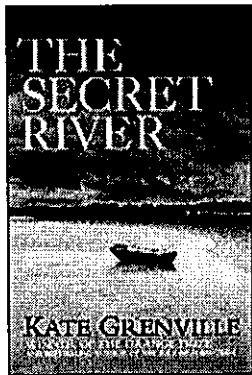


The Secret River

by Kate Grenville



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Review-A-Day

"The most remarkable quality of Kate Grenville's new novel is the way it conveys the enormous tragedy of Australia's founding through the moral compromises of a single ordinary man....Grenville's powerful telling of this story is so moving, so exciting, that you're barely aware of how heavy and profound its meaning is until you reach the end in a moment of stunned sadness." *Ron Charles, The Washington Post Book World* (read the entire Washington Post Book World review)

Synopses & Reviews

Publisher Comments:

The Orange Prize-winning author Kate Grenville recalls her family's history in an astounding novel about the pioneers of New South Wales. Already a best seller in Australia, *The Secret River* is the story of Grenville's ancestors, who wrested a new life from the alien terrain of Australia and its native people. London, 1806. William Thornhill, a Thames bargeman, is deported to the New South Wales colony in what would become Australia. In this new world of convicts and charlatans, Thornhill tries to pull his family into a position of power and comfort. When he rounds a bend in the Hawkesbury River and sees a gentle slope of land, he becomes determined to make the place his own. But, as uninhabited as the island appears, Australia is full of native people, and they do not take kindly to Thornhill's theft of their home.

The Secret River is the tale of Thornhill's deep love for his small corner of the new world, and his slow realization that if he wants to settle there, he must ally himself with the most despicable of the white settlers, and to keep his family safe, he must permit terrifying cruelty to come to innocent people.

Review:

"Grenville's Australian bestseller, which won the Orange Prize, is an eye-opening tale of the settlement of New South Wales by a population of exiled British criminals. Research into her own ancestry informs Grenville's work, the

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chronicle of fictional husband, father and petty thief William Thornhill and his path from poverty to prison, then freedom. Crime is a way of life for Thornhill growing up in the slums of London at the turn of the 19th century -- until he's caught stealing lumber. Luckily for him, a life sentence in the penal colony of New South Wales saves him from the gallows. With his wife, Sal, and a growing flock of children, Thornhill journeys to the colony and a convict's life of servitude. Gradually working his way through the system, Thornhill becomes a free man with his own claim to the savage land. But as he transforms himself into a trader on the river, Thornhill realizes that the British are not the first to make New South Wales their home. A delicate coexistence with the native population dissolves into violence, and here Grenville earns her praise, presenting the settler -- aboriginal conflict with equanimity and understanding. Grenville's story illuminates a lesser-known part of history -- at least to American readers -- with sharp prose and a vivid frontier family." *Publishers Weekly* (Copyright Reed Business Information, Inc.)

Review:

"A riveting narrative unfolds into a chilling allegory...[a] rich historical novel....Grenville's best, and a giant leap forward." *Kirkus Reviews*

Review:

"Grenville writes lyrically, especially in her description of the Australian landscape, while her gift for the telling phrase...enlivens an essentially dark narrative." *Booklist*

Review:

"The narrative offers a fascinating look at the uneasy coexistence between the settlers and the aborigines, as well as at the internal pressures of a marriage where husband and wife nurture contradictory dreams." *Library Journal*

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Indigenous Australians

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This article is about the original inhabitants of Australia. For the Australian definition in law, see [Australian Aborigines](#).

Indigenous Australians are the original inhabitants of the [Australian continent](#) and nearby islands.^[3] Indigenous Australians migrated from [Africa](#) to [Asia](#) around 70,000 years ago^[4] and arrived in Australia around 50,000 years ago.^{[5][6]} The Torres Strait Islanders are indigenous to the [Torres Strait](#) Islands, which are at the northernmost tip of Queensland near [Papua New Guinea](#). The term "Aboriginal" is traditionally applied to only the [indigenous inhabitants of mainland Australia](#) and [Tasmania](#), along with some of the adjacent islands, i.e.: the "first peoples". *Indigenous Australians* is an inclusive term used when referring to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait islanders.

The earliest definite human remains found to date are that of [Mungo Man](#), which have been dated at about 40,000 years old, but the time of arrival of the ancestors of Indigenous Australians is a matter of debate among researchers, with estimates dating back as far as 125,000 years ago.^[7] There is great diversity among different Indigenous communities and societies in Australia, each with its own unique mixture of cultures, customs and languages. In present-day Australia these groups are further divided into local communities.^[8]

Although there were over 250–300 spoken languages with 600 dialects at the start of European settlement, fewer than 200 of these remain in use,^[9] and all but 20 are considered to be endangered.^[10] Aboriginal people today mostly speak English, with Aboriginal phrases and words being added to create [Australian Aboriginal English](#). The population of Indigenous Australians at the time of permanent European settlement has been estimated at between 318,000^[11] and 1,000,000^[12] with the distribution being similar to that of the current Australian population, with the majority living in the south-east, centred along the [Murray River](#).^[13]

History

Most scholars date the arrival of humans in Australia at 40,000 to 50,000 years ago, with a possible range of up to 125,000 years ago.^[7]

It is generally believed that Aboriginal people are the descendants of a single migration into the continent, split from the first modern human populations to leave Africa, 64,000 to 75,000 years ago,^[37] although a minority propose that there were three waves of migration,^[38] most likely island hopping by boat during periods of low sea levels (see [Prehistory of Australia](#)). Aboriginal people seem to have lived a long time in the same environment as the now extinct [Australian megafauna](#).^[39]

Aboriginal people mainly lived as [hunter-gatherers](#), hunting and foraging for food from the land. Although Aboriginal society was generally mobile, or [semi-nomadic](#), moving due to the

changing food availability found across different areas as seasons changed, the mode of life and material cultures varied greatly from region to region, and there were permanent settlements^[40] and agriculture^[41] in some areas. The greatest population density was to be found in the southern and eastern regions of the continent, the [River Murray](#) valley in particular.

There is evidence that some Aboriginal populations in northern Australia regularly [traded](#) with [Makassan](#) fishermen from Indonesia before the arrival of Europeans.^[42]

At the time of first European contact, it is generally estimated that the pre-1788 population was 314,000, while recent archaeological finds suggest that a population of 500,000 to 750,000 could have been sustained, with some [ecologists](#) estimating a population of up to a million people was possible.^{[12][43][44]} The population was split into 250 individual nations, many of which were in alliance with one another, and within each nation there existed several clans, from as few as 5 or 6 to as many as 30 or 40 members. Each nation had its own language and a few had several.^{[vague][citation needed]}

[\[edit\]](#) Since British settlement

British colonisation of Australia began with the arrival of the [First Fleet](#) in [Botany Bay](#) in 1788.

One immediate consequence of British settlement was a series of European epidemic diseases such as [measles](#), [smallpox](#) and [tuberculosis](#). In the 19th century, smallpox was the principal cause of Aboriginal deaths.^[45]

A smallpox epidemic in 1789 is estimated to have killed up to 90% of the [Darug people](#). Controversy exists concerning its source. Scholars such as Noel Butlin have attributed the outbreak to European settlers.^{[46][47][48]} Other writers, such as Judy Campbell,^[49] argue that [Macassan](#) fishermen from [South Sulawesi](#) and nearby islands may have introduced smallpox to Australia prior to European settlement. However after 2006, reviews by Christopher Warren (2007)^[50] and Craig Mear (2008),^[51] have shown that the 1789 outbreak of smallpox was most likely caused by British supplies of virus imported with the First Fleet. This question is not yet settled, with recent contributions in the ABC Radio Program *Ockham's Razor* and in the magazine *Quadrant*^[52] continuing to probe the circumstances.

