TICK WINTON’S

THE TURNING

A UNIQUE CINEMA EVENT

http://www.theturningmovie.com.au

A STUDY GUIDE BY PAUL MITCHELL

http://www.metromagazine.com.au

http://www.theeducationshop.com.au

ISBN: 978-1-74295-338-0

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In scope and ambition, *The Turning* (various directors, 2013) is a unique event in Australian film history. Based on Tim Winton’s short story collection of the same name, the film is an ensemble drama set in contemporary Western Australia.

Starring Cate Blanchett, Hugo Weaving, Rose Byrne, Miranda Otto and Richard Roxburgh (among many others), each of the seventeen stories in Winton’s collection is brought to screen by a different director (including Robert Connolly, Mia Wasikowska, Warwick Thornton and Claire McCarthy). The result is a feature film in seventeen segments, referred to as chapters by the filmmakers, a nod to the underlying novel and a replication of its form. These chapters form a uniform work of art.

Vic Lang (played by eight different actors) is the film’s main protagonist. His adolescent experiences, obsessions, relationship with his estranged father, and self-motivated role as protector of family and friends provide much of the film’s narrative momentum. Although the Langs are not the only set of recurring characters, the family, which includes Vic’s father Bob (Hugo Weaving and Dean Daley-Jones) and mother Carol (Susie Porter, Di Adams and Robyn Nevyn), functions as *The Turning*’s emotional epicentre.

*The Turning*’s stand-alone chapters (named on screen before they unfold) cover a variety of themes, including domestic violence, religious conversion, loyalty versus morality, childhood secrets, adolescent confusion and family responsibility. As a collection, the shorts meld to tell an overarching story of Australian life that is by turns nostalgic, humorous, bleak and menacing, yet always rewarding.
Synopsis

The Turning is a collection of chapters that form a whole, but doesn’t have a traditional storyline. Instead, the main protagonists’ journeys fan out from key events in numerous chapters. The protagonists – and other characters – then experience the reverberations from these events in subsequent chapters. In addition, some protagonists’ key life experiences take place ‘off-stage’ (i.e. in none of the films). Other chapters include characters and events that don’t impact the key protagonists, yet add to the film’s thematic unity.

Despite these characteristics, the film has two central storylines: the Lang family’s journey, and the shorter storyline concerning Frank and Max. Although these storylines don’t have the dramatic intensity we normally associate with a plot, they do offer the film a narrative momentum. These storylines are revealed in a non-linear fashion, but they can, of course, be marked out chronologically.

Vic has an adolescent experience of pleasure and pain with an older girl when his family is on holidays in White Point (‘Abbreviation’). His fascination with the girl’s missing finger starts a lifelong intrigue about people’s imperfections and difficulties (‘Damaged Goods’, ‘Defender’, ‘Long, Clear View’). Vic has an increasingly troubled adolescence in the coastal town of Angelus (‘Long, Clear View’, ‘Damaged Goods’). His father, Bob Lang, experiences mysterious pressure in his work as a policeman, which leads him to develop a drinking problem (‘Fog’, ‘Commission’).

Bob gets lost in the bush with a female cadet journalist during a search for a lost climber (‘Fog’). Vic takes a train back from cadet camp and meets a girl (‘Immunity’), and soon after falls for another girl, Strawberry Alison. She has a facial birthmark (‘Damaged Goods’). Bob Lang abandons his family, and Vic and his mother Carol are left to struggle on together (‘On Her Knees’, ‘Commission’).

Vic finishes high school (‘Big World’, ‘Damaged Goods’) and faces the loss of friends and family. He goes to university in Perth and studies to be a lawyer, while his mother Carol works in the city as a cleaner (‘On Her Knees’). Vic marries Gail, who struggles to understand her husband’s emotional distance and perpetual interest in his adolescence (‘Damaged Goods’, ‘Defender’, ‘Reunion’). Gail bonds with Carol (‘Reunion’), and soon after Carol becomes terminally ill. Vic tracks down his father (‘Commission’) and some family secrets are revealed. Disappointed with Vic, Gail has an affair, which leads Vic to stand at the precipice of finally turning from adolescent into adult (‘Defender’).

