of control and order in his life, deciding what lives and what dies, the one decision that he could not make as an adolescent during the infamous accident that destroyed his younger sibling. This element of power is also the deciding factor when Quick decides to become a police officer. After some questioning from Oriel as to why Quick chooses to pursue the police academy, her son offers the simple reasoning behind his decision, which is merely “to fight evil”, followed by the commentary “Quick thought of his room at Cloudstreet, the victims dancing on his wall, all the things there were to be stopped” (327). Although it manifests itself in a different form, Quick continues to suffer the effects of survivor guilt as a full-grown adult, preoccupied with the saving and taking of lives. His actions

also fall directly under the assertion made by Dr. W. Niederland and then later by Dr. Y. Danieli, which states that:

Guilt presupposes the presence of choice and the power to exercise it. Survivor guilt may sometimes be an unconscious attempt to counteract or undo helplessness. The idea that one somehow could have prevented what happened may be more desirable than the frightening notion that events were completely random and senseless. (295, 458.)

Because Quick struggles with the notion of choice and power, as both Danieli and Niederland mention, he deals with this by taking choice and power into his own hands when he has the ability to, deciding the fate of animals out in the bush, and then again trying his hand as a God-like figure when he takes on the job as a police officer. Quick is never able to accept that he was in no way at fault on the fateful night, when his entire life changed right before his eyes. Not buying into the concept of random acts, Quick spends a good amount of his life attempting to offset and balance out what happened to Fish, and what he thinks should have happened to him.

Yet another result of the entrenched guilt that afflicts Quick's life is his inability to establish and maintain healthy relationships with others. Although he is able to overcome this when he and Rose become intimate and eventually marry, a good part of his life is spent detached from others, always on the outside. According to Drs. Jacob Lindy and James Titchener, "Withdrawal from meaningful relationships and intimacy" (87) is a common side effect of survivor guilt, after a person experiences a life-changing and severely traumatic event. This feeling of disconnectedness is also mentioned in the *Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine* by Dr. Ironside, and he writes:

What a patient experiences is an intriguing weirdness or strangeness, a sense of detachment; a "no nothing mood" as one aptly and humorously described it; body-image distortion of limbs, trunk head; time distortion usually in the direction of marked slowing down event to the extent of all occurring in the present; and a tendency to brush aside or deny what is going on. (164)

These feelings of detachment apply to many of the relationships in Quick's life, but particularly his later interludes with Lucy Wentworth. The two characters share many intimate interactions, but Quick never acknowledges any kinds of feelings of love or even of friendship; quite on the contrary, he blatantly tells her that he was basically "going along without any feeling at all" and kept seeing her solely for the physical benefits that he received from their trysts (Winton 206). This is only reinforced by the statement, "He never thinks about her much, though he doesn't object to wrestling her round in the cab" (204). This complete lack of affection is not the first signal that Quick has problems with establishing and sustaining healthy relationships, but it best illustrates the gravity of his condition. It is not until the last section of the book that Quick is able to prevail over these commitment and trust issues, and manages to build a marriage with Rose and salvage ties with his family that he abandoned so abruptly. Along with his apathy towards relationships is his nonchalance towards life in general, in addition to his propensity to only focus on the present. With no concern for enjoying his daily tasks,

Quick spends almost a year with relatives, and during that long span of time he makes absolutely no plans for his future endeavors, even though his life there gives him no pleasure; quite on the contrary, he actually dislikes it.

Winter bored on and he lived an orderly life in his slow, methodical way. He washed every day, cleaned once a week, and managed to see his awkward working hours out thinking through the importance of every task. ... he'd seem overserious ... there was nothing exceptional in him but for the fact that he could never seem to be ordinary. He had some mark on him, like a migrant or a priest. You could tell he was trying with you, trying to fit. (212)

Quick's failure to find or even look for happiness directly ties into Ironside's depiction of a "no nothing mood", when the victim feels apathetic towards life in general and only worries about the here and now, instead of what is coming next.