A consequence of British settlement was appropriation of land and water resources, which continued throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries as rural lands were converted for sheep and cattle grazing.^[citation needed]

In 1834 there occurred the first recorded use of [Aboriginal trackers](#), who proved very adept at navigating their way through the Australian landscape and finding people.^[citation needed]

During the 1860s, [Tasmanian Aboriginal](#) skulls were particularly sought internationally for studies into [craniofacial anthropometry](#). [Truganini](#), the last Tasmanian Aborigine, had her skeleton exhumed within two years of her death in 1876 by the [Royal Society of Tasmania](#), and

later placed on display. Campaigns continue to have Aboriginal body parts returned to Australia for burial.

In 1868, [a group of mostly Aboriginal cricketers](#) toured England, becoming the first Australian cricket team to travel overseas.^[53]

[edit] Culture

There are a large number of [tribal divisions](#) and [language groups](#) in Aboriginal Australia, and, correspondingly, a wide variety of diversity exists within cultural practices. However, there are some similarities between cultures.



A [didgeridoo](#) player in [Arnhem Land](#), 1981.

[edit] Belief systems

Main article: [Indigenous Australian culture](#)

See also: [Australian Aboriginal mythology](#)

Religious demography among Indigenous Australians is not conclusive because the methodology of the census is not always well-suited to obtaining accurate information on Aboriginal people.^[83] In the 2006 census, 73% of the Indigenous population reported an affiliation with a Christian denomination, 24% reported no religious affiliation and 1% reported affiliation with an Australian Aboriginal traditional religion.^[84] A small but growing minority of Aborigines are followers of [Islam](#).^[85]

Aboriginal people traditionally adhered to [animist](#) spiritual frameworks. Within Aboriginal belief systems, a formative epoch known as 'the [Dreamtime](#)' stretches back into the distant past when the creator ancestors known as the [First Peoples](#) travelled across the land, creating and naming as they went.^[86] Indigenous Australia's [oral tradition](#) and religious values are based upon reverence for the land and a belief in this [Dreamtime](#).

The Dreaming is at once both the ancient time of creation and the present-day reality of Dreaming. There were a great many different groups, each with its own individual culture, belief structure, and language. These cultures overlapped to a greater or lesser extent, and evolved over time. Major [ancestral](#) spirits include the [Rainbow Serpent](#), [Baiame](#), [Dirawong](#) and [Bunjil](#).

[\[edit\]](#) Art



Aboriginal Rock Art, Ubirr Art Site, [Kakadu National Park](#).

Main article: [Indigenous Australian art](#)

Australia has a tradition of Aboriginal art which is thousands of years old, the best known forms being rock art and [bark painting](#). Evidence of [Aboriginal art](#) in Australia can be traced back at least 30,000 years.^[91] Examples of ancient Aboriginal rock artworks can be found throughout the continent – notably in national parks such as those of the [UNESCO](#) listed sites at [Uluru](#) and [Kakadu National Park](#) in the Northern Territory, but also within protected parks in urban areas such as at [Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park](#) in Sydney.^{[92][93][94]} The [Sydney rock engravings](#) are approximately 5000 to 200 years old. [Murujuga](#) in Western Australia has the Friends of Australian Rock Art have advocated its preservation, and the numerous engravings there were heritage listed in 2007.^{[95][96]}

In terms of age and abundance, cave art in Australia is comparable to that of [Lascaux](#) and [Altamira](#) in Europe,^[97] and Aboriginal art is believed to be the oldest continuing tradition of art in the world.^[98] There are three major regional styles: the geometric style found in Central Australia, Tasmania, the Kimberley and Victoria known for its concentric circles, arcs and dots; the simple figurative style found in [Queensland](#) and the complex figurative style found in Arnhem Land and the Kimberley which includes X-Ray art, Gwian Gwian (Bradshaw) and Wunjina. These designs generally carry significance linked to the spirituality of the [Dreamtime](#).^[99] Paintings were usually created in earthy colours, from paint made from ochre. Such ochres were also used to paint their bodies for ceremonial purposes.

Black

The term "blacks" has been used to refer to Indigenous Australians since European settlement.^[22] While originally related to [skin colour](#), the term is used to today to indicate Aboriginal heritage or culture in general and refers to people of any skin pigmentation.^[23] In the 1970s, many Aboriginal activists, such as [Gary Foley](#) proudly embraced the term "black", and writer [Kevin Gilbert](#)'s ground-breaking book from the time was entitled *Living Black*. The book included interviews with several members of the Aboriginal community including [Robert Jabanungga](#) reflecting on contemporary Aboriginal culture.

Although the term "[black](#)" is also used to refer to people of [African](#) ancestry, this does not imply any relation or connection between the two cultures. Genetically, Indigenous Australians are closer to [East Asians](#) and [Europeans](#) than they are to Africans,^{[6][24]} and research indicates their ancestors may have been among the first major groups to leave Africa.^[5]



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Book Review

Kate Grenville, *The Secret River*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2005. pp. 334. \$39.95 cloth.

Kate Grenville's latest novel, *The Secret River*, presents a revisionist history of contact 1 between the early colonists and Aboriginal people in the opening decade of the nineteenth century. It explores the collision of cultures that occurred between these groups, raising questions of identity and belonging, and writing the violence back into the story of early frontier contact.

The Secret River follows the life of William Thornhill, born into a large and poor 2 family in London in the late eighteenth century. Thornhill is a decent but pragmatic man who supplements his small income with petty theft, which eventually leads to his transportation to New South Wales in 1806. Accompanied by his wife, Sal, and their small child, Thornhill begins his new life in the colony as Sal's convict labourer. On securing a pardon after five years, Thornhill travels up the Hawkesbury River to, literally and metaphorically, carve out a Paradise where he is Adam. Contrary to what he initially thinks, this paradise is not a 'blank slate' on which 'a person was entitled to draw any picture they fancied' (p. 319), but the home of a group of Aboriginal people who are connected with the land in ways Thornhill, with his property-based, Old World value system, cannot comprehend. The different approaches of the Aboriginal people and the colonists to land ownership inevitably lead to misunderstandings and conflict, escalating to a massacre in which Thornhill is implicated.

The concern for writing-in the forgotten or suppressed history of Australia's 3 Aboriginal people has received considerable attention over the past decades with works by historians such as Henry Reynolds (*The Other Side of the Frontier and Why Weren't We Told?*) and novelists like Richard Flanagan (*Gould's Book of Fish*) reassessing what many consider to be the misshapen and idealised version of Australia's colonial past we have inherited. These works are informed by recent public debates about what counts as 'History' and historical fact. Some critics have accused this questioning of the conventions on which historical thought operates as leading to postmodernist relativity. Other critics, such as Stephen Muecke, see new ways of experimenting with history and asking 'what if?' questions in a more positive light, as opening up new areas of investigation, such as Aboriginal history.

Grenville's novel falls clearly into the 'what if?' camp, asking what if there was a 4 different version of the history of contact between the early settlers and Aboriginal people than that which is couched in the imperialist lingo of 'settlement' and 'heroic progress'? The novel states: 'Nothing was written on the ground. Nor was it written on any page. But the blankness itself might tell the story to anyone who had eyes to see it' (p. 325).

