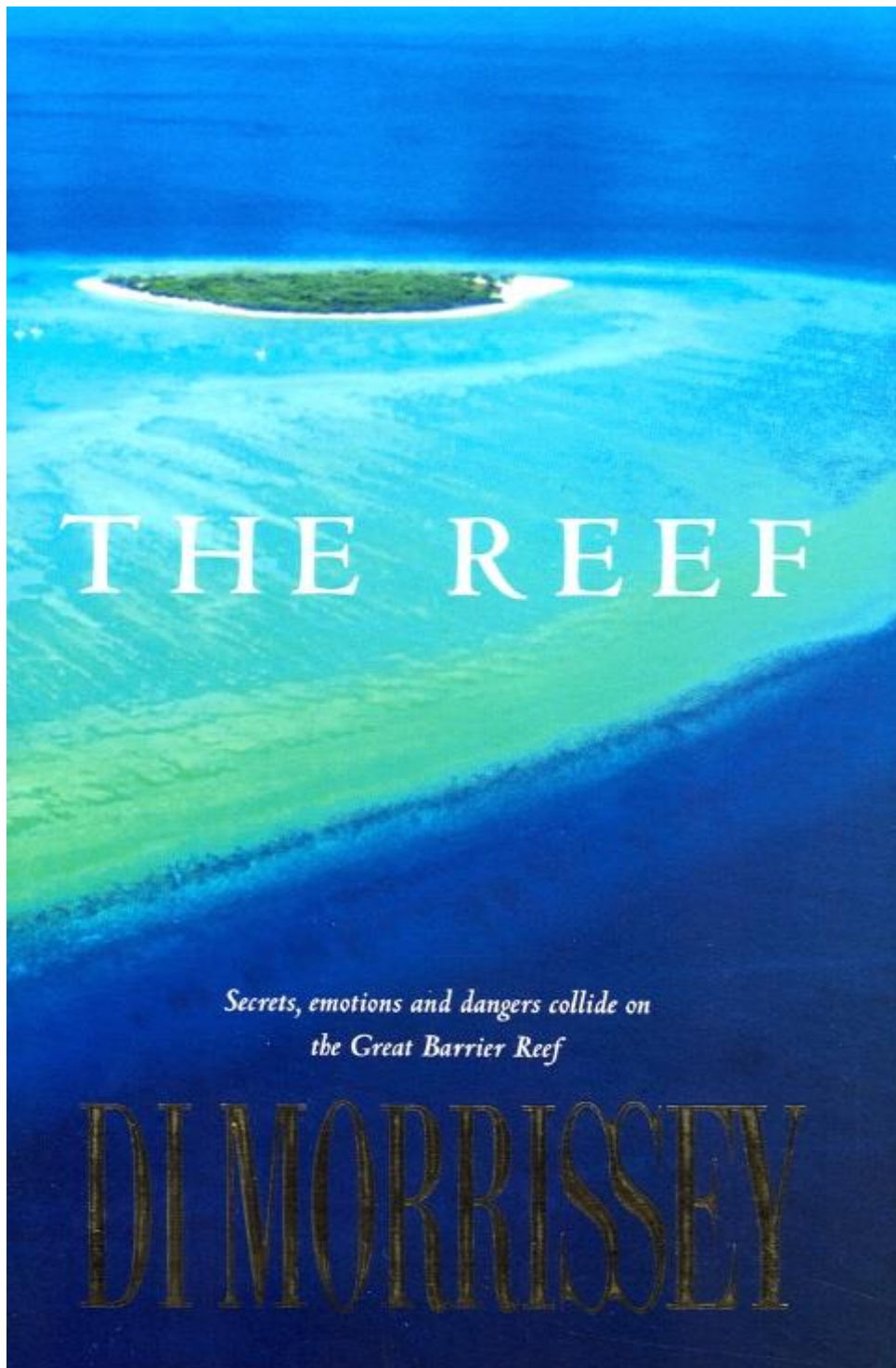


## **'Reality' Fiction and the Great Barrier Reef**

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Di Morrissey is one of Australia's most widely-read writers of popular fiction. Her special twist on the mode is to choose a particular setting and research it deeply, often living in the area for a time. Her thirteenth novel, *The Reef* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2004) is set on Branch Island "named because it was an island sprouting right from a limb of the Great Barrier reef (135), somewhere east of "Headland Bay" which, when described (133-34) suggests a hybrid Cairns/Cardwell/Port Douglas, actual towns spread along Australia's North Queensland coast, which is paralleled by the Great Barrier Reef.



As we shall see, Morrissey has embedded authentic description of the Great Barrier Reef into the novel, and dramatized contemporary issues relating to its use and conservation, as part of her strategy of imbuing the novel with verisimilitude.