The shorter storyline concerns two brothers, Frank and Max. Like Vic, the pair holiday in White Point as boys, and the elder brother, Max, plays a trick on Frank that sees the latter almost buried alive (‘Sand’). Max becomes an abusive husband, living in a caravan park in White Point (‘The Turning’). Frank becomes a star footballer who throws his AFL career away at a high-pressure moment on the field. After this event, he surfs with Max at White Point and they thrash out their differences as tragedy ensues (‘Family’).

Chapters

Although it is usually labelled a short story collection, *The Turning* is a 'short story cycle'. Sometimes also called a 'short story sequence' or 'short story composite', the short story cycle is a literary genre that stands at a midpoint between the traditional collection of stories and the novel.

A straightforward collection of stand-alone stories includes only minor points of connection between them, usually thematic. The novel, of course, is an extended piece of fiction that unfolds sequentially and has a unified vision. If segmented at all it is into chapters, which must be read sequentially for the novel to be understood. Amongst numerous subplots and byways, the novel also usually has an overarching storyline.

The short story cycle is a hybrid genre that includes key characteristics of the novel and the short story collection. A work of literature is considered to be in this genre if each story in the collection stands alone, yet also adds to a cumulative affect of meaning not unlike what readers experience at the conclusion of a novel. While the cycle’s stories could technically be read out of order and still provide impact for the reader, the progressive and cumulative affect would be lost.

A short story cycle often follows a main protagonist and focuses on character development rather than narrative. There may be a main storyline, but it
is usually presented elliptically, and major events often occur ‘off-stage’. Frequently told from numerous points of view and in a non-linear fashion, the short story cycle can also contain numerous other linking devices, including repeating characters, settings, events, symbols and themes.

While the short story cycle has its origins in antiquity (The Decameron, One Thousand and One Nights and The Canterbury Tales), the genre gathered speed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries before coming into its own in the twentieth: Faulkner’s Go Down, Moses, Joyce’s Dubliners, Hemingway’s In Our Time, Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio and Eudora Welty’s The Golden Apples are all examples of short story cycles that captured readers’ and critics’ attention in the early to mid-Twentieth Century. More recently, Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club, Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried, Steven Amsterdam’s Things We Didn’t See Coming, Elizabeth Strout’s Olive Kitteridge and Jennifer Egan’s A Visit from the Goon Squad are multi-award-winning examples of the genre.

A cycle turns to film

Tim Winton’s book The Turning bears all the hallmarks of a short story cycle. The stories can be read individually (many were published as such in journals and magazines), but the book comes together into a narrative and thematic whole. The cycle includes repeating characters, symbols, motifs, settings and themes. It also follows the emotional journey of a central protagonist, Vic Lang, while also delving to a lesser degree into the journeys of other key figures: the rest of the Lang family, Frank and Max, and Boner McPharlin. Other stories, such as ‘Aquifer’ and ‘Small Mercies’, are not directly connected to the repeating characters or narrative spine, but they contribute to the book’s thematic overlay.

The life events that many characters in The Turning experience also play a part in the overarching narrative. At its simplest level, this narrative is represented by the drug-related events that occur in Angelus, many of which Winton barely touches upon. This criminal drama, however, is what effectively divides the Lang family and leads to the central conflict that exists in Vic, namely the affect on him of his father’s disappearance.

The Perth Theatre Company adapted The Turning for stage in 2008. Numerous other Winton novels have been staged, while That Eye, the Sky (John Ruane, 1994), In the Winter Dark (James Bogle, 1998) and Cloudstreet have been adapted for screen (The Riders, Breath and Dirt Music remain in production). Of the current film adaptations, only Cloudstreet (a pay-TV mini-series) received any level of critical acclaim or popularity. It seems Winton may be as difficult to film as some of the other prose masters, including F Scott Fitzgerald (all film versions of The Great Gatsby have had major detractors) and Cormac McCarthy (No Country for Old Men [Joel & Ethan Coen, 2007] was well-received, but The Road [John Hillcoat, 2009] and All the Pretty Horses [Billy Bob Thornton, 2000] less so).
As well as the challenge inherent to filming a Winton work, celebrated director Robert Connolly (Three Dollars [2005], The Bank [2001], one of The Turning’s directors and the driving force behind the project, had to deal with the complexity of taking a short story cycle to film.