Alongside the fictional story of Thornhill's life, Grenville charts a social history of 5 England and colonial Australia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, reflecting the archival research she conducted in writing the book. In the opening sections, Grenville describes the living conditions of the poorer classes in England in relief against the leisure and arrogances of the gentry. Moving to Australia, Grenville touches on the corruption of the colonial administrators, and outlines the fair deal the

government considered they were giving settlers in granting them free land holdings in exchange for farming the land and pushing back 'the Natives'. Grenville describes the consequences for the Aboriginal population of this fair deal: the sickness, the effects of the introduction to alcohol, and the physical displacement of the Aboriginal population as the colony expanded: 'The more civilised folk set themselves up on their pieces of land, the more those other ones could be squeezed out' (p. 121).

While we could piece together this social history from the archive, it is Grenville's recreation of the colonists' encounters with the Aboriginal people that brings the historical facts into a realm we can imaginatively inhabit; we read with horror as Thornhill's fellow colonists boast to him of capturing Aboriginal women, collecting hands and ears, and pickling heads. 6

Grenville's portrayal of Thornhill is one of the most unique aspects of the novel. In creating him, she has not drawn a classical hero who we unhesitatingly trust to guide us along the moral path of the story. On the one hand, Grenville portrays Thornhill as a decent man primarily concerned with protecting his family and place, and who is bewildered and unsettled by the brutal attitudes of the other settlers towards the Aborigines. On the other hand, he embodies the prejudices of his culture and firmly believes he is entitled to occupy the 'empty' land; this otherwise decent man eventually participates in a massacre. 7

Grenville in no way apologises for Thornhill's bigotry, or is ambivalent about his complicity in the fate of the Aboriginal people or about the violent consequences of colonialism in Australia. Rather, she has created a character who provokes our sympathy but whose incapacity to deal with the contradictions of his situation ultimately contributes to murder. Grenville draws him and asks us what we make of him. 8

The Secret River is an elegantly written and intensely engaging novel that contributes to the current reassessment of the contact between the Aboriginal population and the colonists. It clearly and ultimately condemns both the literal violence of this contact and the symbolic violence of misrepresenting Aboriginal history, and provokes us to consider what it means to say, as Jack, the leader of the Aboriginal tribe says, slapping the ground and caressing the dirt, 'This me ... my place' (p. 329). 9

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May 2006

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Kate Grenville

Kate Grenville

Born: 14 October 1950
🇦🇺 Sydney, Australia

Occupation: Novelist, Teacher of creative writing

Nationality: Australian

Genres: General fiction, Historical fiction, Short stories

Website: <http://www.users.bigond.com/kgrenville>

Kate Grenville (born 14 October 1950) is an Australian novelist and teacher of creative writing. She holds degrees from the University of Sydney and the University of Colorado. Kate Grenville lives in Sydney with her husband, Bruce Petty, son and daughter.

Life

She was a born writer and wanted to be one right from childhood. ^[1] After completing her undergraduate degree in Australia, she worked in the film industry, mostly editing documentaries at Film Australia. In 1976, she went to the UK on a working holiday for six months, and ended up being away for seven years. She lived in London and Paris, and wrote fiction while supporting herself by doing film-editing, writing, and secretarial jobs. In 1980 she went to the University of Colorado at Boulder to do a Masters degree in Creative Writing. She returned to Australia in 1983 ^[2] and became a sub-editor at SBS Television in the subtitling department. She won a literary grant in 1986 and left SBS to pursue her writing. ^[3]

Work

Her style of writing includes detailed research for more than a year. This includes reading on the topic and actual experience in the place. After the research, she tries to use the language in the times the book is set in. This can be poetic. When questioned about it, she replied "I would never write a sentence that didn't have a nice rhythm, or at least I wouldn't leave it to be published like that." ^[4] She uses italics for direct speech since she tries to give the idea of continuity during dialogue. She gets the ideas for topics from life experiences. Her books are based on experiences that she wonders about. Her books are based on history with distortions so that readers would consider ideas that they might not otherwise want to deal with. One truth was distorted, but another was revealed.

Awards and Nominations

Prizes Won

- 1984 - The Australian/Vogel Literary Award for *Lilian's Story*
- 2001 - Orange Prize for Fiction for *The Idea of Perfection*
- 2006 - Commonwealth Writers' Prize for her novel *The Secret River*
- 2006 - New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards, Christina Stead Prize for fiction for *The Secret River*
- 2006 - New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards, Community Relations Commission Award for *The Secret River*

Shortlisted

- 2006 - *The Secret River* - Miles Franklin Award and the Man Booker Prize.

Two of her novels have been made into films: *Dreamhouse*, filmed as *Traps* (1994); *Lilian's Story* (1995) which starred Toni Collette, as the young Lilian, and Ruth Cracknell, as the older Lilian.

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- Grenville, Kate (2006). *Searching for the Secret River*. ISBN 1-921145-39-0.

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Dutch

- *De verborgen rivier*, 2006, ISBN 90-414-1015-5

German

- *Joan macht Geschichte*, 1991, ISBN 3-499-12979-5

- *Der verborgene Fluss*, 2006, ISBN 3-570-00867-3

Italian

- *La storia di Lilian*, 1998

Portuguese

- *O Rio Secreto*, 2007

References

1. ^ [Kate Grenville Interview with Australian Independent Book Publisher](#)
2. ^ [Kate Grenville My Life A Biographical Note](#)
3. ^ Waldren (2001)
4. ^ [Kate Grenville talks to Radio National](#)

External links

- [Kate Grenville's Home Page](#)
- MP3 of interview with Kate Grenville speaking about her book *The Idea of Perfection* taken from [Interviews Archive](#)
- [Kate Grenville's site by Canongate](#)
- [Kate Grenville at www.contemporarywriters.com](#) (British Council)
- [Online interview from CBC Words at Large](#)
- [Waldren, M \(2001\) Kismet Kate: An Interview with the Winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction 2001](#) Accessed 19 May 2007

Persondata

NAME Grenville, Kate
 ALTERNATIVE NAMES
 SHORT DESCRIPTION Australian writer and teacher of creative writing
 DATE OF BIRTH [14 October 1950](#)
 PLACE OF BIRTH [Sydney, N.S.W.](#)
 DATE OF DEATH
 PLACE OF DEATH

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the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 16, 2006

The Booker Q&A: Kate Grenville



OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, the NBCC will be talking to the authors who have been long-listed for the Booker Prize. We recently tracked down Kate Grenville, author of "The Secret River," in her native Sydney.

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Q: Reading *The Secret River*, I was struck by how the taming of the landscape, through toil and through violence, feels like a founding narrative, almost primal. Were you aware of this when you went back to the story, and if so, how did it change how you approached it? Did you ever want your characters to behave better than they did?

A: The book started with questions about my own settler ancestor and an uneasy realisation that his "settling" mightn't have been as uncomplicated thing as the family stories suggested. As I found out more about him, the picture of "settling" became more and more ambiguous and the moral issues harder to be categorical about. My ancestor (an ex-convict, ex-Thames boatman) was no angel, but I also came to understand the harsh world he'd come from -- survival of the toughest. In turning his story into the fiction, I felt I had to walk a tightrope -- not to judge any of the characters for good or ill. There seemed no point in writing unremittingly "evil" characters -- the point about the frontier, I felt, was that the people who did bad things weren't necessarily bad people. The novel was trying to draw a picture of the circumstances out of which those bad choices might have been made. There also didn't seem much of interest in making them behave too well. I felt that would just perpetuate the heroic pioneer myth -- shadowless and shallow -- that's been the currency in Australia for so long.

Q: You have won the Orange Prize, the Commonwealth Prize. The impact of prizes has often been poo-pooed in literary communities.

Eric Miles Williamson

Art Winslow

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What Are You Reading in Port

What have they meant for you?

