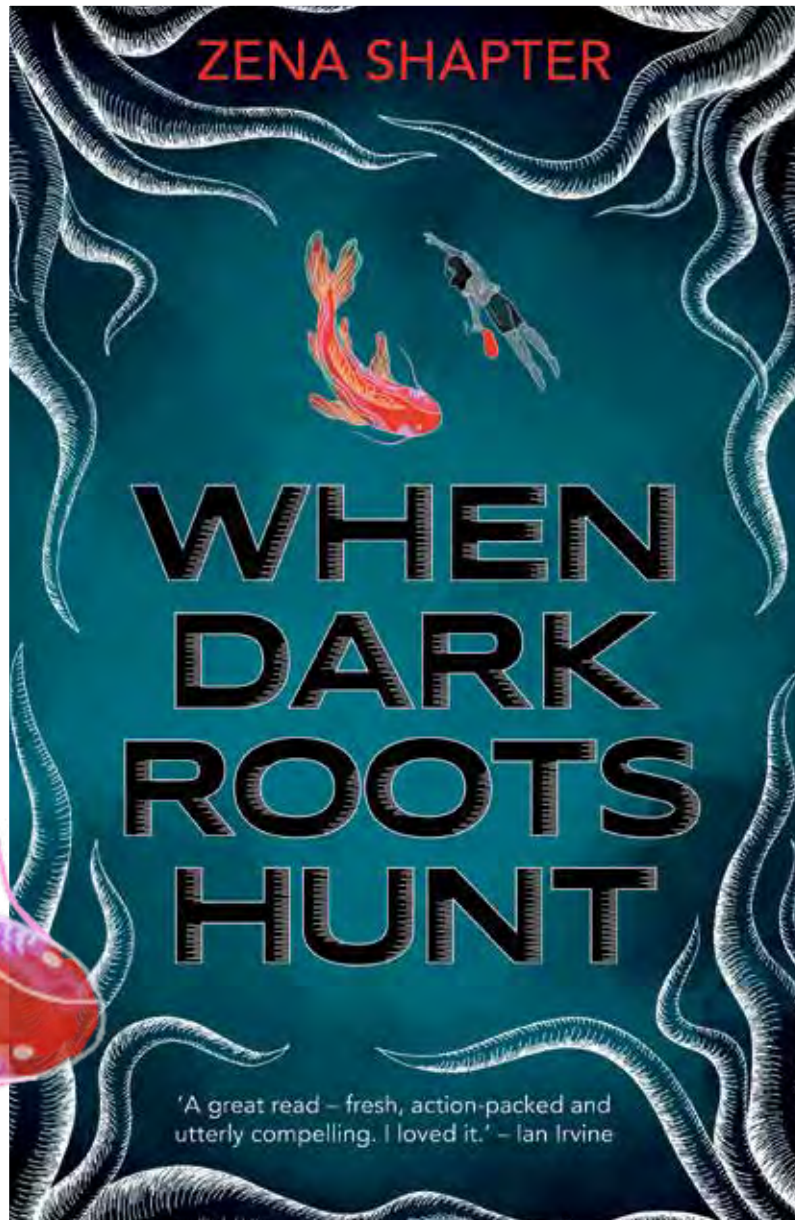


# Book Club Notes



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# INTRODUCTION

Set on a planet of carnivorous tree swamps and giant water-ants, *When Dark Roots Hunt* portrays a world where land and resources are alarmingly scarce. Survival depends on the various cultural groups of Palude putting aside their conflicting ideologies and cooperating to transfer their limited resources between various communities established on a saltwater lake, in freshwater swamps, and the only dry farmland atop towering 'hillfarms'. However, most remain resentful of what other groups appear to have, resulting in constant intercultural tensions and rivalries.

Speculating on the true nature of wealth, and whether a society's continual pursuit of economic growth and power over others is to its own detriment, the story draws subtle parallels with contemporary society to expose a deep collective anxiety about the future. The novel's protagonist, Sala, is particularly anxious about the short-sighted environmental and wellbeing policies of Palude, and is increasingly convinced that she has the answer to Palude's greatest sustainability issue: the keei fish.

With everyone's solar technology in permanent decline, the oily saliva of keei fish will soon be the world's only fuel, yet her village keeps squeezing juvenile keei fish to death to extract the oil. A worldwide disaster looms. Yet no one will listen to Sala, a trainee engineer. Her ideas about extracting saliva oil from mature fish out on the lake go unheard. It's up to her to physically prove everyone wrong.

