

TEACHERS' RESOURCE KIT

Longacre Press Young Adult Fiction

An exquisite conclusion to the outstanding
'Watermark Trilogy'.

Zillah

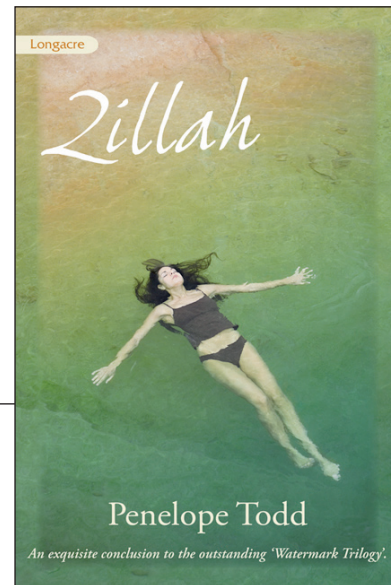
Penelope Todd

'I want to talk with myself, Mum. Over there. ...'

There is a small, green oasis on a wild piece of coast, which has the power to change its visitors. Twenty-year-old Zillah loves and knows it well: this year she arrives in search of solace, after a disturbing episode overseas. Here at Roimata, she hopes to meet Joseph: her love of two summers. But this year there is no welcome; she has to keep moving upriver.

Walking into the heart of the West Coast bush, Zillah wants to turn her back on a time she'd sooner forget. But relentless memory, and the five men she meets up the rugged valley, force her to confront what haunts her. What light can four strangers – and the enigmatic Joseph – shed on Zillah's disquieting past?

Bewitchingly evocative of its wilderness setting, and the heat of Spain, *Zillah* is a spellbinding, psychological thriller. Exquisite, astute, affecting, the novel brings the 'Watermark Trilogy' to a rich conclusion.



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RESOURCE KIT CONTAINS:

Author statement; discussion questions; debate topics; creative responses; research questions.

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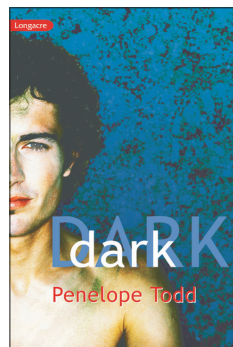
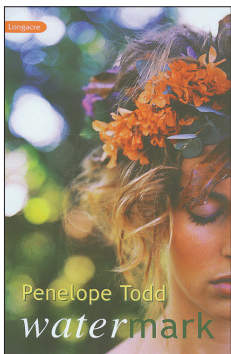


Claire Beynon

Author Statement

Just as *Dark*, did, *Zillah* took me by surprise. I hadn't had a sequel in mind when I wrote *Watermark*, but obviously *Zillah* still had some growing up to do and someone had to write that into being. I was alarmed to find so many blokes with weapons crossing her path — men with cameras, guns, knives, spatulas and blazing sticks. Freud would have had a field day. (He'd probably have had plenty to say, too, about the symbolism of going up valleys, sleeping in caves, and the kind of cleaning frenzies to which *Zillah* is prone.) Still, it's an important job for any young woman, to negotiate the tricky terrain of sexuality — hers and that of the men she encounters — to come to terms with her own appetites and anxieties; her mis-steps and her capacity to recover from them; her difficult and her delectable encounters.

— *Penelope Todd*



Issues, Themes:

Teenage sexuality; attraction; personal responsibility; individualism versus social duties; utopian/survivalist theories; femininity versus masculinity; nature versus society

Discussion Questions:

- Why do you think *Zillah* puts up with the conditions in Spain for so long?
- Do you think *Zillah* is responsible in any way for the crisis she gets involved in with Jamie and his friends?
- What do you think of her decision to head to the West Coast alone, after an experience like the encounter she had overseas?
- Summarise Martin's attitudes to society and the individual. What merits and disadvantages can you see in his beliefs?
- What do you think Joseph is doing in the theatrical game with Martin in the public hut? I.e. what are his intentions? Do you think they are a valid way to deal with conflict?
- Do you believe that Martin's kidnap scenario was really a joke? Why, or why not? How does it differ — or not — from Joseph's theatrics?
- What complications or problems can you see in *Zillah*'s belief that life eventually gives people what they need or deserve eventually? On the other hand, what advantages might there be in holding this belief? Where do you stand, personally, on this notion?