A: When you miss out on prizes, you have to tell yourself (and believe) that they don't matter too much and don't reflect on the quality of your work. When you win now and again -- well, that's another matter. Prizes are a message that, at least for one group of judges on one particular day, your book spoke to readers the way you'd hoped it might. Prizes get literature on the front page of the newspaper -- what else does that? They're a warm comfort on those long dark nights of the soul when all that you've ever done seems worthless. And the money (and extra sales) give you the freedom from paid employment that lets you write the next book. With the really big prizes, one of the best aspects is that all the shortlisted books -- not just the winner -- get a good boost from the publicity so the benefits are shared around to some extent.

Q: In an old interview, you talked about being influenced by John Hawkes, Robert Coover, and Ron Sukenick, but one might be hard pressed to find obvious markers of those influences in your work today, except perhaps in the elegance and care you take with language. Has there been a difference between the writers who made you want to write, and the writers who kept you writing?

A: Those writers are still a great influence although the effect mightn't show up on the page -- their teaching that prose didn't have to be prosaic is with me every day as I write. "Make it new" -- a person can't hear that often enough. Somewhere along the line, though, I realised that I wanted to reach a more general readership and that I was interested in "story" in a way some of those mentors weren't. The mysteries of human behaviour are as fascinating to me as the dance of words. I'm also driven to write by questions -- in the case of *The Secret River*, the question was about what really went on on the Australian frontier, and why, in human terms. The writers who keep me writing use words in beautiful and surprising ways but their books take their energy from the subtleties of people acting on each other. Who do I have in mind? Colm Toibin (especially *The Master*), Marilynne Robinson, the Australian writer Helen Garner...and I read and re-read the classics -- Jane Austen, Patrick White, Laurence Sterne.

**

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 8:28 AM 

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with Ramona Koval
Sunday 17/07/2005

Kate Grenville

Summary:

Kate Grenville talks to Ramona Koval about her latest, and much anticipated, new novel *The Secret River*. This is a tale that seeks to gain a new vantage point from which to view Australia's European settlement. It's a story of ordinary people, inter-cultural incoherence and dreadful inevitabilities.



Details or Transcript:

Ramona Koval: This week, a conversation with Kate Grenville, whose new long-awaited novel, *The Secret River*, has been well worth waiting for.

Kate's last novel was *The Idea of Perfection*, a love story about two shy and not conventionally attractive people in a small town, and it won for her the Orange Prize for Fiction in the UK. It was a long-time best-seller in Australia and the UK, and was published to acclaim in the USA. A film adaptation of the novel is currently being made.

The Secret River is a very different book. It's an historical novel set in the early years of the settlement of NSW, and follows the life and times of William Thornhill, who was sentenced in 1806 to be transported to NSW for the term of his natural life. With his wife and children, he eventually takes up land on the Hawkesbury River, and it's this phrase, 'takes up land', that Kate Grenville examines, because it's a phrase that doesn't instantly invoke the risk and bloodshed that actually happened.

It's a wonderful and disturbing novel, full of detail about life and work in the colony of NSW, and daring descriptions of the land and the strangeness of the encounters between black and white people. And when Kate Grenville spoke to me recently, I asked her to read from *The Secret River*.

Kate Grenville: [reading from *As they neared the heads... to ...into another geography altogether.*]

Ramona Koval: Well, I think anybody listening to that must be particularly impressed with the language and the technicalities of the work of the lighterman turned sailer, I suppose, in the colonies. How did you find these ways to express this kind of work?

Kate Grenville: I began with years of research. I suppose it was about a year and a half of research before I started writing. So I read everything I could read about everything that was relevant to the book, even obliquely relevant, including boats and ships. But, of course, you can only get a certain amount out of books. Basically you've got to go out there and experience it, so the scene in which they first turn in to the Hawkesbury River from the ocean; I took the ferry across from Palm Beach to Ettalong one day, and it happened to be really rough, and it's just a public ferry, it's no big deal. But I was terrified. I was gripping the gunwale like Thornhill, and I suddenly tasted the salt on my lips, and I realised that I was more frightened than I had been

for many years. One part of me was frightened, and the other part was cold-bloodedly taking notes in my notebook. This is what fear feels like. So as much as I could in the book, I did everything that I had to describe. I'm a great believer in the experiential theory of writing.

Ramona Koval: You've got, for example, Sal, who's William Thornhill's plucky wife, who is on the same transport as he is. His death sentence is commuted to the term of his natural life in the colonies, where we live, but his wife gets to go on the ship too. Did that happen?

Kate Grenville: It happened from time to time. The authorities in England had a real dilemma; if they only sent the men out, then there were a lot of what they nicely called 'unnatural acts' going on in the colony, and of course they didn't want that. On the other hand, if they sent the women, then it wasn't actually much of a punishment. So at different times the authorities back at the home office in London made a different decision, and it just happened that when Thornhill was sent out (and the real-life model for Thornhill) the authorities were more afraid of unnatural acts than they were of the convicts having a good time. So, quite a few wives were sent. It was almost regarded as a great privilege and a very rare indulgence, but it did happen to a surprising extent.

Ramona Koval: So this is based on your relative; did his wife come out as well?

Kate Grenville: Yes, my ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, was, like Thornhill, a lighterman on the Thames who pinched some timber and was caught, and was sent out with his wife. It's probable that on arrival...I mean, he was the convict, the wife was a free immigrant, basically...so he would have been assigned to his wife, and the master of an assigned servant had total power, almost of life and death, over the assigned servant, which would have made for a really interesting husband and wife relationship, I think.

Ramona Koval: And they play with it in your book, don't they?

Kate Grenville: Yes, they have a good time. They make it a nice joke, but it's a joke with a slightly sour edge, too, and for many people it would not have been a joke at all.

Ramona Koval: While we're talking about the writing process, I wanted to talk about the language that you use, because I found some of the language just beautifully poetic. Then I thought to myself, why is it poetic? What do I mean by that? And then I read it aloud to myself, and then I heard the poetry in the reading. So let me just read this sentence: 'There was nothing he would have called a path, just a thready easing that led through the daisy lawn and up the slope, between the tussocks of grass and the mottled rocks that pushed themselves out from the ground.' When I read that, I saw those poetic rhymes in it, and I just thought, do you actually read aloud, and do you change the words according to the rhythms of it? Does that ever happen?

Kate Grenville: Oh, all the time. I would never write a sentence that didn't have a nice rhythm, or at least I wouldn't leave it to be published like that. It seems to me that prose mustn't be prosaic. I read a lot of poetry and I love what it does with language. I love music, too, and I think there's probably no coincidence there, that the rhythm of the words is almost as important as the words themselves, and when you can get the two working together, which usually takes me about 20 goes, I feel a huge satisfaction. At about draft 18, I start reading it aloud, and at that point I rewrite nearly every sentence, not in a major way but just a little way; maybe replacing a comma, or putting a full stop, making it into two sentences. Of course, with this book I had the advantage of a magnificent editor, Michael Heyward at Text Publishing, who understood precisely about the music of the sentence and could tell me where my ear had gone tinny and got it wrong, and so we could work together to just get it perfectly right. It was a real privilege to work with him at that level of detail and minutiae.

Ramona Koval: What about the use of italics for direct speech? That's the solution you've chosen in this book; any time somebody says something it's in italics, and you don't have to go away from the descriptive paragraph before or after. It seems part of the music of the text. Why did you decide to do that?