Some successful films have been based on short stories (Brokeback Mountain [Ang Lee, 2005], Jindabyne [Ray Lawrence, 2006] and The Big Steal [Don Siegel, 1949]). Many other films have been structured similarly to short story cycles: multi-point-of-view with segmented yet linked narrative structures (e.g. Pulp Fiction [Quentin Tarantino, 1994], 21 Grams [Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003] and Crash [Paul Haggis, 2004]).

But, perhaps due to the inherent difficulties of presenting a whole film in a collection of parts, the short story cycle hasn’t attracted filmmakers. Robert Altman’s Short Cuts (1993) could be considered an exception, but the short films that formed its whole were based on Raymond Carver stories taken from various books, rather than a published cycle.

It was clear that with The Turning, Connolly and his team were stepping into fresh territory.

‘Like all great works of literature, The Turning offers up so many permutations, interpretations and points of entry for the reader,’ Connolly said, adding that it was decided each director could interpret any way they liked the story they were charged with bringing to screen. ‘The filmmakers were subsequently liberated from any of the usual expectations of both the short and feature film form.’

Taking a different direction

The most immediately noticeable point of departure between the book and the film is how the repeating characters are portrayed. As a boy and teenager, Vic is played by four actors, including an Aboriginal boy, a red-headed Anglo and a dark-haired teen. As an adult (and at similar ages as an adult) he is played by men who bare limited resemblance to each other (Josh McConville, Casey Douglas and Dan Wyllie). Likewise, Bob and Gail Lang are played by actors whose appearances challenge audience understandings of character continuity.

While it is possible to follow Vic’s (and the rest of his family’s) character journeys, it is not as easy as it is in the short story cycle. This means the film emphasises particular situations with which the characters are confronted – and their specific moments of realisation – but to a lesser extent how characters develop over time.

Additionally, the book focuses more on its overarching plot than does the film. The film addresses the Angelus drug issue and its affect on the Lang family, but significant points are left out (notably, Boner McPharlin’s book experiences are not given film time). The affect is that the film takes an even more elliptical approach to narrative structure than the book. As a result, the film calls our attention more to incidents, transitions, individual dramas and themes than to the holism we experience in traditional long-form storytelling.

The book is a cycle of stories and the film a set of short screen works. But that’s where the stylistic similarity ends. The book is by a single author, the film by seventeen directors. As a result, the styles directors use to retell, reimagine or interpret (and sometimes all three) The Turning’s stories are diverse: voiceover-dominated and/or dialogue-free work, dance, split-screen, and more traditional narrative storytelling.

Various techniques and approaches are used to create a broad, multi-layered and multi-vocal film that uses Winton’s book as a platform, but becomes its own distinct work of art.
Making
The Turning

Taking turns at a challenge

The Turning’s eclectic and diverse composition is a direct result of the project’s instigator, director Robert Connolly, conferring artistic freedom upon the sixteen directors who joined him to work on the film.

‘Embarking upon this cinematic adventure posed a unique challenge as we explored ways to adapt The Turning to screen,’ Connolly said, adding that directors received a personal invitation to interpret a story from the book. He said directors chose their stories in an ‘effortless selection’ process.

‘We extended the invitation not only to established filmmakers, but to choreographers, actors, animators and visual artists,’ Connolly said. He sent them copies of the book but no creative brief.

‘We chose not to enforce any style choices across the chapters, avoided linking characters with common cast, allowed different location choices that spoke more specifically of each response,’ Connolly said.