Quick is not the only one with relationship issues in the Lamb family, however. Oriel set the precedent for problems with inter-personal relations, as that seems to be the biggest byproduct of her own survivor guilt. Stemming from the traumatic events of her childhood, Oriel copes with her distress by emotionally removing herself from situations. Viewing life with a war-like mentality, Oriel prepares herself each day for battle, not letting anything or anyone get too close. A perfect example of this would be the description Winton provides when detailing her youth:

Oh, how she hated to be a survivor, to be left. It had been a lonely girlhood for Oriel, even when her father remarried. She was a leftover from some other time, an embarrassment to him ... But she learned to be strong; she grew it in herself ... She grew steel in her. (185)

By referring to herself as a "leftover", Oriel hints at the suggestion that she had no control over the situation, but if she had, she would have chosen to die instead. She lived through it, however, and consequently, ever since the tragic fire that killed practically her entire family, Oriel chose to build up an emotional wall that would never let anything touch her, shielding her heart from life's instabilities and disasters. The barrier was only reinforced as life kept handing Oriel disappointment after disappointment. After her father's remarriage, she took on the role as caretaker, only to have her half-brother, Bluey, enlist in the military and die overseas. That event, combined with the trauma of being trapped in a burning inferno while being forced to listen to the screams of her mother and siblings as they were burned alive, was enough to jade Oriel forever, especially when it came to love.

Oriel continued to love her father, but she knew that loving a man was a very silly activity; it was giving to the weak and greedy and making trouble for yourself. Even Bluey dying in Palestine. Killed because he was careless, the swaggering underage horseman from the colonies showing how young and fearless he was, and in her bitterest moments Oriel thought of it as a betrayal, that for Bluey there was loveliness but not love. If he'd loved her he would've come back made sure of it. Lester came back alright. (96)

This particular excerpt demonstrates Oriel's mistrust, and holds the implication that she only loved and agreed to marry Lester because, in some way, he filled in some of the gap that Bluey's death had created. Somewhere along the way, Oriel's notion of love became warped, and she began to put her love into causes and objects instead of people. This was just survivor guilt in an alternate form, officially termed "overcontrol." Running her house and the store in practically a militaristic fashion, Oriel loves her work first and foremost.

Those Lambs. No joke, it took his breath away to see them go at it. You'd think they were carrying the nation on their backs with all the scrubbing and sweeping, taking up shelves and blackboards, arguing over the situation of jars, tubs scales and till ... They were just scrubbing and sweeping ... They were just scrub farmers green to town ... with that little woman pushing and harassing and haranguing. (76)

In technical terms, this feeling of "overcontrol" is defined as "the survivor utilizing the character defenses already in operation at the time of the disaster falls back excessively on these defenses as a way of warding off repetitious intrusive images" (Lindy 86). In Oriel's case, she obsesses over working so that she doesn't have to dwell on the many instances in her life when people that she loved died and she was left all alone, the sole survivor in the war against catastrophe and tragedy. In the end, all of this mistrust and work ethic puts a huge tax on the relationships she has with her family, and she decides to move out of the house completely, setting up a tent in the backyard. When Lester questions Oriel about her new choice of residence, his wife responds matter-of-factly "The tent? I wish I could lace it up and never come out, she says with an unexpected laugh. You could slip food under the flap and I'd never see a soul, never say a livin word" (Winton 232). While her laugh implies that the comment was said in jest, it is also evident by the way Winton portrays her character that there was at least a partial truth to that statement. As with most of her remarks, this too skirts around the issue of Oriel wishing that she had died in place of someone else, anyone else, that she had cared for in the past. This suspicion is confirmed during her heart-to-heart with Quick, when she tells him "I know about bein a survivor. You think it's your fault he died. You think it should have been you. You're paralyzed with this thing that's eatin you, and you don't know that it's rubbish" (268). While the purpose of this dialogue seems to be only to ease Quick's guilt, it really helps to identify Oriel's. And although she is trying to convince her son that Fish's accident was not his fault, it's likely that she is also attempting to persuade her own conscious that she was really blameless in all of the traumatic events that she went through. And finally, there is the insinuation that Oriel has basically given up on life and on happiness when she addresses Lester with the comment "Raisin a family, keeping yer head above water. Life. War is our natural state. [...] Since Fish ... I've been losin the war. I've lost me bearins" (229, 231). While it is not in Oriel's nature to give up control, this is evident that the survivor guilt has worn her down over the years, leaving only the shell of an overcontrolling housewife. In her own thoughts: "Sometimes she couldn't think of what jerrybuilt frame was holding her together ... she only had will enough to make everything else

work, these days. There was never enough left for her. She was like that blessed truck of Lester's, running on an empty sump" (269). Although it was a long battle, not even Oriel can escape the apathetic attitude that the trauma in her life has forced her to use as a natural defense.