Kate Grenville: I've always had a problem with conventional punctuation of dialogue because it does seem to me to set it off too much from the narrative. I mean, in life, things don't stop while somebody says something and then stuff starts up again, it's all happening at once. Now, that simultaneity is not something that you can really describe in words because words go one after the other. But what a writer, I think, is always trying to do is get the illusion of that simultaneity, that you are feeling things and hearing things and touching things, and dialogue is going on at the same time. So I've tried a lot of different things. I think almost all my books have a different technique for trying to do it. In *Lillian's Story*, my first novel, I used italics for dialogue, and I felt happy with it. It seemed to me to allow you to get away from the done social realism aspect of dialogue. You could let the dialogue be poetic in a way that the narrative was trying to be, too.

Ramona Koval: How do you choose the tone and the language of the narration to give us a sense that we're steeped in a historical period different from our own? It's not quite the same thing as getting the people speaking like they did at the time. In the narration... I thought there's something about the narration that makes me think we're not looking back on...you're not telling us a story from a 21st century perspective.

Kate Grenville: Yes, I had to have a lot of goes at getting the narrative tone right. It's not a first-person account but it is a fairly subjective third-person account. It's basically Thornhill's perception of the action. So I needed a voice that was kind of plausible for Thornhill, so it couldn't be the kind of 18th, 19th century voice that we're familiar with from literature which is a very literate, educated voice...that wouldn't be right for an illiterate Thames bargeman. On the other hand, I didn't want to sacrifice the possibilities for poetry and beautiful language and a richness of lyrical force, so I was in a bit of a quandary. What I ended up with was something that was fairly plain. The vocabulary is quite plain, the syntax is quite plain, but I hope that by arranging quite plain words in perhaps slightly unusual ways, I would get a slightly antique feeling and also a plausible voice for this Thames bargeman. I did a huge amount of research into late 18th century, 19th century language, and of course I came up against all those incredible expressions that people like Dickens were full of, wonderful Cockney slang and so on, and I was tempted to use a lot of that. In the end I didn't because it draws attention to itself but every now and again I drop in a slightly antique word like 'britches' or 'vittles' and hope, also, that that gives a kind of antique flavour without being literally 'ye olde'.

Ramona Koval: You've got some great words there. I suppose everybody knows what 'tholepin' is...

Kate Grenville: Oh of course!

Ramona Koval: I had to look it up. Tell us what a 'tholepin' is.

Kate Grenville: A tholepin is what you used instead of rowlocks before you had rowlocks...

Ramona Koval: Oh yes, the old rowlocks, we all know what rowlocks are...

Kate Grenville: Okay, well, let's go one step further back; when you need to row a boat you stick the oars in a little metal bracket called a rowlock, but those metal brackets cost money, and the cheaper way is to simply have two little wooden peg things to hold the oar in place to stop it just slithering up and down the side of the boat, otherwise known as the gunwale, and these things are called tholepins. They had them in the old days because it was

cheaper, and the labour to make the tholepins was much cheaper than the cost of the steel to make a steel rowlock. I mean, that's how poor the whole thing was. 'Tholepins' was one of the few really obscure words that I allowed myself to leave in.

Ramona Koval: You could actually build one of these boats now you know all these things. It's very useful, all the information you've got now.

Kate Grenville: Ask me anything about 18th century boats.

Ramona Koval: Well, let's move from the writing to the ideas in this book. I think the title comes from a line in Stanner's Boyer Lecture of 1968, 'There is a secret river of blood in Australian history,' which is the history of our relationship with the Aboriginal people, the river of blood. *The Secret River* is the title of your book.

Kate Grenville: Yes, I certainly didn't want to call the book 'The River of Blood' because that would give, I think, a wrong impression about the book. What I wanted to describe or suggest was the fact that Australian history does have a series of secrets in it. There are cupboards in Australian history that we have just drawn a curtain over; we sort of know they're there but we sort of don't want to look at them. Other parts, we've drawn the curtain back with great pride—Gallipoli, the first planting of the flag by Captain Cook, the gold rushes—all that stuff. We're happy to look in those cupboards, but there are other cupboards that make us uncomfortable, and for 200 years we've just chosen not to look at them too closely. So this is a book, in some way, about those cupboards, it opens a couple of those cupboards and looks into them in a judgment neutral way, but I hope a clear-eyed way, because my feeling is that until we are prepared to look at all those slightly hidden, slightly secret places in our history, we can't actually make much progress into the future.

—**Ramona Koval:** There's a description of scarring in the book, and it says here, 'On a lag's back, the point about the scars was the pain that had been inflicted and the way they marked a man to his dying day. The scars on Scabby Bill's chest [and Scabby Bill is an Aboriginal man] were different. It seemed that the point was not so much the pain as the scars themselves. Unlike the net of criss-cross weals on Daniel Ellison's back, they were carefully drawn, each scar lined up neat next to its neighbour, a language of skin.' So you show, really, the scars worn by both the black and the white proponents in this struggle for land, and the very fact that there is a shared scar but, in fact, the meaning of the scar is completely different for both people. There, I think, is a really good example of the kind of world views that clash and just have nowhere to meet.

Kate Grenville: That's right. In doing all the research for this book, what I came away with overwhelmingly was the feeling that there had been no particular ill-will on both sides, at least in the beginning, but a complete inability to communicate. It wasn't just language that the settlers and the Aboriginal people didn't share. I mean, the Aboriginal people picked up English quite quickly and some of the settlers learned a bit of the local Aboriginal language, so it wasn't the literal language, it was, as you say, a world view. The Aborigines, for example, had a culture in which individual competition, individual striving, individual ownership were not part of their world view, and they were unable to understand the way settlers marked out a bit of land for themselves individually, put a fence around it and called it theirs. The settlers, likewise, just couldn't understand that the Aborigines had just as great a sense of territory as they themselves did but they didn't need to build a fence or a house or a road to have that. So it was a tragic, tragic inability to communicate across a gulf of culture.

Ramona Koval: The Aborigines were regarded by the settlers, though, as non-human. That's a bit of a barrier to understanding if you decide that the being across the fence is not a human being. Was it hard to write from this point of view, and how did you do it?

Kate Grenville: Well, I think not many of the settlers regarded the Aborigines as not being quite human. A few of them did, and I've got one of them in the book, a man called Smasher who certainly regards them as...he describes them as vermin, 'Good only for manuring the land,' which is a quote from a real settler. I think, though, that those settlers were probably in the minority. It seems to me that most settlers would have understood perfectly well that the Aboriginal people they met were, in fact, absolutely human beings, they often had a great deal of respect for them in many ways, although not much understanding. They allowed themselves to get into a kind of rationalisation about the Aborigines' attitude to land. They allowed themselves to pretend that because the Aborigines were nomads they therefore had no particular attachment to place. But it was a real schizophrenia because at the very same moment...when you read the research you see this double-think going on...they could also recognise that Aborigines burst into cries of joy when they were returned to their own place, and when taken out of their own territory they were as nervous and as uncertain as the white people. So I think there was a huge double-think going on, which is kind of tragic. You want to go back 200 years and say to the settlers, 'Look, this is how the Aborigines are,' and to the Aborigines, 'Look, this is why the settlers are behaving the way they are. Let's understand this. There's no need for all this brutality.'

Ramona Koval: You use terms like 'outrages' and 'depredations', and these in the book are the public euphemisms and, in fact, exaggeration of the dangers of living side-by-side with Aboriginal people, the way that myths and stories are compounded in the telling, which happens in the book too. But they did have a basis in fact; people were killed by Aborigines...not to the extent that the stories became in the retelling, but you paint this picture of fear; men feared for their women living alone on their land while they went upriver and did things that they had to do with trading. So there was a fear built up about what was going to happen, that you were going to be scalped, you were going to be eaten, your children would be killed. Tell me about coming across the evidence for that sort of feeling.