- The men Zillah encounters in this story often seem threatening at first. (This includes the men she hears outside the hut on her first night back in Roimata, Martin, and to some degree the hunters.) How much of this is due simply to her nerves and to what degree do the men seem to pose a real and immediate threat? Why does she not feel as apprehensive about Gray and what does this suggest her fear stems from?
- Look closely at the passages that recount Zillah's time in Spain. What seems to account for the vulnerable state she found herself in? How do you think the effects of this are playing out in the present tense story, in the way Zillah relates to others and to herself?
- *The bach ... was deserted too... There was no one, only objects: the patched kitchen table Joseph had holed; a pair of Hep's red, frayed trousers hanging over the back of a chair; a fantail, claws-up on the floor beneath the far window.* (p 13)
Much of the descriptive writing in this book could have a symbolic meaning. Here, the fantail could be seen as a stand-in for Zillah, if she hadn't escaped her ordeal in Spain, or perhaps it is just a symbol of peril. Perhaps it could represent the danger of being trapped in by walls that are built to protect. What other symbolic descriptions can you find in the novel, and what do you think they could mean?
- *...what was love except an urgent flurry of particles between two people? Could love save a person from anything? Yes, the thought of Joseph enlivened her, momentarily, but she didn't yet quite believe in him or in any power that might exist between them.* (pp 32–33)
Is this really Zillah's definition of love? What is she looking for, in her search for it? What do you believe love is? Where is it to be found in this novel?
- *Every government's got its scapegoats and for ours it's the unemployed and poor, sick, people who can't slot right into the capitalist system, who can't or won't exploit it.*' (p 44)
Discuss Martin's theory. Who do you think would be the scapegoats of other systems, such as Socialism, or Anarchism? What is the origin and purpose of a scapegoat? Where do you see the existence of scapegoats in the contemporary world?
- Martin has the idea that in his survivalism he is dealing with his 'shit': *'Chop out a tree if I've got too much aggro, burn it. Wash my clothes if I want to get rid of dirt. What you do means two things or more.'* (pp 47–48)
Do you agree with this idea that basic or necessary actions have deeper meanings? What actions in your own life carry two meanings for you?
- *'I used to think I had to figure out everything and do the right thing. At Roimata I realised that your life has a life of its own, but that you have to make it happen.'* (p 70)
Zillah's theory seems to combine fatalism with self-determination. What do you believe? Is it possible for these two to combine? What 'evidence' is there in this novel that supports Zillah's theory?
- *'You think you females are the tragic figures of the world because some men do horrible things to some of you. Well, it's your choice whether you go on nursing this into a monster.'* (p 99)
Do you think Joseph's statement is fair? Is the effect of bad things on a person something they themselves have the power over? Discuss in relation to Zillah's experiences in this novel.
- When Joseph explains his actions in his 'stand-off' or 'duel of wits' with Martin, Zillah feels he has treated her in the same way: *'...he pushed her away, as if her unhealthiness was the thing they had to deal with.'* (p 139) How does this relate to Joseph's experiences and theories in the previous books? Do you think this is fair in the context of Zillah's experience?

- *Zillah's mind began to flit, looking for a safe place to settle. If that had been her, if that had happened to her, what did it say about her? That she was hideous. That she'd taken herself to that point of no return and they'd found her there, swinging loose, theirs to play with as they would.* (p 161)

Zillah blames herself to some degree. Is this kind of self-blame ever justified? Is there an element of truth in it, and if so does that in any way excuse the men's behaviour? Is this just a symptom of the trauma Zillah has suffered?

- *Why didn't a girl grow up feeling proud of her body, and its secrets?* (p 164)
Do you agree with Zillah's view? If so, what do you think accounts for this in our society? Is this changing for better or worse in the modern world?
- *'We have to do everything for ourselves. Be everything. Parents, friends, teachers ... lovers.'* (p 171)
Is Zillah's statement nothing more than that 'every man is an island'? Joseph says we must learn how to be these things from our relationships with others. Is what Zillah claims possible? Discuss.
- Zillah feels the need to go back to Roimata to face up to and recover from what happened to her. Why Roimata? Is it to do with the place itself or do you think this need relates more to her previous experiences here? How are they similar? And what is different about this occasion? Is there significance in the fact she is herded off up-river to unknown territory?
- Whereas the other two books in this trilogy, *Watermark* and *Dark*, are largely filled with female characters and often deal with their relationships, this final book has Zillah alone in a world of men. What are the overarching themes relating to women in this story, as you see them?