But first to the story. The main character, Jennifer Towse, has a tense relationship with her mother and an unhappy marriage to Blair. As a child Jennifer witnessed the drowning of her

brother while on a seaside holiday. Later, her father disappears, and she is told that he also has drowned in a boating accident. Since childhood she has not been near the water. When Blair informs her that they are to move to Branch Island resort in which he has business interests, she is not impressed. Having just finished a degree in environmental science, Jennifer imagines her career faltering:

The conversation with Professor Dawn about her move and the future of their collaboration had been traumatic. The arrogant and austere professor was relying on Jennifer more than she knew to turn his work of important, but dry, facts about the dangers of world pollution into a polished and emotive book. He had reluctantly agreed—'as I have little alternative'—to work long-distance by email and exchange drafts of hard copy by post. Jennifer tried to be as accommodating and positive as she could because she saw this as the only intellectually stimulating diversion she'd have on the island and the only means of continuing and promoting her career. (Morrissey 77-78)

One could re-write that second line as: 'The powerful and successful publisher was relying on Jennifer as she well knew to turn important, but dry, facts about the dangers of polluting the reef into a profitable and emotive book.' And this is very much the case. Life on the island proves to be quite stimulating. The island is infested with corporate management types and their minders, who are running around in fancy yachts supposedly doing project development for a multi-national company called Reef Resorts. As well, the island is home to a research station populated with scientists and students researching the unique biota of the nearby reef (again, obviously modeled on the actual James Cook University and Australian Institute of Marine Studies or AIMS). You can see how this provides for the introduction of debates between the scientists who are on the conversation side of things, and the corporate types, who are all for development.

Jennifer comes heavily under the spell of two characters. Tony, a journalist, who takes an interest in her writing, and a world famous oceanographer from Brazil, Dr Isobel Belitas:

For the next hour [Jennifer] jumped from story to story, from photos to interviews with the astonishing Dr Isobel Belitas. Inspired by the legendary Sylvia Earle, the world's leading aquanaut, Isobel had become fascinated with the world beneath the sea—'where our future lies'. Jennifer read how the Brazilian-born, American-educated Isobel had made dives deep

into the Mariana Trench—a slash in the ocean floor one thousand eight hundred metres deeper than Mount Everest is tall. Here Jacques Cousteau had taken down his bathyscaphe in 1960 whereas Isobel, in a special diving suit, was strapped to a small submersible that took her more than three hundred and eighty metres below the surface where she released herself and walked on another part of the ocean floor for nearly three hours. (Morrissey 208)

Clearly the alter-ego of the arrogant professor, Dr Belitas gradually coaxes Jennifer into overcoming her fear of the water, so that she can explore the beautiful new world she finds herself in. Immersion, descent into the deep, the exploration of hidden exotic worlds—all these motifs found in serious myths and stories suggest Jennifer's journey towards transformation. And indeed, in the course of the narrative Jennifer becomes more independent of her manipulative mother, proposes an amicable divorce from her husband Blair (who makes only a token protest) despite the fact that she is pregnant, finds true happiness with Tony, writes a first class Honours thesis, writes some stunning articles which bring further commissions, get a scholarship to do a PhD, and has her baby, called Bella, after Dr Belitas, in a home-birth assisted by midwives after going into contractions while her and Tony are spying on crooks who are exchanging protected wildlife for crack during a cyclone at sea.

Drug trafficking on the Great Barrier Reef? Yes, a sup-plot hints at those very current concerns of drugs and terrorism. Unknown to Blair, some of his corporate cronies can see a profit in trading the exotic wildlife in which the island and surrounding reefs abound, for cocaine. Jennifer has been distressed to discover that turtles' nests have been looted, and there are mysterious break-ins at the research station where things go missing, including a secretion from a rare ocean creature. This toxin has the power to put a human gently to sleep, or into suspended animation, or into cardiac arrest, depending on the dose. The theft of this raises spectres of terrorists plundering sensitive research for chemical warfare; but it turns out that one of the crooks' minders (the same one who has raped a resort employee) has snatched the solution so that he can silence any turncoats or informants who might talk about the wildlife/crack scam, after witnessing its power when just a tiny whiff of it knocks one of the lab assistants unconscious.

No doubt Morrissey believes the injection of reality material about the reef into her fantastic plot will lend it some plausibility. And in fact, the novel's interest does come to depend fairly crucially on the many factual references to the nature and significance of the reef. These

references serve firstly, to expand the reader's understanding of the significance of the reef in contemporary society and culture, and secondly, to structure the story of the main character around the theme of the reef's significance in the individual subject's healing, maturation and development of environmental consciousness.

