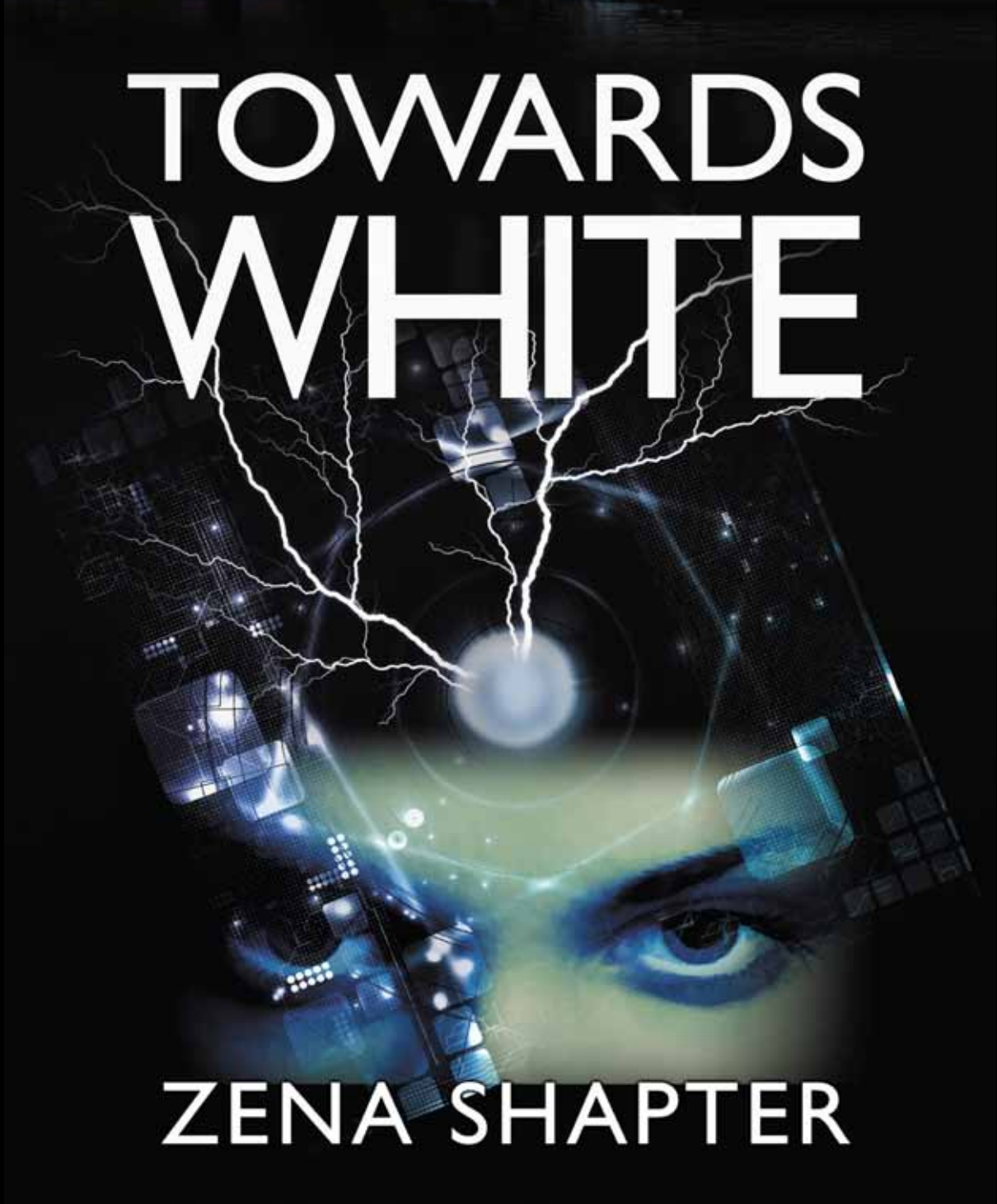


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



TOWARDS WHITE



ZENA SHAPTER



TOWARDS WHITE by ZENA SHAPTER

Discussion Questions

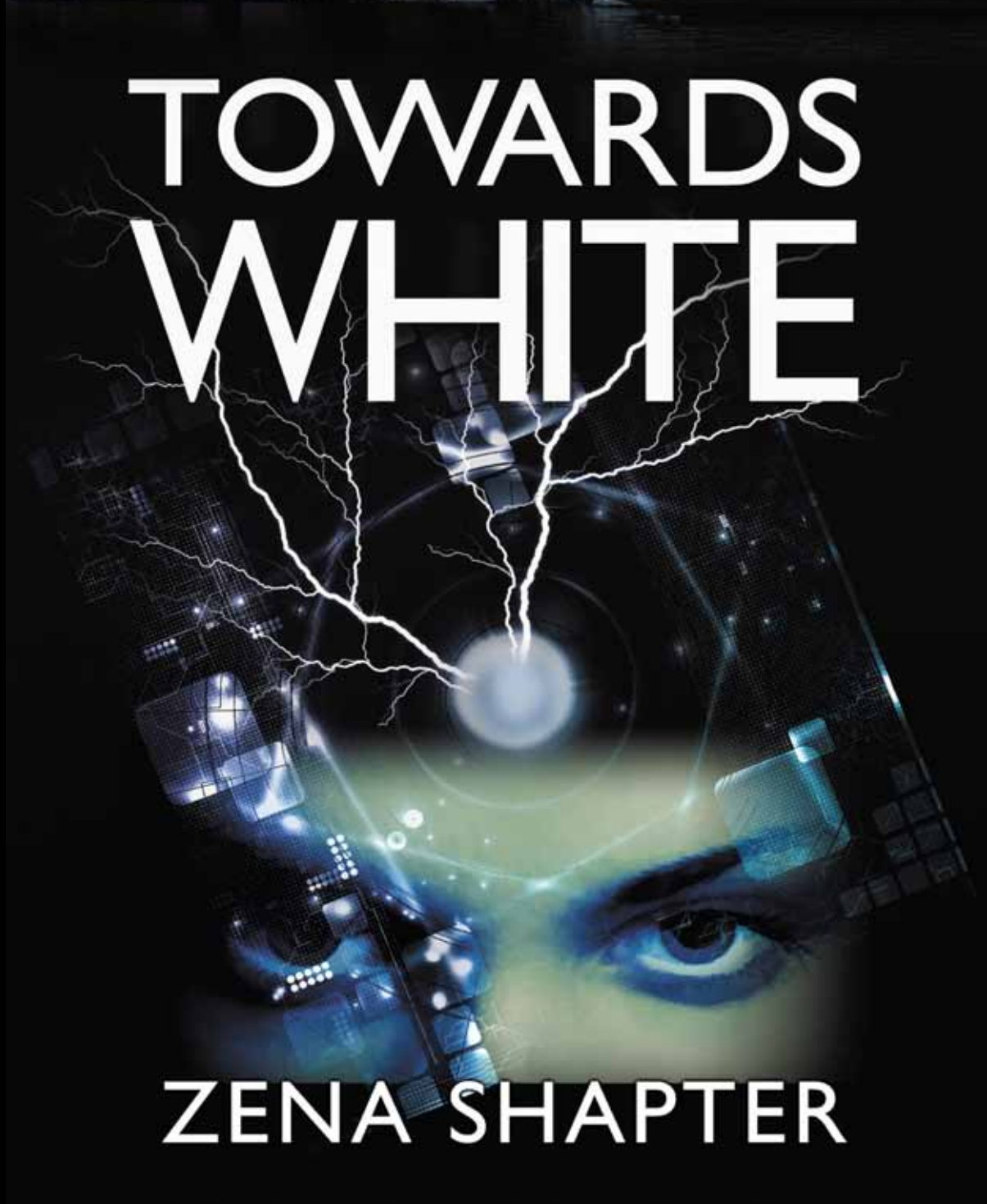
1. “Now winding roads cut through the cooled crust, curving around the hardest sections of basalt like white-icing messages on chocolate cake.” (p.25) How much does the Icelandic landscape shape *Towards White*? How do the author’s descriptions differ from or resonate with ideas you may already have about Iceland?
2. “But you saw them. You saw their calm, perhaps a generosity of spirit?” (p.15) To what extent does the science in *Towards White* make religion obsolete?
3. Go to YouTube, search for and listen to the playlist ‘*Towards White* by Zena Shapter’. How is Becky’s journey reflected in these tracks?
4. “Religions use the words good and bad. Law uses the words right and wrong. Science uses positive and negative. They’re all just words.” (p.86) Right and wrong, good and bad, positive and negative – what are the intrinsic differences between these concepts?
5. “Are you alright, Becky? You seem in a hurry. Like you need to know everything very fast.” (p.40) Is Ari’s impression of Becky fair? How does Becky’s relationship with control change throughout *Towards White*?
6. Which of the characters in *Towards White* do you think is the most courageous and why?
7. Forgiveness is a reoccurring theme throughout *Towards White*. Whom does Becky most need to forgive?
8. “I readjust my waistband until it sits directly on top of the bulge that rolls up my stomach and sides when I sit.” (p.14) In what ways is your own relationship with food complicated or strained, and how does this impact your reading of *Towards White*?