For his part, Tim Winton thought Connolly’s idea was so crazy it might work.

‘So when [Rob] asked about making a film as a response to this book, pitching it as seventeen films, each with its own director, writer and cast, it seemed churlish to stand in his way … Anyone mad enough to try it deserved a crack.’

Winton said that a decade since publishing The Turning he was still trying to understand it. Likewise, he said, the film offered much with which to come to grips.

‘All I can say is that seeing it take shape has been an experience almost as happy and bewildering as the original labour. Rob’s film is testament to the nerve and brio of our film culture, a showcase of talent, from those we know and revere and newcomers set to make their mark.’

Freedom to explore

With absolute freedom to explore and cinematically realise their chosen stories – always referred to as chapters by the filmmakers – the seventeen directors used a vast range of techniques and approaches. And, in keeping with the project’s brave outlook, two well-known actors made their directorial debuts: David Wenham (The Boys [Rowan Woods, 1998], The Bank, The Lord of the Rings trilogy [Peter Jackson, 2001–2003]) and Mia Wasikowska (Lawless [John Hillcoat, 2012], The Kids Are All Right [Lisa Cholodenko, 2010]).

‘I was interested in the perspective of a young person and the way their imagination can heighten things and change the reality of instances in our lives,’ Wasikowska said of her impressionistic telling of ‘Long, Clear View’. Wenham, who directed ‘Commission’, said, ‘Winton has the ability to strip anything extraneous from his characters and stories. His unique skill allows him to simply and directly locate the kernel of truth.’

Likewise, the filmmakers had to use their craft to locate for themselves – and audiences – the truths in Winton’s stories. Using voiceover, silence, dance, music video tropes, split-screens, mockumentary and more traditional storytelling methods, the film is stylistically diverse yet seamless. Each chapter has its own rhythm, pitch and sensibility, but the film possesses artistic unity. This is likely, in part, a result of the filmmakers’ inclusion of nature, especially fire, earth and ocean.

While they were free to choose settings, the film has visual and symbolic unity due to the repeated presence of water (ocean, rivers, swamps), fire (bonfires, house and car fires) and earth (whether the landscape Boner McPharlin’s Holden prowls or the sand that nearly kills Frank.) Similar to much of Winton’s fiction, the environment in the film version of The Turning is prominent. Oceans, rivers and swamps are full of danger and secrets, fires represent new life and the razing of the past, and the desert represents waste, loneliness and even eternity.

‘For me the most appealing aspect of Tim Winton’s storytelling is the fabulous tone and atmosphere he creates,’ said Denson Baker, cinematographer on ‘Aquifer’ and ‘The Turning’. ‘There is poetic imagery and an emotional response that his words evoke. This is the greatest and most exciting challenge for a cinematographer, to do more than present visuals on a screen by creating a world that has texture … an atmosphere and emotion that an audience can feel, not just watch.’

Robert Connolly said the film’s key image was one from Winton’s book: a group of friends gathered around a beach bonfire.

‘In many ways this is the campfire we have gathered our storytellers around, and we’re now inviting our audience to join us there to hear seventeen uniquely Australian stories.’
Selected Biographies

Robert Connolly – 
Creator of The Turning 
and Director (‘Aquifier’)

Robert Connolly has written and directed the feature films: The Bank, Three Dollars, Balibo (2009) and most recently the Matchbox NBCU telemovie Underground: The Julian Assange Story (2012). He has won three AFI awards for screenwriting (The Bank, Three Dollars and Balibo), and in 2007 produced Romulus, My Father, which won four AFI Awards, including Best Film. As a director, he has screened his films in more than thirty major international film festivals, including the Toronto International Film Festival and San Sebastian Film Festival. The Turning is the first of three feature films Robert will release in 2013 through his new distribution initiative, CinemaPlus.