Let's look at the larger picture first. Jennifer's first view of Branch Island is from the air, and she sees "the rusted skeletal remains of an iron boat jammed into the reef; it jarred the pristine scene" (Morrissey 88). This echo of the reef's history as a navigational peril, soon gives way to Jennifer's first impression on the ground: "It was romantic. Over a creamy cocktail with a slice of pineapple in it, they watched the brilliant sunset from the terrace bar. The water was gilded with soft gold and rose tones. A cluster of clouds backlit by the setting sun made the scene spectacular. 'Just like the travel brochures' thought Jennifer. Flashes from cameras captured the moment" (Morrissey 97). But almost immediately, the narrative begins to dramatize the gap between resort life and the real life of the island. It's not long before Jennifer notices the contrast between the travel-brochure phyness of the resort and the simple functionality and intellectually serious atmosphere of the research station.



nla.pic-an23220026 Hurley, Frank, 1885-1962. [South Molle Island, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland]

[picture] [between 1910 and 1962] 1 negative : acetate, b&w ; 11.8 x 16 cm.

Part of [Hurley negative collection \[picture\]](#) [1910-1

On one of her first walks through the island, Jennifer discovers trees with nesting noddy terns:

Along the branch and wherever there was a fork of fragile twigs a nest had been constructed. Each was occupied by a stoic black noddy tern whose partners hovered close by or swished around the tree and to the ground taking no notice of humans. The tree shivered and rustled with squabbles and movement, shrieks and jostlings. Airborne they swooped on silent wings that Jennifer found unnerving. (Morrissey 91).

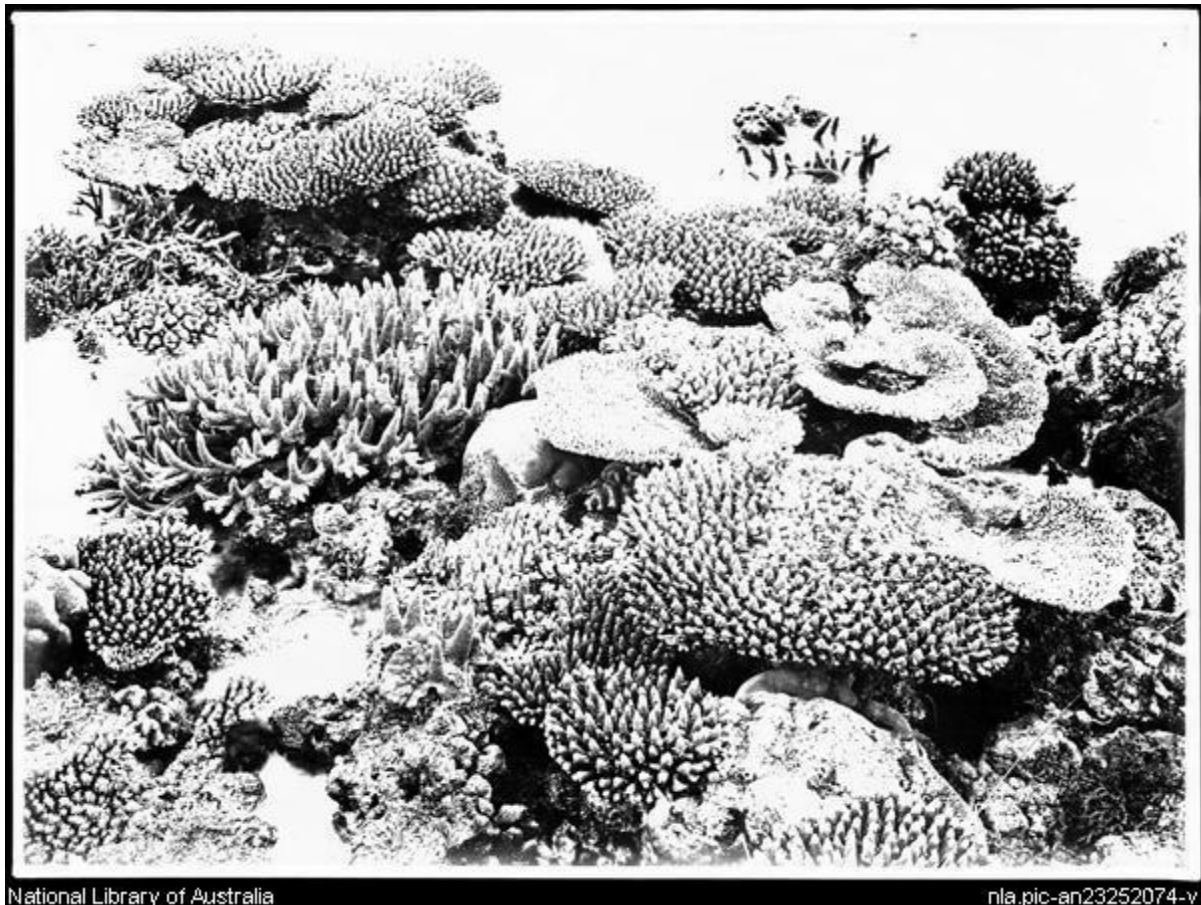
Her guide explains "We get over a hundred thousand in the breeding season...Those are pisonia trees. The leaves are handy for their nest building (91). Images of massed birds on the Great Barrier Reef have gained almost iconic significance as a result of Frank Hurley's photographs. Again, Morrissey has nicely incorporated fact into her fictional scenario.