- The characters in this novel are all self-reliant to differing degrees and for different reasons. Look at the four main characters: Zillah, Joseph, Martin and Gray. In what ways are they trying to be self-reliant? How does self-reliance aid them in resolving their issues or achieving their goals? What do you think this suggests about people and their need, or lack of need, for one another?

- Although the men in the book are all trying to work independently, they at times form a kind of 'brotherhood' from which Zillah feels excluded. Do you think there is some greater truth in this? Is there a base division between the sexes that will never break down entirely? Or is this feeling just a consequence of Zillah's bad experiences at the hands of the group of men in Spain?

- The first two books in this trilogy were told from Zillah's first person perspective. Although this story focuses even more so on Zillah's internal struggle, the author has chosen to tell it in the third person. Why do you think she has made this choice? What advantages/disadvantages do you see in this choice of narrative style? What is its effect? In what ways does it relate to the internal story of Zillah and her perspective on it?

- Zillah tells Joseph she came to Roimata to be saved. What did she need saving from? Could she find it from outside influences? What could Joseph offer her and did this have the same effect? What, in the end, could save Zillah?

- How does this novel, *Zillah*, echo or reflect *Dark*? What similarities and differences are there in Joseph's and Zillah's journeys? What does the novel gain from being read as a solo novel, and alternately as part of a trilogy?

- What rituals are there in this book? Compare three rituals: how do they play out? What changes through their 'performance'? Is everything that could be defined as 'ritual' essentially significant? Should we try and read meaning into all experience? Is that helpful or dangerous for these characters?

- Does all ritual bring about a kind of metamorphosis? Discuss in relation to the book.

- This trilogy contains many 'rites of passage'. Compile a list of experiences that could be described this way, looking for both the negative and positive in your search.

- Zillah expounds the theory that change and growth are inherently violent in the natural world (p 173). Do you think this is always the case? Is there anything in this book that contradicts this theory?

- *I would love to kiss you.*

The price of kissing is your life.

Now my love is running toward my life shouting,

What a bargain, let's buy it.

—Rumi

In this quote from Rumi, who do you think the voices of the dialogue could represent? How does this quote relate to Zillah's story? What kind of balance does it suggest? What does it suggest about the power of this kind of relationship and the way it plays out?

- The cover image is evocative of two scenes in the book in which Zillah submerges herself in water. These scenes, on the Spanish beach and her moonlit dip in the flooded Roimata, could be seen as opening and closing brackets to Zillah's story. Discuss.
- When Martin realises his leg won't heal on its own, he comes to Zillah and Joseph for help. However, he is resentful and angry about this and a violent episode follows. He emerges from this almost childlike in his trust of them. What about his behaviour is similar or different to Joseph's or Zillah's? Are they any different from him? What do you think Martin learns from this episode?
- What do you think each of the four major characters learns in this book? Are these things related in any way, or are they all on their own independent ordeals, as such?

Debate topics:

- 'Human nature' is a contradiction in terms.
- Men and women: two estates at war.
- When we suffer, we choose our victimhood.

Creative Responses:

- Write a personal essay about a beloved place.
- Design your own cover for the book.
- Write a poem or a song that captures the mood of a dramatic incident or intense feeling in the book.
- Turn one of the scenes in the novel into a performance piece for two or more actors.

Research Questions

- What is the recommended course of action to be taken by those who have been the victims of rape or sexual violation? What support services are available for those victims in New Zealand, and for New Zealanders overseas? Compare your findings to the course of action taken by Zillah in this story.
- Compare accounts of sexual harassment in Spain and in New Zealand. What levels of 'attention' are considered acceptable? What do you think accounts for these differences?
- Look into the various elements of bush survival. How can one best survive the elements? What food can be found in the New Zealand bush? What items form the minimum collection essential for bush survival?
- Research the uses of native plants for essential 'bush medicine'. Which plants are the most accessible and useful?