9. In what ways is human nature an unstoppable force?
10. "There is only a black void tempting me to abandon my senses, to float free from care in its thick soup of absence." (p.173) How does Becky's spiritual beliefs influence her reaction to and judgment of the *Heimspeki*?
11. "When something is so believed across humanity for so long, surely there has to be some common universal truth behind it." (p.23) How well does science today attempt to address gaps in humanity's knowledge?
12. "Mark would have done the same for me." (p.92) How true is Becky's belief of her brother?
13. What does Becky's journey to Iceland say about her relationship with her parents?
14. To what extent was Becky right to feel the way she did after her relationship with Riley ended? Have you ever had similar feelings?
15. Does Ólaf have an ability or disability? Why?
16. "'The kingdom of God is within you,' said Jesus." (p.114) Having read *Towards White*, how has the meaning of the word 'God' changed for you?
17. "It feels like a waterfall is already plummeting onto my shoulders; that a burst thundercloud is soaking me to the skin." (p.41-2) Reflect on how water both gives and takes away from Becky throughout the novel.
18. Discuss the ending of *Towards White*. What questions does it leave unanswered?
19. Have you or has anyone in your group seen an aurora? Share your impressions of this phenomenon.
20. Read Becky's introduction to her brother's thesis, which follows these questions. Discuss Becky's final thoughts about the balance between science and spirituality.

MARK'S THESIS



TOWARDS WHITE



ZENA SHAPTER



TOWARDS WHITE by ZENA SHAPTER Mark's Thesis

WARNING: CONTAINS SPOILERS

An analysis of the world's approach to the post-mortem survival of the human conscience – culturally, religiously and scientifically
by Mark Dales

Supervised by Dr Iain Hartney, The University of Sydney

Introduction by Becky Dales: "Should we want to know?"

Numinous – from the Latin numen – refers to the power or presence of a divinity, spirit or god. The word was popularised by the imminent German theologian Rudolf Otto in his influential 1917 book *Das Heilige* (translated into English in 1923 as *The Idea of the Holy*). Otto suggested that there are two essential elements to experiencing a numinous encounter. The first, *mysterium tremendum*, is a sensation of being invoked with fear and trembling. The second, *mysterium fascinans*, is a sensation of being attracted, fascinated and compelled. The result of a numinous experience is that a person is left with the feeling of having been united with a hallowed other – be it a deity, the transcendent, supernatural, sacred or holy. Numinous experiences can be encountered anywhere – while watching the sun set from a beautiful beach; listening to Debussy; praying in a place of worship; cradling a newborn child; witnessing an aurora dance over cooled lava plains...