nla.pic-an23366179 Hurley, Frank, 1885-1962. [Unidentified man surrounded by flock of birds, 2] [picture] [between 1910 and 1962] 1 negative : acetate, b&w ; 6.1 x 9.4 cm. Part of [Hurley negative collection \[picture\]](#) [1910-1962]

Much of the description is obviously intended for the international reader who may have no knowledge of the reef at all: lush descriptions begin many chapters, and sometimes the explanations of reef biology are condescendingly patronizing, as when Jennifer asks "How do these coral cays form?" and gets an answer: "Basically, billions of coral polyps accumulating from the supporting reef build up a foundation...Cyclones and storms break down the coral to make the sand that starts to build up around the reef..." (160). We are also told how over centuries rainwater accumulates underground in the islands, in freshwater lenses, providing nutrients for the vegetation (160).





nla.pic-an23252074 Hurley, Frank, 1885-1962. Coral garden [Great Barrier Reef, Queensland, 2]  
[transparency] [between 1910 and 1962] 1 transparency : glass, b&w ; 12 x 16.3 cm.  
Part of [Hurley negative collection \[picture\]](#) [1910-1962]

Guided as she no doubt was by her 'research' Morrissey manages to put some real-life perceptions into the mouths of her fictional characters. For example, the Edenic myth of the tameness of the animals, again made popular in photographic images, is a motif in the narrative. Jennifer notices that the nesting terns are "not the least bit afraid of us" and she "leaned over and put her face centimetres away from a bird that turned its head with a disdainful, bored expression" (91), and she repeats later "It's amazing how unconcerned they are at all the people around them" (98). Later, Jennifer is to become more and more interested in the turtles which visit the island to nest—and frankly, this too has been one of the many tantalizing attractions for those interested in the reef. Similarly, there are several occasions



when coral spawning is described (and explained). At moments like these the plot goes into suspension, while we are delivered a little biology lecture.



Hurley, Frank, 1885-1962. [Bird on tree branch] [picture] /

1 negative : acetate, b&w ; 6.1 x 9.5 cm.

IN Hurley, Frank, 1885-1962. [Hurley negative collection \[picture\]](#) /

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Of course, idyllic description is often interrupted by discussion of some of the environmental threats to the reef as well as ethical and political debates about its conservation. One of the first lessons Jennifer learns is the nature of the human threat to the reef's ecology. Tourism is an obvious threat to the ecosystem, as are more specific factors like chemical bleaching, or the plastic bag: "Plastic bags are killers to turtles. They think they're edible jellyfish and then they choke on them" (Morrissey 159). But also, humanity's mere presence is a risk thus posing an ethical dilemma: "...we're interlopers in a living museum. And wherever humanity goes, we destroy what is beautiful and special. And it makes me wonder, should we go down into that last frontier? I rather like the idea of it being unknown, undisturbed'" (401).

Nevertheless, the reef is serious business for the researchers, who are mouthpieces for modern scientific environmental and ecological perspectives. Jennifer meets the director of the research station, Professor Masters or Mac for short. He tells how the research is important for understanding the ecology of the reef so as to aid in its conservation, and protect against its destruction. This same research can also have applications to human life. Mac asks "...what is it that protects corals and other sea creatures from getting sunburnt at very low tides. The tidal range is nearly two metres here and this sunburn protection could be useful in preventing and curing skin cancers in humans. The natural world is like a great textbook, we just have to crack the code to find the answers to help us in the human world" (181). Another researcher says, "marine based medications are going to help cure human diseases...Coral reefs hold chemicals that will help fight cancer, AIDS, diabetes. We're just starting to find out the molecular potential of the sea" (392). Morrissey thus examines conflicting ethical concerns about research, human progress and conservation. Research can be justified but must be done sensitively. The dangers of exploitation are discussed by Mac: "...the Pacific Ocean has an average depth of four thousand two hundred metres, the bulk of it unexplored. For a start, commercial concerns-fishing, energy, oil and gas, biochemical industries-are interested. But research has to be done sensitively and co-operatively. The days of drilling the Great Barrier Reef for oil, minerals and lime for sugar cane fields are over." (290)

