

The Sawdust House Book Club Notes

Book Summary

The Sawdust House meets James 'Yankee' Sullivan as he is held in a San Francisco jail in 1856 by the Committee of Vigilance, which aims to extradite Australian criminals from the town. Sullivan's fellow prisoners are one by one taken away to be hanged and it seems he will share the same fate.

Rallying for his release is Yankee's mistress and the mother of their young daughters. Meanwhile, inside his dingy cell, Yankee recounts his life story of tragedy, triumph and – at last – love to an American journalist with his own motivations. The engrossing tale takes readers all over the world, from the slums of London to the colonies of Australia to the streets of New York.

About the Author

David Whish-Wilson is an author born in Newcastle, NSW, but raised in Singapore, Victoria and WA. He has also lived in Europe, Africa and Asia and has taught in prison systems in both WA and Fiji where he started the country's first prisoner writing program.

Whish-Wilson began his writing career by publishing short stories before moving on to novels. He has twice been shortlisted in the prestigious Ned Kelly Awards (2010 for *Line of Sight* and 2020 for *True West*). Whish-Wilson currently lives in Fremantle and teaches creative writing at Curtin University.

Discussion Questions

1. How has Whish-Wilson's portrayal of James Sullivan paid testament to the historical figure and his memory?
2. How has punctuation and grammar been utilised to evoke Sullivan's character?
3. The book is typeset in an unusual manner, displaying dialogue through new pages rather than the traditional quotation marks. How has this stylistic choice influenced the flow and tone of the story?
4. How has the use of dialogue been used to distinguish between characters?
5. How has Whish-Wilson used scene and setting to illuminate the various locations within the novel?
6. How do Sullivan's interview and subsequent friendship with Thomas Crane change him as a character?

7. Sullivan often flicks between his descriptions of poverty and wealth. What is the resultant characterisation of the working class?
8. Keeping in mind the time at which the story is set, do you agree or disagree with the way in which Sullivan's father brought him up and taught him to fight? Why or why not?
9. Towards the end of the novel we discover the truth of Sullivan's first wife. What does Sullivan's description of his first wife compared to his second reveal about his character?
10. How do you think Sullivan's final act within the book changes him as a character? Does it show his weaknesses as a man or does it instead show his bravery?

Other Recommendations

- *Second Innings: On Men, Mental Health and Cricket* by Barry Nicholls' (Fremantle Press)
- *Debesa: The Story of Frank and Katie Rodriguez* by Cindy Solonec (Magabala Books)
- *Not Always Diplomatic: An Australian Woman's Journey Through International Affairs* by Sue Boyd (UWA Press)
- *Father of the Lost Boys* by Yuot Alaak (Fremantle Press)
- *Slice Girls* by Joan Arakkal (Ventura Press)