A thought-provoking page-turning adventure, the story champions the power of collaboration, empathy, and environmental foresight. As Sala discovers a long-hidden truth about her family, along with a stranger with unusual powers, and advanced tech that incites a violent and excessive individual and collective greed, *When Dark Roots Hunt* also explores themes of belonging, identity, and courage. Its dramatic climax not only challenges Sala with deep personal betrayals and issues of responsibility, but raises questions about the value of human life.

## THEMES

- Greed
- Wealth (Money, Property, Power, Security, Wellbeing)
- Value of Life
- Courage
- Love (Family, Friendship, Relationships)
- Identity and Belonging
- Sustainability
- Land Scarcity
- Technology
- Cultural Rivalries
- Social Responsibility





# BLURB

Don't go out onto the lake. Wyann trees search the shallows to spear passing prey with their roots. Giant water-ants hunt anything that moves on the water-skin. Sala's village survives hidden behind a wall of poisonous ivy, because everyone agrees: don't go out onto the lake.

But then a strange comet crosses the night sky, throwing Sala and her pet pointer into a race through wyann-infested swampland that has her risking it all, unearthing long-hidden truths and stirring rivalries into a terrifying conflict set to change the world of Palude forever. Sala must do whatever it takes to face the truth of who she is: to save her village, to save her family, to save herself.

If only they had listened.

*"When Dark Roots Hunt is a rich and thrilling read... Shapter has created an intriguing new world filled with luminous beauty, exotic dangers, and unsettlingly familiar ageing tech, where the heroine must navigate strange cultural and political tensions and wrestle with the consequences of her own tangled ambitions."*

Leife Shallcross, author of *The Beast's Heart*

*"Fresh, action-packed and utterly compelling. I loved it."*

Ian Irvine, internationally bestselling author of *The Gates of Good and Evil* series

*"Shapter has created an immersive, fantastical world with tension poised to snap at any moment. I couldn't put it down."*

USA Today Bestselling Author Dionne Lister,  
author of *The Circle of Talia*

*"A completely captivating fantasy world, that is full of action with intriguing characters and a great story line. Sala is a complicated character who will have you screaming at her one minute and cheering her on the next... A perfect story for fantasy and sci-fi lovers."* Lamont Books

*"This book has broad appeal across age, gender, cultures and book genres, it's YA for AA, that stands for All Adults. When Dark Roots Hunt takes you to a fantastical intriguing world. To fully enjoy this book, suspend all judgment and immerse yourself in its luminosity and complexity. It's as though Game of Thrones met Alice in Wonderland in an underwater world."*

Tawny Frogmouth Magazine



# AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

## 1. What inspired you to create the world of Palude?

For over a decade I tutored English students, helping them to fall back in love with stories after becoming disenchanted with reading. They said they would read more if books helped them to escape, through a captivating story that also authentically represented their contemporary perspectives.

So I set out to create a story world that not only intoxicated them with lush imagination and fast-paced action, but which also resonated with their concerns. Along with fears about sustainability and the constant threat of war, they told me they felt continually anxious about what kind of world they would inherit, and particularly the future of land. They worried about the rising cost of living on it, the preciousness of it, yet the lack of responsibility people take for its preservation. These anxieties were exacerbated by the feeling that 'no one listens' to young people, so why bother to speak out or get involved? Someone else will surely fix things...

In the world of Palude, land is critically scarce. Resources are low. Important environmental issues are being ignored. There is political instability and constant cultural rivalry. The future is scary and unknown. My young adult hero is unheard, frustrated, and even constrained by the adults who are supposedly acting in everyone's best interests. And it's clearly resonated with YA and adult readers alike, as the first novel set in Palude, *When Dark Roots Hunt*, sold out prior to release!

## 2. What was the hardest part for you to write?

Sala's emotional journey – it's a rollercoaster of shock, disillusionment, compassion, love, betrayal, and hope. Yet the truth of her story lies in what it says about us as humans, our relationships with each other, and our relationship with the world in which we live.

## 3. What was your favourite book as a child?

When I was a young reader, I loved the *Little House on the Prairie* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, so much so I'd go to sleep dreaming about building my own log cabin, where I might find water and food in the woods or on the prairie, and how I'd cook and eat it all! The pioneering lifestyle of the 1800s was of course in no way as simplistic or idealised as it is in those books, but that didn't matter to little young me – it wasn't the simplicity of life that appealed. What I found fascinating was exploring a different world new to me, the books' survival aspects, and how it allowed me to observe the basic needs of humans and what little we need to live. I still find this fascinating, whether I'm reading dystopian novels, watching *The Walking Dead*, or disaster movies on the big screen.