Finally, rounding out the Lamb family is Lester, who is most definitely affected by survivor guilt, but on a much smaller scale in comparison to his wife and eldest son. To begin with the obvious, Lester shares the guilt with Quick in regards to Fish's accident, because he was also present at the time that it happened. In fact, not only was he present, but it was his idea to go fishing that night, and he made the decision to go through with it even though Oriel disapproved. Although he was reluctant to heed his wife's warnings, and played a significant role in the drowning mishap, Lester appears to be only marginally affected by the survivor syndrome, relying on his constant teasing and joking as classic defense mechanisms. At times, however, his true feelings are glaringly obvious, unable to stay perpetually covered up. This happens only a few times in the novel, but in those few instances, it is blatantly obvious as to how Lester actually feels on certain subjects and events in his life. One example is the scene that begins with Lester entering Quick's room, attempting to talk him out of his depression after Wogga McBride's untimely death. Lester ends up getting extremely emotional, however, and ends his tirade with a sentiment about Fish: "You and me understand about Fish. We were there. We were stupid enough to drown him tryin to save him. You remember that. We owe him things, Quick. We got a debt. All we can do now is let him be happy, let him be not too confused" (94). This is the first time that Lester openly expresses his guilt, and does so almost in a hostile manner, warning Quick that he has a responsibility to his brother, and probably causing Quick to feel even worse about the situation. Because Lester prides himself on always being the clown of the group, hardly ever taking a serious tone, he doesn't really know what to do with his feelings of guilt and sadness, so they just get overlooked until the buildup is too much for Lester to handle and he either lashes out or overanalyzes his thoughts. Fish is not the only cause of Lester's survivor guilt, however; in truth, his son's near-death experience is probably the less emphasized event when in regards to Lester's past and the guilt he feels because of it. The real thing that he feels guilty and ashamed about is being a survivor of the war. Even though Lester joined up with other Australians, he was not by any means fighting on the front lines; on the contrary, he was tucked far away from the gunshots and bloodshed, working in the kitchen. "You know, I was in the cavalry at Gallipoli, but as a cook. No wounds. And she lost a brother" (303) Lester tells Quick, in reference to Oriel's half-brother who died the honorable death, serving his country. His guilt for surviving the war when so many of thousands died is clear in this statement, and also explains Lester's continued involvement with the Anzacs Club.

Survivor guilt may also motivate an individual to bear witness and to remember those who were murdered. However, survivor guilt also has the potential to compel an individual to remain mired in his past, to the relative exclusion of his present or future. Guilt is the penance one pays for the gift of survival. (Haas)

In some ways, Lester falls into both of these categories. By joining the Anzacs Band, Lester is able to alleviate some of his own guilt by providing whatever services he can to the military, and by doing this he is arguably remembering those soldiers who never made it home. But, at the same time, he is stuck in the past, unable to overcome the shame he still feels for not participating in the actual fighting of the battles, as his position was more akin to a spectator on the sidelines than an actual trooper, being forced to witness thousands of his countrymen dying horrid, painful deaths while he was, for the most part, completely helpless and completely safe. Towards the end, the degree of guilt was lessened in each character, particularly after Fish's calm suicide to join his spiritual "other half," and the birth of Rose and Quick's child that gave both families a second chance at life. But even so, the Lamb family carried that survivor mentality with them always, a cemented part of their past that couldn't be erased or denied. There was no forgetting the intensity of survivor guilt was so pronounced in the Lamb household, and it existed for a variety of reasons. To begin with, the most obvious: survivor syndrome was so prevalent due to the fact that each of the affected characters was closely related to Fish, and each one played a hand in his semi-fatal accident – for Lester, it was his idea to go into the river in the first place; for Ori-el, it was letting him go, and then forcing him back to life after his partial drowning; and for Quick, it was the most intense, the feeling of complete responsibility for his brother's accident and dealing with the random acts of life that Fish was somehow "chosen" to die, while he was left to live, physically unharmed. Another reason that survivor guilt was so widespread among the Lambs has to do with the multiple traumatic events that each character had faced in their past. Aside from all having the Fish misfortune in common, each of the three Lamb family members faced other severe traumatic events, both as adolescents and usually again, after they were well into adulthood. These multiple episodes dealing with death and disappointment scarred each individual deeply, to the point where it affected their outlook on life, produced significant and long-term character changes, and, for at least a good amount of time, completely altered their lifestyle.