Over time wise men, prophets, saviours and other religious figures have come up with new theories that best explain this numinous experience. Under the revolutionary guidance of these figures, countless communities otherwise desperate for harmony have evolved into civilisations and single nations, sometimes clinging to their newfound theories with passion, commitment and ferociousness – even fanaticism.

Why so much devotion to a theory? Theories can always be proven wrong. In the past, we have believed in highly mystical theories to explain thunder, lightning and earthquakes. Centuries later we know that earthquakes

are rapid releases of energy in the Earth's crust creating seismic waves, that lightning is an atmospheric discharge of electricity, and that thunder is the sound of air collapsing back into channels remaining after lightning-heated air expands. With every discovery, with every explanation science offers, we have been able to understand our place in the world with greater ease.

Doctor Mark Dales, my brother, was a pioneer in the study of how science might actually explain the numinous experience. As you will see from the Contents page of this thesis and the Abstract that follows this Introduction, Mark's first task was to compare and contrast the ways in which the numinous experience is most commonly explained across the world's populations, cultures and religions.

After reading his findings, it becomes clear that the world seems to agree on just one issue – numinous experiences 'prove' that death is not the end, that somehow we must go on. We 'must' because life is hard to live and our existence cannot consist of years of hardship followed by infinite nothingness. There must be some reward for acting towards each other with kindness, rather than obeying our innate instincts to protect only ourselves. Life must have meaning. Thus the numinous experience must 'come' from somewhere and, in promising followers a post-death existence, the various religions and cultures of the world attempt to nullify the existential loneliness we would otherwise have to bear.

However, after exploring what the world currently believes, Mark then examines how and why the world believes it. He divides the cultures and religions of the world into those that invented their theories about the post-mortem survival of the human conscience in the absence of scientific explanation; and those that base their theories on proven scientific facts. Whereas most of the organised religions of the world fall into the former category, basing their beliefs on myth rather than science, there are only a handful of cultures in the latter category, and most of these are based on energy theories, which Mark then examines in more detail. This included Iceland's *Heimspeki*.

In his comprehensive conclusion Mark supposes that science will expose all of mankind's myths and theories over time, including the numinous experience. He also tackles the difficult subject of what scientific research is still being done on the post-mortem survival of the human conscience – 'difficult' because this research is often discounted by the scientific community as being barely credible 'pseudo-science'.

Altogether, Mark's thesis is a fascinating journey and, being Mark's sister, I naturally believe it is nothing short of genius. That said, I also believe, even with its polished conclusion, that his thesis is incomplete. Before my

brother died, he told me he was writing a postscript to append to his thesis, a postscript that he believed was, in many ways, more important than the thesis itself – so important, in fact, that he died in pursuit of his newfound ideas. Due to his untimely death, it has been left to me to explain.

Mark's initial hope for his published thesis was that it might persuade more people to base their understanding of the numinous experience on scientific facts, rather than on myths perpetuated by the world's organised religions, and that this would lead to the ultimate demise of those organised religions. I guess this aspiration made him a secular humanist. Like many of us today, he had noticed that a significant amount of disharmony in the world is caused by followers ferociously devoted to the teachings of their chosen religion. Mark wanted people to be more tolerant of each other, to be freed from the need to rely on life-after-death myths. He wanted the world to be a more peaceful place – devoid of religious fanatics. He believed that if he could persuade more people to base their beliefs on scientific fact then the world would be a better place.

Then he realised his mistake. No matter how significant the scientific evidence, two facts will always undermine the impact of science on the world:

1. Mankind needs its spirituality
2. Human nature won't be tamed

Mankind needs its spirituality because without it the world of science would have no boundaries. A sense of spirituality not only functions in our communities as a buffer against our existential loneliness, it also acts as a safeguard to alert us when science might be going too far, when it might be asserting too much control over nature. Nature may very well be only a matter of scientific equations and explanations itself but, without the idea that there is more to life than the material, and without organised groups supporting that idea, science would have no limits. Why give science limits? To protect nature. Why protect nature? To protect ourselves. Nature has spent thousands of years fine-tuning mankind – physically and psychologically. Nature has not only ensured that humans have the physical ability to hunt on land, dive into the sea and create flight in the sky; it has also given humans a wide enough range of attributes to enable our species to face any danger, placing us top of the food chain. It is this range of attributes that makes us so successful as a species.