I enjoy taking things back to basics and examining our essential nature. I still have my Little House books!

## 4. What authors inspire you today?

Margaret Atwood, Suzanne Collins, Cormac McCarthy, Veronica Roth, Patrick Rothfuss, William Shakespeare.

# PRE-READING CHAT

Before reading *When Dark Roots Hunt*, set the scene by asking your book club:

1. How do you feel when you belong somewhere?
2. What do you fear most about the future?
3. What do you believe teenagers fear most about the future?
4. Authors often create speculative fiction worlds to reflect on contemporary concerns and experiences. Such stories lean on subtle societal parallels and analogies to explore important world issues; yet provide enough escapism for readers to take a breath, then see the world differently. What do you like best and least about speculative fiction worlds?

**Speculative Fiction** is a broad term that refers to any story that departs from the real world in some way. It includes science fiction, fantasy, horror, alternate history, dystopian fiction, superhero and supernatural fiction, and any combination of these.

5. Most of Palude is uninhabitable – covered in carnivorous tree swamps, with giant water-ants hunting the only saltwater lake, and the only dry land atop ‘sky-high’ hillfarms. Resources are scarce, which makes the keei fish saliva that fuels Palude even more precious. Yet few are working to protect the keei fish, and the lack of land causes constant rivalrous intercultural tensions. Discuss how the geography of Palude reflects contextual concerns about land scarcity and sustainability.
6. If you had the definitive answer to Earth’s sustainability issues, how far would you go to ensure that answer was realised?
7. Which of these quotes do you identify with the most and why?

“Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come.  
We have only today. Let us begin.” Mother Theresa

“The future belongs to those who believe in the  
beauty of their dreams.” Eleanor Roosevelt

“If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot  
stamping on a human face – forever.” George Orwell, 1984



## READING DISCUSSION

1. "I have a good idea, the only idea, and everything will be alright." (Chapter 1) – What do you think is more important to Sala at this point in the novel: the long-term sustainability of milking the keei fish, or to have her ideas being heard? Why do you think this is?
2. "Can't you just drink dag and kiss under the ivy like everyone else our age?" (Chapter 3) – What does this quote tell us about Aten's opinion of Sala and her sense of social responsibility?
3. "It's not my ideas they have a problem with – it's me." (Chapter 6) – Discuss three adjectives that Ittans might use to describe Sala at this point in the novel, and also list three adjectives that Sala would use to describe herself. What does a comparison of these lists tell us about the nature of identity and self-reflection?
4. "It wasn't black roots I saw earlier." (Chapter 8) – What is the author's purpose in creating a world where humans are hunted by water-ants and wyann trees?
5. "Yet this store is left wide open and unlocked." (Chapter 11) – What does this tell us about swamper culture, and why does Sala want Aten to notice this?
6. "This is how family is supposed to make you feel. Light. Special. Safe." (Chapter 13) – In what ways do you agree and disagree with Sala's expectations of family?
7. "Their ancestors used to believe roots were possessed by angry relatives, intent on punishing them for being lazy and not being aware enough of their surroundings." (Chapter 15) – Rituals and beliefs about death can tell us more about the living than the dead. When swampers kiss their fingertips before touching the memorial names carved into wyann trunks, what does this reveal about their cultural values?
8. "...the Sendalg also triggered its forming mode... accidentally released unfiltered cryogenic gas... maybe the archives and search results were all wrong..." (Chapter 16) – Is Kib's technology more reliable, less reliable, or the same as technology today? What is the author's purpose in presenting technology this way?
9. "Cranfield swampers only care for their own." (Chapter 17) – What do we know so far about the relationships and rivalries between Ittan, swamper, Tillar and mounder communities?
10. "I don't belong here..." (Chapter 22) – Sala used to believe she belonged among swampers. What made her think that, and why has that now changed?
11. "...he didn't want me to be too much like Mum." (Chapter 23) – Why does Kib think this of his dad, and what does this reveal about his family dynamics?
12. "I smear away my soundless tears, though find some semblance of strength in them." (Chapter 24) – What does this reveal about Sala's physical, emotional and psychological reactions to what she sees in Sendalg?

13. "...dag and unclean bandages are triggers for him." (Chapter 26) – What are the positive and negative aspects of Aten's relationship with his parents? What does this tell us of the nature of family?

14. "I love it – a part of the lake will always be with me now." (Chapter 27) – What does Aten's gesture tell us about the changing relationship between him and Sala? What does this tell us of the nature of friendship?