Simplistic notions of nature are further undercut by discussions which focus on predation within the ecosystem. While the fantastic shapes and colours of organisms and corals beneath the surface can be visually stunning, there is the paradoxical dimension of each organism's struggle for life. One scene describes a violent and bloody attack on a turtle by a shark (162). Also research shows how many marine animals have extremely toxic secretions for protection. The scientist's point of view is put by Tony:

'The world is a toxic place on many levels. We're all battling our environment, taming, conquering, destroying it...despite the sea creatures and marine plants all having some defensive or aggressive mechanism for survival, they have managed to adjust and survive side by side for millions of years. The whole system started to cave in and get out of balance when humans arrived on the scene...It does make you start to see how stupid unwinnable wars fought out of ignorance and for the wrong reasons are.' (348-49)

This gives way to discussion of the reef as a kind of moral and ethical template of human society and culture. A kind of environmental neo-romanticism informs discussion of the individual within the communal:

Tony bent down and lifted a clump of brain coral.

'Isobel talked of the power of the individual, it takes just one coral polyp to secrete lime and make a hard cup around itself, then multiply each growing polyp into colonies that become cities, then countries, then whole nations of coral! By dying, living things build and create beautiful forms.'

'And within their borders all manner of inhabitants, the good, the bad and the ugly. Very fanciful,' added Jennifer.

'It's the symbiotic relationship between everything that's intriguing. The tiny algae, plants that live in coral tissue, use sunlight to give the coral oxygen and carbohydrates, while the coral gives the plants a home, carbon dioxide and waste products as fertiliser. The food chain ranges from minuscule planktonic animals to great whales. Right along the line they all depend on each other. That our world was so constructed,' he sighed. (Morrissey 281-82)

Taken as a whole these discursive pedagogical intrusions into the narrative build into a theme: a vision of nature as a symbiosis, which may be a model for the 'construction of our world'.



nla.pic-an23252095 Hurley, Frank, 1885-1962. [Clam and coral, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland]

picture] [between 1910 and 1962] 1 slide : lantern, hand col ; image 5 x 6.3 cm., slide 8.2 x 10.2 cm.

Part of [Hurley negative collection \[picture\]](#) [1910-1962]

When it comes to the individual, Morrissey shows how experience of the reef can have a transformative effect on the human subject. While the narrative lacks the complex motivation and psychological depth that leads to excellence in characterization, the embedding of factual material in Jennifer's story helps to lift it above the ordinary. When commentators try to relate the reef to individual human aspiration and struggle, the biological regenerativity of the Reef is often the feature which allows empathy between human and natural life. In much contemporary philosophizing about the reef (see especially Rosaleen Love's *Reefscape*) the reef is the scene of constant regeneration where new life builds on and incorporates old. Throughout Morrissey's narrative there are numerous references to the reef as the scene of life constantly renewing itself, not only in the emphasis placed on coral spawning, but also on the repeated discussions of the symbiotic communal nature of life in a coral reef. These

motifs become linked to Jennifer's need to escape the traumas of her childhood and be re-born, finally free of her mother, but as a mother in her own right. Jennifer says: "So the reef is a living formation, each generation growing on the skeleton of its parents until the colonies become hundreds of years old and the reefs develop over thousands of kilometres...And incredibly beautiful" (278). Increasingly confident dives into the reef are metaphors for Jennifer's physical and psychic regeneration. These immersions also sometimes suggest that in rare moments of empathy a reciprocity of being, a oneness with nature, can exist between humans and the environment.

It is Mac who stimulates Jennifer's curiosity about the sea, and helps to ameliorate her phobia of water. He says "We are created in water. A lot of scientists believe the sea is the birthplace of life, that answers to questions about the creation of the planet lie at the bottom of the ocean" (188). He continues:

'Sorry to bore you with a lecture ...'

'Oh, it's not boring at all,' exclaimed Jennifer.

'To get the word out about the state of the reef we need the media, and there's a wall of silence. It was a hot topic in the eighties and a bit in the nineties with the crown of thorns seastars, but now they don't want to know what's really going on. Been there, done that,' sighed Mac. 'The other thing is, we don't know what's down there, on the floor of the ocean. We have more idea what's on the moon than what's on the floor of the oceans of the world. And frankly, we can't keep treating it as a dump and pouring crap into the ocean. There are things down there that are not only worth knowing about and protecting, but that might hold answers to our own future.' He stood up. 'End of lecture ... for the moment.'