Hugo Weaving – Bob Lang in ‘Commission’

Hugo Weaving is a three-time AFI Award winner. He received his first for Best Actor in 1991 for his portrayal of a blind photographer in Proof (Jocelyn Moorhouse, 1991), and he also won the 1998 Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role for The Interview (Craig Monahan, 1998). Hugo made his mark internationally in two blockbuster film trilogies; He played Agent Smith in the Matrix trilogy (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999) and the role of Elrond in Peter Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings trilogy. Hugo recently appeared in Cloud Atlas (Tom Tykwer, Andy Wachowski & Lana Wachowski, 2012) alongside Tom Hanks and Halle Berry. His other film credits include Captain America: The First Avenger (Joe Johnston, 2011), Babe (Chris Noonan, 1995), Oranges and Sunshine (Jim Loach, 2010), Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga’Hoole (Zack Snyder, 2010), The Wolfman (Joe Johnston, 2010), Last Ride (Glendyn Ivin, 2009) and True Love and Chaos (Stavros Kazantzidis, 1997).

Cate Blanchett – Gail Lang in ‘Reunion’

Cate Blanchett is a five-time Academy Award nominee, and was awarded the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role in The Aviator (Martin Scorsese, 2004). Other awards include two BAFTA’s (Elizabeth [Shekhar Kapur, 1998], The Aviator), and three AFI Awards (Elizabeth: The Golden Age [Shekhar Kapur, 2007], Little Fish [Rowan Woods, 2005] and Thank God He Met Lizzie [Cherie Nowlan, 1997]). In 2007, Cate was named one of TIME magazine’s 100 Most Influential People, and in 2012 she was awarded the Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Minister for Culture. Cate has received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and is an Ambassador for the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Australian Film Institute.

Rose Byrne – Raelene in ‘The Turning’

Rose’s film career began in Australia with her standout role in the crime drama Two Hands (Gregor Jordan, 1999) opposite Heath Ledger. She went on to star in The Goddess of 1967 (Clara Law, 2000), for which she was awarded Best Actress at the Venice Film Festival. Rose starred in all five seasons of the award-winning series Damages, alongside Glenn Close: Her portrayal of Ellen Parsons earned her Golden Globe Award nominations in 2008 and 2010, Emmy Award nominations in 2009 and 2010, and an AFI International Award for Best Actress in 2007. Recently, Rose starred in I Give it a Year (Dan Mazer, 2013) alongside Rafe Spall and Simon Baker, The Internship (Shawn Levy, 2013) opposite Owen Wilson and Vince Vaughn, and The Place Beyond the Pines (Derek Cianfrance, 2012) with Ryan Gosling and Bradley Cooper. (See The Turning’s official website for further cast and crew information.)
Activities

Activity 1. Turnings.

Tim Winton used a section from TS Eliot’s poem ‘Ash Wednesday’ in the prologue of The Turning. This is adapted for film as The Turning’s prologue. At one level a mood setter, it also puts us in mind of the definitions that can apply to the term ‘turning’, and the metaphors with which the filmmakers may be working.

- Read the poem ‘Ash Wednesday’. To what kind (or kinds) of ‘turning’ might the poem be referring?
- What kinds of ‘turnings’ occur in the film?
- Why do these turnings matter to the characters and to us as viewers?
- Think about the turnings in your own life, e.g. from primary school student to secondary school student. To what extent do we leave everything behind when we make a significant turn in our lives, and to what extent does the past travel with us?

Activity 2. Growing Up. A Turn for the Worst?

Numerous characters in the film (Vic Lang especially) have experiences in their adolescence or childhoods that continue to haunt them.

- Identify some of the difficult, mysterious or painful experiences The Turning’s characters have in their childhoods or adolescence.
- How do these characters ‘grow up’ as a result of their reflections on these experiences? Do they grow up at all?
- What is the significance of Vic Lang shooting the clay targets in The Turning’s final chapter, “Defender”?
- We hear it said that Westerners live in an age of ‘perpetual adolescence’, where growing up is said to be something to avoid. Do you believe this is true? What does The Turning have to say about the value or otherwise of ‘growing up’?

Activity 3. The Nature of Addiction.

Addiction is a theme in The Turning, especially in ‘Small Mercies’, but also in other chapters.