Thus we have our carers, leaders, inventors, fighters, traders, teachers, judges – each individual helps its community to function and thrive using her or his different qualities, from aggressiveness and tenacity (not necessarily

unbeneficial to a society's progress) to tolerance and patience, from creativity and passion to humour and ingenuity. If we were all the same, we would not evolve and adapt as successfully as we do.

The downside of this variety, however, is that there will always be those with an innate materialism so strong it blinds them to the consequences of indulging their greed, those with a belief so embedded in their subconscious it blinds them to their ignorance, and those with a passion so powerful it blinds them to their own corruption. Such people will do as they wish with or without organised religion (in fact they often use organised religion or a fear of organised religion as an excuse to do as they wish), with or without the law, with or without the military, with or without science, with or without spirituality. In this, human nature cannot and will never be tamed and, because of our untameable nature, science as a belief system is not enough by itself – we need a variety of belief systems to match our variety in nature.

With a variety of belief systems in place, a community can only increase its chances of reaching those who don't care, and convince them into caring. A greater selection means more possibilities of striking a chord with those who can't help themselves, and persuading them to strive for self-control.

There is certainly a benefit in asking the world to believe in something scientifically grounded, rather than based on myth or legend. It would show evolutionary progress. It might calm those so fanatic about the righteousness of their own particular religion or culture.

Yet there is a naivety in thinking our species could continue to thrive if it maintained *only* its pro-science beliefs. Mark realised this only after he had completed his thesis, through studying and living in an Icelandic society that considered its scientific discoveries so paramount it based its laws, policing, politics and culture on those discoveries (see Mark's section on The Heimspeki).

Science cannot change mankind's psychology, nor should we want it to – over a few generations, or at all. History has shown that where there is only one belief system in a community, that community will naturally become fanatical about that belief system – irrespective of whether it is based on science, deities, spirits, visions of utopia, red hats or blue hats. So maintaining a variety of belief systems is to the ultimate benefit of any community.

Doctor Mark Dales was not just a pioneer and respected intellectual; he was also my brother. When the loss of a loved one is pointless, it is a harder loss to bear – which is why I ask you to read his thesis with the knowledge that he had changed his mind: he no longer wanted to bring an end to organised religion, he no longer wanted to convert anybody. The world's religions and cultures have a long history of grounding their beliefs in false myth, but

perhaps that's because our brains have a predisposition for wondering what else might be out there, unseen and unknown, apart from the rational; and perhaps that's because on some level the unseen and unknown gives meaning to our lives. Perhaps there is a part of us – an innate, natural part – that longs for every numinous experience we can find, a part that needs to wonder at the world, not to have all the answers, a part that likes to yearn for undiscovered possibilities.

Over time, science may very well expose all of mankind's myths and theories, including the numinous experience. But should we want it to?

Since having the privilege to follow in Mark's last footsteps I, for one, have come to value humanity's freedom to wonder and suppose. That's not to say I believe humans are the only creatures in the universe privileged in their ability to have moments of soulful wonderment; I simply appreciate my own ability to do so. I am not a theologian or philosopher, a spiritualist, naturalist or materialist, a sceptic, an atheist or an agnostic. I am just the sister of a man who appreciated there was something in everything, who realised that the key is understanding the necessity of balance and moderation in all things, and that only strong beliefs in any one single system present a danger to our species.

We need as great a variety of belief systems in the world as we have roles in our different communities and attributes in diverse people. We need science, critical thinking, rationality and reason. We also need wonderment, mystery, the unseen, and numina. Science and spirituality. Yin and yang.

Becky Dales