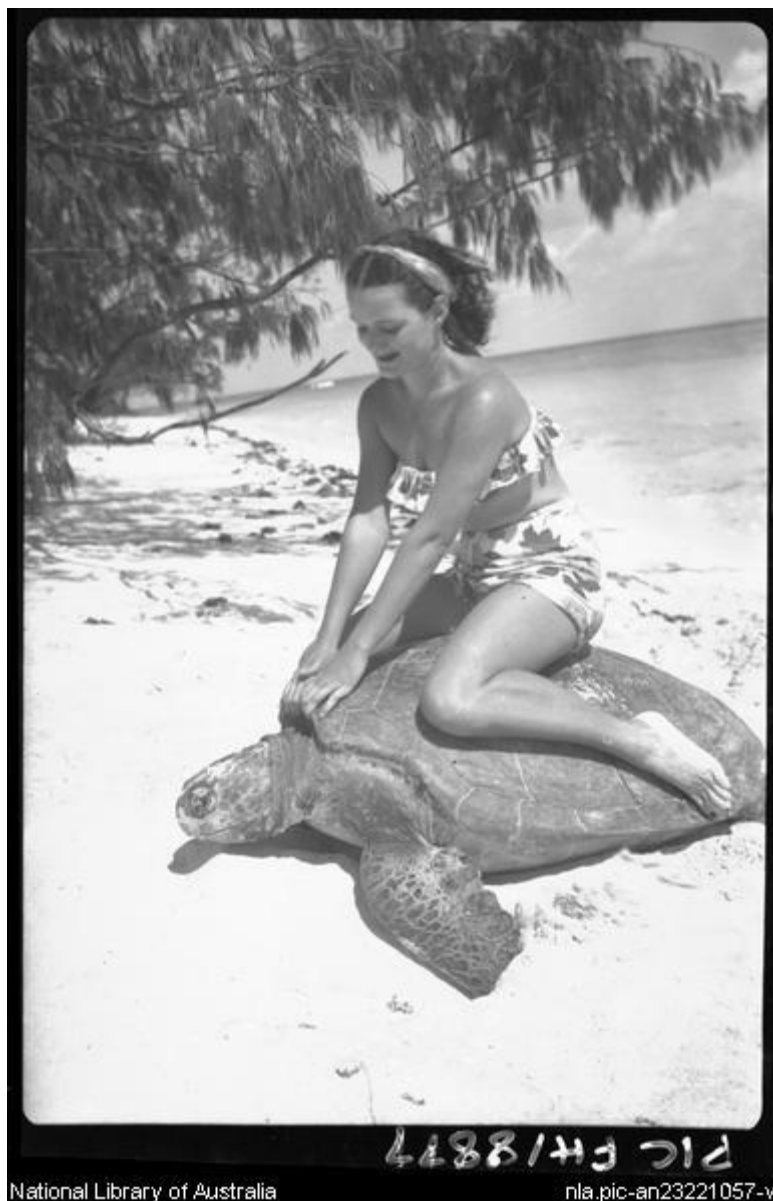
'Mac, I'm really interested. I can't explain but I feel like the world just turned upside down. Like the sea is on top and we are down in some abyss . . .' An image from the dream flashed into her head and she closed her eyes.

'What is it? You okay, Jennifer?' he asked softly.

She opened her eyes that were filled with tears. 'I nearly drowned once, and I remember being underwater, like I belonged there. I could live there ... That's why I'm so frightened of being in water, in the sea. I have this uncontrollable desire to stay down there. It's some kind of death wish I suppose, as my brother drowned. And my father, well, took his own life in the sea. Just disappeared. They never found his body. Maybe I'm drawn into the sea looking for him.'

Impulsively Mac wrapped his arms around Jennifer. 'I understand now. But I think your interpretation of your dream isn't right. It isn't a death wish, or that you feel guilty you survived and they didn't.' (188-189)

Lloyd, too, cajoles Jennifer to overcome her fear of the water. When she asks "'Why is everyone trying to get me under water?'" he responds "All the other stuff, the fab resort, tropical island, idyllic lifestyle, turtles, fish, birds-they're all trimmings. It's the reef. The reef is the drawcard. They don't call it one of the wonders of the world for nothing. You gotta see it, Jennifer'" (321). Jennifer engages in one tentative snorkelling session with the researchers (330-331) but the real breakthrough comes with the turtle.





nla.pic-an23221057 Hurley, Frank, 1885-1962. [Girl on a turtle, Heron Island, Queensland]  
[picture] [between 1910 and 1962] 1 negative : acetate, b&w ; 9 x 6 cm.

Part of [Hurley negative collection](#) [\[picture\]](#) [1910-1962]

Jennifer, has a particular sympathy with the turtles who come to lay eggs, "empathizing as a mother-to-be" (246). In one episode she helps to push a female turtle which has just buried its eggs back into the sea:

Jammed amongst the rocks, low down in the channel barely covered with rivulets of the lost tide, a huge turtle struggled, flippers straining to pull the heavy hulk of ancient shell across the eternity of coral flats on its long march to the sea. She glanced back and saw the old female had come in to shore to lay her eggs...Unless she got back into the sea she would die, stranded here to boil in her shell in the sun...

