



Discussion Questions for Shirley Barrett's RUSH OH!

1. 'Many times in the ensuing years, I have run this moment through again in my mind; taken it out of my small box of precious things and turned it over, examining its every facet minutely' (p. 47).

'And yet even to attempt to describe this moment between us seems to diminish it somehow, so I shall desist from going any further. I have only these memories to hold on to, and am anxious lest I wear them out' (p.139).

Written as a memoir, what does *Rush Oh!* have to say about the nature of memory?

2. *Rush Oh!* is set in rural-coastal Australia at the start of the 20th century. This is prior to Aboriginal Australians being recognized as citizens or granted the right to vote. White Australia at this time (and even to a considerable extent today) was not kind to the Aboriginal community. However, the Aboriginal whalers in this story are treated with great respect and fairness. Indeed, as Shirley Barrett explains in the Author Note, they were 'highly regarded for their superior eyesight and ability' and 'by most accounts... (they) received the same pay and conditions as the white whale men' (p. 349). How is the contrast between their treatment by the whaling crew and by the wider community handled in the novel?

3. 'To see this noble creature slaughtered by our own kith and kin was very difficult for us, and we found ourselves unable to respond with any civility to the hearty congratulations that were heaped upon us in the aftermath' (p. 272).

It is now widely accepted in western society that killing whales is inherently wrong. It is understood to be both cruel to the whale, which is romanticized as a noble and majestic creature, and damaging to the ecological stability of our oceans. Similar views are also often held in regards to hunting for sport and, increasingly, in the treatment of our livestock. What does *Rush Oh!* indicate about changing attitudes towards animal welfare and environmental responsibility?

4. 'My sisters and I were slave to a great many 'kitchen superstitions', some of which we had learned from others, and many of we had simply invented ourselves' (p. 4).

'I happened to comment in passing that after sweeping out the kitchen, I had accidentally left the broom in the corner of the room. I reminded her that we used to believe this indicated that the sweeper would shortly meet her true love' (p. 334). While Mary addresses her family's superstitions with humor and some flippancy, do you think there is a part of her that truly believes in them, even as an adult?

5. As Shirley Barrett concedes in her Author Note, it's difficult not to feel 'nostalgic for a time when the killer whales' annual arrival in Twofold Bay warranted an excited snippet in the local newspaper' (p.353). Indeed, the whalers and the troupe of killer whales are much celebrated in the town of Eden today. The Eden Killer Whale Museum has a number of informative displays about the whales and the history of the area, while the original home of George 'Fearless' Davidson is preserved as a tourist attraction. Given our current distaste for whaling, what do you think fuels this nostalgia?

6. 'In truth, I suspect that the real reason 'Stern All, Boys!' was deemed unworthy of a prize is that the subject matter was considered unsuitable for a young lady' (p. 8). Traditional gender roles are deeply embedded in the Davidson family and society in general. In what ways does Mary conform to these roles, and in what ways does she challenge them?

7. "'I think you will find that there is a lot of blood, perhaps more than one would reasonably expect.'

"Yes," murmured the stranger. "That is so often the case.'" (p. 11)

Considering the fact that John Beck is a clergyman with no whaling experience, what could he have meant by this? How does this foreshadow the rumors brought to light later in the novel?

8. Familial responsibility plays a profound role in Mary Davidson's life, from 1908 (when the story begins) to 1938 (when the story is being ostensibly written). Mary spends her life working hard and making sacrifices for her family. She lives with her father until his death and, at age 44, moves in with her younger sister's family. 'It is not an especially large house, but I have the back room, a covered-in verandah, and I find it quite suitable for my needs' (p. 320). Do you believe Mary is satisfied with where her hard work and sacrifices have brought her? Is she pragmatic and sensible, or unfulfilled?

9. 'To be honest, I am beginning to feel somewhat impatient with myself about it all... So I will provide this one small memory before moving on with the story: that upon kissing me beneath the mulberry trees that night, he murmured softly that my lips tasted deliciously of blackberry cordial (excise all this

later)' (p. 337). Mary clearly means for all of these romantic and personal details to be removed from her recount; what do you think motivates her to write them out in the first place?

10. Legends and myths are frequently referenced in *Rush Oh!* – from the terrifying bunyip (pp. 56-62) to the belief held by the Aboriginal whale men 'that each individual Killer whale represented the reincarnated spirit of a deceased tribe member' (p. 230). In what ways do these myths shape the characters' experiences and understanding of the world? Discuss the myths and legends you grew up with and how they affected your own perception of the world.

11. Many of the animals in *Rush Oh!* are given names and imbued with distinct characters: Old Tom, the lead Killer whale with the 'demeanor... of a cheeky schoolboy' (p. 18); Mr and Mrs Maudry, the noisy and ill-tempered plovers; Two Socks the moody horse and Betty the self-satisfied cow. Why do you think this is?

12. Illustrations are scattered throughout the text, ostensibly created by the main character, Mary Davidson. What do these illustrations add to the story? How do they complement or enrich the text?