Kate Grenville: I think when you don't understand another set of people, it's very easy for that lack of understanding to turn very quickly into fear. I think that fear of the 'other' is universal, we all feel it. We look at someone with a different shaped face, a different skin colour, a different kind of covering on their head, and we think, oh, I don't understand this person. And the next instinct is, should I be worried about this person? So I think a lot of that happened, and these perfectly ordinary people from the Thames who had no education, no understanding, no breadth of world view, were plunged into this situation that they had no way of understanding. In a situation of ignorance like that, it's awfully easy for people to orchestrate feelings, to manipulate people's emotions. The accounts in the newspaper of the outrages and depredations always have this tone of surprise. It's as if they can't understand why the Aborigines might be robbing the white men or burning their crops or spearing their sheep and cattle. There's this thing of puzzlement; these must be really irrational child-like people because we can't understand why they would be spearing our cattle and burning our crops. Now, we can understand it perfectly well at a distance of 200 years. They couldn't understand it, or at least they pretended not to, and so it was very easy for them to whip up this hysteria of Chinese whispers, so that a spear flung towards a white man, over a couple of tellings, would become a white man speared like a pin-cushion, scalped and eaten. We're all familiar with that kind of Chinese whispers, and I think that happened a lot.

Ramona Koval: Is there a danger though, that by writing well about the mindset of the settlers at the time—the fears, the choices made by William Thornhill—that you end up justifying the slaughter of the people who were in the sights of the settlers, the massacred ones? I mean, how did you navigate that matter?

Kate Grenville: That was tricky because what I didn't want to do was to step

into the heads of any of the Aboriginal characters. I think that kind of appropriation...there's been too much of that in our writing. That didn't seem to me appropriate. So what I had to try to do was to let the reader know what was happening, even though Thornhill sometimes didn't. There's a scene, for example, in which the Aboriginal people light a fire and burn off some ground, and the white people can't understand why, and just by coincidence, it seems, a week later it starts to rain, and a week after that there's this wonderful meadow of soft green grass which is attracting the kangaroos, whereupon the Aborigines come and spear them and have some considerable BBQ feasts on it. Thornhill watches this, and he's not a stupid man, and he suddenly realises, he has this insight that the Aboriginal people, he says, are farmers, just as much as the white man. Instead of building a fence though to keep the animals in, they make a patch so enticing that the animals are drawn to them. So he does have that insight, which I want the reader to understand. I've tried to be very even-handed. There is a gruelling scene of a white man speared, and his slow agonising death, but there is also an equally horrible scene of a young Aboriginal boy whose entire clan has been poisoned by arsenic in their flour. So I have tried to say, look, it happened on both sides, and on both sides it did not happen because these people were just bad people or evil, it happened because when you have a complete lack of understanding and you have two different sets of people needing the same resource (that is; good riverside land), it's almost inevitable that you're going to have violence. Unless the people involved have enormous insight and imagination, it's going to be quite hard to avoid violence, but neither side were simply evil specimens of humanity.

Ramona Koval: You said before that you thought that you didn't want to step into the minds of Aboriginal characters, and I think you used the word 'appropriate' there. Now, this surprises me, for a novelist to say that. I mean, shouldn't everybody...every character, every animal, every chair and table be something that you could write about? Why not?

Kate Grenville: Sure, if another writer wanted to do it I would say good luck to them. I certainly didn't feel comfortable about doing it. That was just a decision I made, and I suppose it's not so much a matter of principle as realistically seeing my own limitations, and also that the subject of this book is actually white settlers, it's the white settler response to the fact that the Aboriginal people were on the land they wanted to settle on. It's not actually about the Aboriginal response to the white settlers. That's not a story I could tell. I do believe that you have to draw on what you know to write well, and I don't pretend to understand or be able to empathise particularly with a tribal Aboriginal person from 200 years ago; that's beyond me.

Ramona Koval: So where would you put your book, finally, if you were laying out books on the history wars? Whereabouts would you slot yours?

Kate Grenville: Mine would be up on a ladder, looking down on the history wars. I think the historians, and rightly so, have battled away about the details of exactly when and where and how many and how much, and they've got themselves into these polarised positions, and that's fine, I think that's what historians ought to be doing; constantly questioning the evidence and perhaps even each other. But a novelist can stand up on a stepladder and look down at this, outside the fray, and say there is another way to understand it. You can set two sides against each other and ask which side will win, the Windschuttles of the world or the Henry Reynoldses of the world? Which is going to win? The sport analogy, if you like, about history. Or you can go up on the stepladder and look down and say, well, nobody is going to win. There is no winner. What there can be, though, is understanding, actually experiencing what it was like, the choices that those people had. And once you can actually get inside the experience, it's no longer a matter of who's going to win, it's simply a matter of; yes, now I understand both sides and, having understood, the notion of one side being right and the other side being wrong becomes kind of irrelevant. So that's where I hope this book will be. It stands outside that polarised conflict and says, look, this is a problem we really need, as a nation, to come to grips

with. The historians are doing their thing, but let me as a novelist come to it in a different way, which is the way of empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events. Basically to think, well, what would I have done in that situation, and what sort of a person would that make me?

Ramona Koval: Kate Grenville. Her new novel, *The Secret River*, is published by Text. And that's all from Books and Writing this week, which is produced by me, Ramona Koval, and Michael Shirrefs.

Presenter and Producer:

Ramona Koval

Producer:

Michael Shirrefs

Publications:

The Secret River

Author: Kate Grenville

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There are about 500 different Aboriginal peoples in Australia, each with their own language and territory and usually made up of a large number of separate clans.



Applying traditional face paint to an Aboriginal boy, dance festival, Northern Queensland, Australia.

© John Miles/Survival

Archaeologists believe that the Aboriginals first came to the Australian continent around 45,000 years ago.

Aboriginals themselves, however, trace their creation back to the Dreamtime, an era long past when the earth was first formed. One Aboriginal man explained it thus:

'By Dreaming we mean the belief that long ago these creatures started human society, they made all natural things and put them in a special place.'

'These Dreaming creatures were connected to special places and special roads or tracks or paths. In many places the great creatures changed themselves into sites where their spirits stayed.'

'Aboriginals have a special connection with everything that is natural. Aboriginals see themselves as part of nature ... All things on earth we see as part human. It is true that people who belong to a particular area are really part of that area and if that area is destroyed they are also destroyed.'

Aboriginals' land was invaded from the end of the 18th century onwards, with catastrophic consequences for them.

How do they live?

Before the invasion, Aboriginal people lived throughout Australia, although the highest population density was along the coast. Here, people seem to have moved seasonally between permanent settlements near the sea and others at the headwaters of the coast rivers.



Aboriginal boy, Australia.

© Helen Ross/Survival

Evidence suggests that these communities managed their environment carefully to ensure a steady supply of food, bringing wild yams into gardens which they irrigated, for example, or building artificial dykes to extend the range of eels.

Those Aboriginal tribes who lived inland in the bush and the desert lived by hunting and gathering, burning the undergrowth to encourage the growth of plants favoured by the game they hunted. They were experts in seeking out water.

Today more than half of all Aboriginals live in towns, often on the outskirts in terrible conditions. Many others work as labourers on cattle ranches that have taken over their land.

Many, particularly in the northern half of the continent, have managed to cling on to their land and still hunt and gather 'bush tucker'.

What problems do they face?