'You poor old mother.' Touched by the persistence of a mother following a prehistoric instinct, Jennifer crouched, shoving and pushing to help. Panting and straining, she seemed to make little difference.. If this was to be this turtle's fate, so be it.

'No, I can't leave you here.' Some mothering, female bond surged in Jennifer. She lay beneath the peak of the turtle's egg tube, shoved her shoulder under the point of the shell and, taking a deep breath, lifted and pushed...Slipping, sliding, Jennifer pushed and pulled, the turtle levering its weight so together they made gradual, bumpy, grinding progress over the coral flat.

... They inched along, the turtle distressed. It struggled, but some will, some maternal force in Jennifer, gave her strength and tenacity and she finally tilted the old turtle into the shallow channel. Feeling water under its flippers, the turtle struggled forward with renewed energy. Jennifer was worried it would try to return to its former trajectory, so she hung on, now both of them dragging and scratching through the narrow channel with the water up to Jennifer's knees.

Then there was a gap, and a surge of water, and the channel dropped away to sudden depths. Jennifer held on to the great shell as the turtle started to swim, its head out of the sea, its gaze set on some distant horizon.

It happened so quickly. The turtle was stroking determinedly ahead, carried by the washing current. Jennifer, clinging to its back, was swept into the deep narrow channel, heading to the white surge at the edge of the reef. In seconds they were through the choppy foam and suddenly in clear, gentle water. The turtle dived, swimming strongly, easily, and

Jennifer gasped, shut her mouth and loosened her grip as it slid below the surface. The cumbersome beast was now weightless, moving gracefully through the blue water.

The connection between them slipped away. The turtle tilted, swimming deeper, a flash of creamy undershell and a slight turn of the head. Did she see in that glassy, beady eye a look of knowingness, of gratitude? ... she hauled herself shorewards with kicking legs and stroking arms until she could stand. Wobbling and tripping, her feet scraped the sand while she waded and then scrambled across the rocky shallows to the beach.

She fell onto the sand, her arms and legs scratched and bleeding, but overwhelmed by a sense of triumph. Something told her this was going to make her a better scientist-she had been there with her subject and had shared an innate if brief connection. (Morrissey 388-90)

Some time after this event, Jennifer has her baby, and she returns to the same scene:

Deeper and deeper still she glided through the translucent water. Clouds of curious neon-coloured fish swarmed before her face. A rose and yellow coral wall slid down to greener depths. Lazily, an enormous yellow-spotted blue Maori wrasse cruised past, its massive mouth closed in a benign expression. Manta rays performing their own ballet sailed above her. In the underwater forest she was dwarfed, threading her way through the fleshy waving tangle of seaweed arms reaching to sunlight.

In a stretch of clear water she felt she was flying through the sky. A flick and a shark was there, and gone, minding its own business.

Across the seagrass meadows of waving gold, to a ledge where anemones clung with the soft corals protecting their beautiful but poisonous residents, a starry reef eel slithered and a fat red emperor held its mouth open for cleaner fish to dart in and clean its mouth and teeth. The tiny blue fish swimming in and out of the predatory jaws had read the signals: they were safe until their job was done.

And in the shimmery distant water, did she glimpse for a moment or two the soft human shapes of a boy and girl? Holding hands, swimming together, at home and at peace in the warm kind waters of the reef and its world. So different from the turbulent coastal seas and a rocky ledge where waves had snatched a family's joy, children's dreams and a mother's hope.

Upwards, bubbles hissing from a breath, she broke through the surface. A hand reached down and helped her swing on to the ladder, and she pulled herself up as water streamed off her red wetsuit and silver airtanks. Jennifer pushed her mask back on her head, took out her mouthpiece and snapped the straps as Tony lifted the tanks from her back.

'Was it bella, bella?' he asked gently.