15. "Our discussions lift me, and something tells me they always will." (Chapter 28) – What does this tell us about Sala's feelings towards Kib? What does this tell us about the nature of romantic relationships?

16. "...trying to be valued by people who don't even know I'm here." (Chapter 33) – Why does Sala tremble, even though she's safe inside the airlock? What does this tell us about her character?

17. "All Tuni's done is hurt herself" (Chapter 35) – Why did Tuni set fire to the oil and what does Aten mean here by 'hurt'?

18. "I don't need excuses anymore, because trying is what I do." (Chapter 35) – What does Sala mean by 'excuses' and 'trying'?

19. "As if in answer, the ship lurches." (Chapter 37) – In what ways does technology drive the plot of *When Dark Roots Hunt*?

20. "...why do we have to leave places before we realise we love them?" (Chapter 40) – How does this reflect how Sala is different now compared to Chapter 1?

## POST-READING CHAT

After reading *When Dark Roots Hunt*, discuss a selection of the following:

1. In what ways does the novel lean on subtle parallels and analogies to explore contemporary world issues?
2. Which elements of the novel belong to the genres of science fiction, fantasy, or science fantasy?
3. What does Sala learn about herself, following her experiences in the novel?
4. What did you like best about the novel?
5. Which books and/or movies would you compare to *When Dark Roots Hunt*, and why?
6. Which characters in the novel did you like best and least?
7. If you were making a movie of this novel, who would you cast in which roles, and why?
8. What feelings did this novel evoke for you, and why?
9. What songs did this novel make you think of, in any genre, and why?

10. "Greed is predictable." (Sala, Chapter 30) – In what ways does this statement reflect the central concerns of the novel?
11. If you had the chance, what one question would you ask the author?
12. Which places in the novel would you most and least like to visit, and why?
13. Which character in the novel would you most and least like to meet, and why?
14. If you could read this story from another character's point of view, who would you choose, and why?
15. Why do you think the author wrote this novel?

## LINKS TO FURTHER INFORMATION

For discussions on #StorytellingOverTime, including:

The Hero's Journey,  
The Insight of Wildernesses,  
Worlds of Upheaval,  
Love & Betrayal, and  
How Monsters are Metaphors

Please go to:

<http://zenashapter.com/blog/?s=StorytellingOverTime>

For other interesting articles on writing and living a creative life:

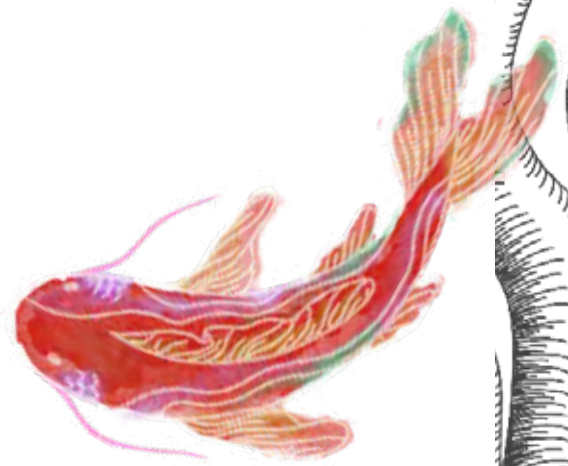
<http://zenashapter.com/blog/>

For Zena's YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHOg2qfRECB6qpZwsjHKPw>

For free creative writing tips:

<http://zenashapter.com/blog/?s=writing+rockface>





# REVIEWS

If you enjoyed reading *When Dark Roots Hunt*, please consider sharing a review with friends or other readers. Reviews make a real difference to authors, helping them to write more books for you to then enjoy!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zena Shapter writes from a castle in a flying city hidden by a thundercloud, reaching across age and genre into the heart of storytelling. A multi-award-winning author of speculative and contemporary fiction, she loves conjuring journeys into the beyond and unusual. To read more of her work, please browse the bibliography on her website at [zenashapter.com](http://zenashapter.com)

When not writing, Zena loves movies, frogs, chocolate, potatoes and living with her family among Sydney's beautiful Northern Beaches. She's travelled all around the world, visiting close to 50 countries, which inspire her to create worlds of her own.

With her BA (Hons) in English Literature, and a plethora of post-graduate qualifications, Zena enjoys working as a mentor, editor and inclusive creativity advocate, inspiring writers to develop their craft. She teaches storytelling and writing at festivals, libraries and schools, judges various literary awards, and encourages everyone to value the importance of creativity.

She believes that stories are our best invention.

To book Zena for an author talk:

<http://zenashapter.com/contact/>

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