Ever since the British first invaded, Aboriginal peoples have had their land stolen from them or destroyed. Until 1992, when it was finally overturned, the legal principle governing British and then Australian law regarding Aboriginal land was that of 'terra nullius' – that the land was empty before the British arrived, belonged to no-one, and could legitimately be taken over.

Most has still to be returned today, and the loss of their land has had a devastating social and physical impact on Aboriginal peoples.

The initial invasions also sparked huge waves of disease that killed thousands – many others were massacred. In just over one hundred years from the first invasion of their land, their numbers were reduced from up to an estimated one million to only 60,000.



Aboriginal cave art, Australia
© John Miles/Survival

During much of the 20th century, outright killings were replaced with a policy of removing Aboriginal children from their parents and giving them to white families or placing them in mission schools, to eradicate traces of Aboriginal culture and language.

Today they still face racist attitudes, and there are periodic incidents of violence towards them, particularly affecting those in police custody. Their generally poor living conditions mean that Aboriginal people have a far higher infant mortality rate and suicide rate and a lower life

expectancy than the rest of the population, and they make up a disproportionate section of the prison population.

Although a landmark judgment in 1992 finally threw out the racist 'terra nullius' principle, the government has since done everything it can to obstruct Aboriginals reclaiming title over their lands.

Despite the many hurdles placed in their way, however, some Aboriginal groups such as the Martu of western Australia are finally securing ownership titles to their land.

Home

About Kate Grenville

Kate Grenville was born in Sydney, Australia. After completing an Arts degree at Sydney University she worked in the film industry (mainly as an editor) before living in the UK and Europe for several years and starting to write.

In 1980 she went to the USA and completed an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Colorado, where her teachers included Ron Sukenick, Robert Steiner and Steve Katz.

On her return to Australia in 1983 she worked at the Subtitling Unit for SBS Television. In 1984 her first book, a collection of stories - Bearded Ladies - was published.

Since then she's published six novels and four books about the writing process (one co-written with Sue Woolfe).

The Secret River (2005) has won many prizes, including the Commonwealth Prize for Literature and the Christina Stead Prize, and has been an international best-seller. (It also formed the basis for a Doctorate of Creative Arts from University of Technology, Sydney.) The Idea of Perfection (2000) won the Orange Prize.

Her other works of fiction have been published to acclaim in Australia and overseas and have won state and national awards. Much-loved novels such as Lilian's Story (1985), Dark Places (1995) and Joan Makes History (1988) have become classics, admired by critics and general readers alike.

Lilian's Story was filmed starring Ruth Cracknell, Toni Collette and Barry Otto. Dreamhouse was filmed under the title Traps, starring Jacqueline MacKenzie.

Kate Grenville's novels have been widely published

in translation, and her books about the writing process are used in many writing courses in schools and universities.

She lives in Sydney with her family.

From my personal site: *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville

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Substantial additions have been made to this post, thanks to Adrian Phoon. Go to **the original post** for his comment. See also **Just something to think about...**, a follow-up post.



The Secret River by Kate Grenville (2005). Grenville has also written one of the best **books on writing** that I know. (Australian historical fiction)

As I said last week:

I mentioned in my comment on **Jim Belshaw's post** that I am at last reading *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville, and I am enjoying it thoroughly. I think this reading is partly responsible for my looking into Macquarie connections to Cleveland House here in Surry Hills, a building I see every day! The site linked to the novel there is Kate Grenville's own site, thoroughly worth exploring, especially the section on fiction and history. *The Secret River* (that is, the Hawkesbury) attracted some little controversy on that score, much of it misplaced. But I will take that up when I review the novel. You will see I have already given *The Secret River* a best read of 2007 tag though.

That still stands, now that I have finished.

The "Secret River" is today a major tourist attraction, and more, just north of Sydney, parts of it indeed inside Greater Sydney.



The climax of the novel is a massacre, and that has been the issue, it seems, that has led to its being caught up in controversy. Given, as the author has clearly stated, that this is a work of fiction, I don't think it matters whether or not the events described actually took place in the real-world Hawkesbury Valley in the time of Lachlan Macquarie. Such events, however, did happen, and the novel makes a clear case for the way in which even close to such events their reporting could have been spun and muffled, to be forgotten before many years passed. I think the novel quite properly should caution us against the naive belief that written records tell the whole story.

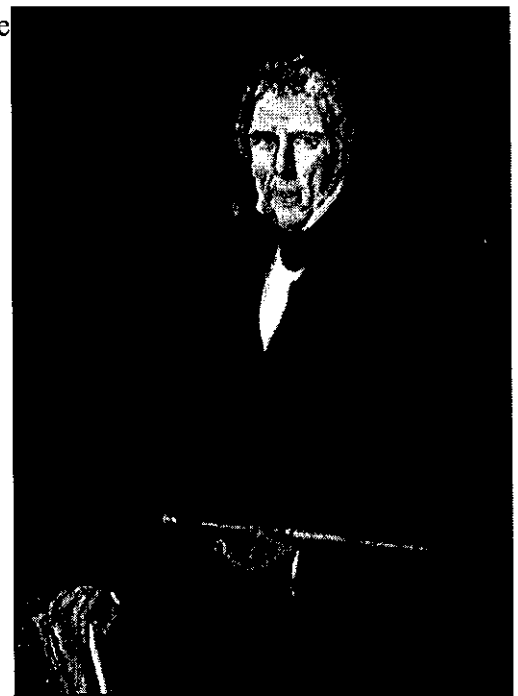
The novel began, Kate Grenville tells us, as a work of non-fiction; she is fortunate enough to have a very interesting convict ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, about whom rather more is known and told than is the case with my ancestor Jacob. Some stirring tales appear in **The Hawkesbury Historical Society's pages**. Grenville does her subject novelistic justice in that flesh-and-blood characters really emerge in her writing. It is true, nonetheless, that, while true to what we know of Aboriginal life and culture in that time and place, she does fail to render her Indigenous characters quite so fully. Perhaps given the perspective of her narrative this is not possible, but her convicts and emancipists are rendered brilliantly and individually.

The portrait of Wiseman on the right is alluded to in the last chapter of the novel.

I can really believe that (as Aluminium said in a comment here) readers will be drawn by the novel into an enthusiasm for Australian history, and that can't be a bad thing after all.

Don't think I am damning with faint praise; I'm not. This is one very fine novel.

See also **Kate Grenville: Secret river, secret past** — *Sunday* Channel 9 August 7, 2005 and **The Convict Trail**.





North of the Hawkesbury region is the Hunter River and Newcastle. The University of Newcastle has a very fine **Virtual Sourcebook for Aboriginal Studies in the Hunter Region**, well worth examining. To the east of most of the territory covered by Kate Grenville's novel and reaching down to northern Sydney lay the lands of the Guringai, whose history my nephew, himself a descendant of the Guringai, has explored: see **A Guringai Family's Story: guest entry by Warren Whitfield**.

Later

I deliberately minimised controversy in this post. Adrian in his comment noted that and I responded with some reasons. In writing that comment I found **Warts and all: on writing "The Secret River"** in the *University of Sydney News*. It is a good article. My reservations about the Aboriginal characters compared to the Europeans are explained there, I think. I could see Grenville had a problem.

Two chapters [in *Searching for the Secret River* 2006] unravel her struggle to represent Aboriginal people authentically.

"The whole point of writing *The Secret River* was to put the Aboriginal people back into the picture," Grenville said, "but how to do that without appropriating their story." And how to do that without caricaturing?

Her attempts at Aboriginal dialogue in limited English were "dire", she said, so she took it all out and showed Aboriginal people doing things and relating to each other instead.