- Is it possible to be addicted to a person? Are any characters in The Turning addicted to another person? If they are, what does this mean for them?
- In the segment ‘Small Mercies’, to what are the main adult characters addicted? Are they free of their addictions at the end of the short film?
- What is the opposite of addiction? Does it have an opposite? Which characters in The Turning appear to be free of addiction? Which characters would you feel safest sitting next to on a train/bus/plane?
- Have you had friends or family members who have suffered from addiction? What were the affects on them and the people closest to them? From what you’ve seen in real life, does The Turning contain accurate portrayals of addiction and addictive behaviour?

Mishaps and accidents (or the results of them) are a feature of almost every chapter in The Turning.

- What impact does witnessing (or being a participant in) accidents or mishaps have on particular characters?
- Who suffers most – the characters that have the accidents/mishaps or the characters that witness them?
- Are the mishaps and accidents the most important aspects of the segments in which they occur, or are they a vehicle for themes the writer and/or director is exploring?

Activity 5. Spirituality in View.

Religion, spirituality and the possibility of transcendence are presented in various ways in The Turning.

- Lenny senses in the desert at the end of ‘Big World’ that there is not only more to his life than working at the cannery but more to reality. Have you had experiences in nature that have made you feel there is something beyond the world of our senses?
- Christians are often said to ‘turn to Christ’ when they initially profess their faith. That’s how the characters talk about it in the segment ‘The Turning’. Discuss the attitude that each character in this chapter has to religious conversion. What do you take away from this about the nature of religious experience?
- In ‘Cockleshell’, how does religion affect Agnes’ family? Is it for the better or the worse?

Activity 6. Pages and Pixels.

This activity looks at the differences and similarities between the screen chapters and stories in The Turning’s film and book versions.

- The story ‘Immunity’ is brought to screen as contemporary dance, developed by the CIRCA ensemble. Read the story and watch the screen chapter. How has the filmmaker used the story as a platform for his film? Where has he departed from it? Do the two versions of ‘Immunity’ share an emotional core?
- ‘Boner McPharlin’s Moll’ in the film is told with little reference to who Boner McPharlin is. How does this compare with the book’s version?
- The story ‘Abbreviation’ contains a significant amount of dialogue. The film version doesn’t. It also changes Vic’s and Melanie’s ethnicities, gives them no back story, omits Vic’s family and the accident that occurs on the boat. What, then, is the film’s focus? And how does it function with the rest of the screen chapters that feature Vic?
- Sport is a huge part of Australian culture, especially AFL. In the book’s version of ‘Family’, the ‘Leaper’ character is white Anglo. In the film, he is Aboriginal. Does Leaper’s Aboriginality in the film heighten the impact on the viewer of his decision to give up football in the middle of a game on national television?

Activity 7. Your Turn.

Your version of The Turning.

- You’ve been given a budget to make four, ten-minute short films to tell your life story.
- What events will you choose to explore and how will you develop them as a filmmaker/writer/director?

Helpful Links

- The Turning film’s official site
- The Turning film’s Facebook page
- Tim Winton’s Penguin (publisher) page
- Tim Winton’s Facebook page
- Robert Connolly’s Arenamedia
- T.S. Eliot’s ‘Ash Wednesday’
- Two Essays on ‘Ash Wednesday’: from ‘A Noble Theme’ blog and Melic Review

Suggestions for Further Activities

- Families. How do The Turning’s characters (especially Vic) struggle to be themselves as part of their families? What would a short film about your family focus on?
- Secrets. Many of The Turning’s characters have secrets that cause them distress. When should secrets be shared, and when should they remain hidden forever?
- Normality? Many of The Turning’s characters have quirks, issues and defects (think of Strawberry Alison, Biggie, Vic, Raelene and her religious friends, and Bob Lang.) How does The Turning play with our understanding of the idea of normal?
This study guide was produced by ATOM. (© ATOM 2013) ISBN: 978-1-74295-338-0 editor@atom.org.au

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