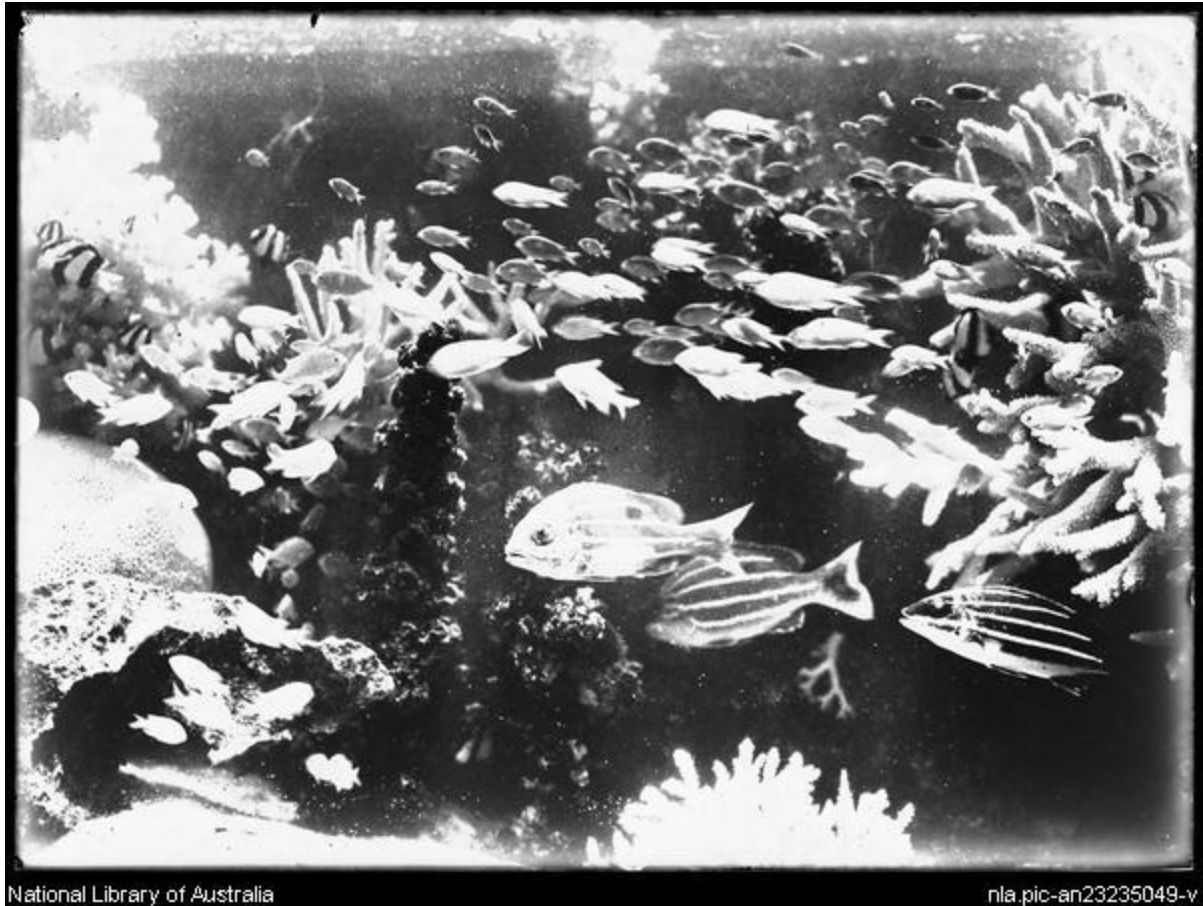
'Very. I never believed I would be able to experience, to really feel part of that world ... down there.' She dropped her flippers on the deck and gazed down into the water. 'I'll keep doing this. But right now, at this moment, I feel a chapter has come to an end.'

Tony leaned over and kissed her salty wet lips. 'There will be plenty of time to begin other stories.'

And indeed, a 'chapter has come to an end: the novel concludes with Jennifer placing a memento of her father in a crevice in the coral, where it will become part of the living reef:

It lay dead and white in the palm of her hand. The ancient shell she'd found in her father's field one day. Jennifer picked her way across the reef flat to the rim of deep water. The tide would soon turn back towards the island. She drew a breath and fell forward into the startling blue, kicking down, her arms pulling her towards the rocky ledge she'd seen from the surface. She saw a clump of pink branching coral nestled in the arms of seagrass and so she placed the fossil between them. As she thrust her body back to the surface she liked to think the limestone that had frozen the small shell in time would re-form, that grains of coral sand would support the tiny creatures in rebuilding, continuing the reef's cycle of life. Her head rose from the crystal water. The sun was shining. (498-99-500)

Di Morrissey's *The Reef* succeeds in popularising both serious scientific knowledge about the reef and more emotional and experiential insights into its significance. The narrative's appeal and authority is enhanced by the accuracy of Morrissey's description of the setting. Although the plot has some of the exaggerations of the popular romance, at its heart is a story of intellectual and emotional transformation enacted in an environment which engenders human responses to do with permanence and change, birth and re-birth, and the wonders and paradoxes of nature.



nla.pic-an23235049 Hurley, Frank, 1885-1962. [Coral fish, Queensland]  
[picture] [between 1910 and 1962] 1 negative : glass, b&w ; 12 x 16.3cm.  
Part of [Hurley negative collection \[picture\]](#) [1910-1962]

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