"There's a lot about getting it wrong in *Searching for the Secret River*", Grenville said. "It's pretty much warts and all. But the teacher in me, the person who wants to encourage others to write, is overcoming my fear of exposing my dopiness. There's no short-cut to creativity."

The convoluted, partly unconscious problem-solving process of writing, she finds absolutely fascinating.

"I think that's why people go on doing it," she said.

The Secret River has won several awards since publication last year, including the overall Commonwealth Writers Prize for Literature. But the thanks Grenville has received from members of the Aboriginal community is worth more to her, she said, than any of the prizes.

"They recognise that the book is my act of acknowledgement, my way of saying: this is how *I'm* sorry."

And a positive and healthy example of that, I would have thought. Nonetheless, even though I think it is

excellent historical fiction because the history is *possible* (often *probable*) in the main and while it is a magnificent empathic exercise, that issue of showing the Aboriginal people to a degree externally still is there.

When she writes *how to do that without appropriating their story* I know what she means, and anyone who follows this blog knows that I am all in favour of cultural sensitivity. In fact I think we still have a lot to learn in that regard. At the same time there is a danger of being crippled, isn't there. It's a paradox, and I am not sure Grenville has entirely solved it. One view is that such stories are in fact *our* stories, that is the stories are deeply Australian. We all need, perhaps, to enter them. Nicholas Jose was on to something when he wrote: "I got into trouble once for writing that Aboriginal issues were therapy issues for non-indigenous Australians. I was thought to be trivialising matters when, on the contrary, I meant to imply that the issues live inside all of us, inseparable from us. That is why we bristle when we are told to shut up and listen for a change." (See my **Indigenous Australians**.)

Historians are right to be cautious when acting as historians; I quite admire Inga Clendinnen in that respect. Novelists however would find life very difficult if they were quite so bound. There is, though, a world of difference, in my view, between Grenville's approach to history and that of Dan Brown, not to mention Dumas and *The Three Musketeers*, or Sir Walter Scott! I think she gets Macquarie's ambivalence right, and it is interesting that the May 1816 Proclamation is quoted verbatim, as Grenville says, in the novel. That same Proclamation appears in the Defence case in **R. v. Johnston, Clarke, Nicholson, Castles, and Crear** (1824).

Mr. Rowe respectfully suggested to the Court, on behalf of his clients, that he did not see there was any necessity for the prisoners to enter into a defence, as the charge laid in the information did not appear to be borne out by the evidence that had been adduced. The learned Gentleman also contended, that the prisoners were entitled to the benefit of two points of law which suggested themselves in the case; viz. 1. — That the indictment charged the prisoners with having committed an offence within the County of Cumberland, whereas the spot, on which these poor native women met with death, was in the County of Westmoreland; and, 2. — That the prisoners were warranted in the adoption of the steps that had been taken, having acted under the direction of a Proclamation, bearing date the 4th of May, 1816; one clause of which enacted "That from and after the 4th day of June next ensuing, that being the Birth-day of His Most Gracious Majesty King George the Third, no black native, or body of black natives, shall ever appear at or within one mile of any town, village, or farm, occupied by or belonging to any British subject, armed with any warlike or offensive weapon or weapons of any description, such as spears, clubs, or waddies, on pain of being deemed and considered in a state of aggression and hostility, and treated accordingly." In reply to the learned Solicitor, His Honor the CHIEF JUSTICE observed that these were matters of evidence, and it was necessary that the prisoners should go into their defence.

Mr. Robert Howe called. — His father, the late Mr. George Howe, was the Editor and Government Printer in 1816; and he (the witness) succeeded to the situation in 1821. That it was usual for all Proclamations, and other Orders of the Government, to be published through the medium of the Gazette; and that such had been invariably the practice. That it was a standing Order, "that all Public Communications which may appear in the Sydney Gazette, signed with any Official Signature, are to be considered as Official Communications made to those Persons to whom they may relate." The Proclamation, bearing upon the present question, was published by the late Governor (General MACQUARIE). That it had been called forth in consequence of certain outrages and murders that had been committed by the natives, on this side the mountains, which was the habit of being repeated every maize season; that it was found expedient to send out military aid to the settlers, owing to which numbers of the natives had been killed; and that since the date of the Proclamation, the natives had been in a tranquil state, with the exception of those in the new-discovered Country (Bathurst). In his cross-examination by the learned Attorney General, Mr. Howe stated, that he had not heard of disturbances in the vicinity of Bathurst, till within the last 8 months; and the preamble of Governor Macquarie's Proclamation

was read to the witness, reciting that the black natives of the Colony had, for three years before its promulgation, manifested a strong and sanguinary spirit of animosity and hostility towards the British inhabitants, &c.

The Rev. Thomas Hassall was next called. — This gentleman also stated that the Proclamation had been issued by the late Government, owing to the destructive and cruel ravages of the natives; and it was true that several natives had been killed in the new country. The country over the mountains is designated “Westmoreland.” For general humanity and kindness, Mr. Hassall gave the prisoners a most excellent character, and was quite lavish in his encomiums on John Johnston, whom, together with the prisoner Clark, he had known from a state of childhood.

On being cross-examined, Mr. Hassall stated that he knew nothing of the consequences of the Proclamation of 1816 of his own knowledge; and the concluding paragraph of the Proclamation of 1816 was read to Mr. Hassall by the Attorney General; viz. “And finally, His Excellency the Governor hereby orders and directs, that on occasions of any natives coming armed, or in a hostile manner without arms, or in unarmed parties exceeding six in number, to any farm belonging to, or occupied by, British subjects in the interior, such natives are first to be desired in a civil manner to depart from the said farm; and if they persist in remaining thereon, or attempt to plunder, rob, or commit any kind of depredation, they are then to be driven away by force of arms by the settlers themselves; and in case they are not able to do so, they are to apply to a Magistrate for aid from the nearest military station; and the troops stationed there, are hereby commanded to render their assistance when so required. The troops are also to afford aid at the towns of Sydney, Parramatta, and Windsor respectively, when called on by the Magistrates or Police Officers at those stations.”

Mr. Hassall, on being asked, stated as to the clause — “they are then to be driven away by force of arms,” — that his impression was, that the settlers might kill the natives, although they themselves were not attacked.

The Secret River shows quite convincingly how this might have worked in practice. It also shows a *range* of views among the settlers.

Less dramatic than the depiction of the massacres, but just as telling, is Grenville’s understanding of just how settlement disrupted the Indigenous economy and way of life. The “Wiseman” character plants his corn right over the top of the yams — which he discards — on which the local Aboriginal people have depended, and which grow in few other places in that area.

There have been Aboriginal writers who have travelled through similar territory, by the way; *Pemulwuy the Rainbow Warrior* (1987) by Eric Willmot is not a bad bit of historical fiction itself, though from a literary point of view *The Secret River* is better.

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The Secret River

The Secret River is set in the early nineteenth century, on what was then the frontier: the Hawkesbury River.

William Thornhill, an illiterate Thames bargeman and a man of quick temper but deep feelings, steals a load of timber and is transported to New South Wales in 1806. Like many of the convicts, he's pardoned within a few years and settles on the banks of the Hawkesbury River. Perhaps the Governor grants him the land or perhaps he just takes it – the Hawkesbury is at the extreme edge of settlement at that time and normal rules don't apply.

However he gets the land, it's prime riverfront acreage. It looks certain to make him rich.

There's just one problem with that land: it's already owned. It's been part of the territory of the Darug people for perhaps forty thousand years. They haven't left fences or roads or houses, but they live on that land and use it, just as surely as Thornhill's planning to do.

They aren't going to hand over their land without a fight. Spears may be primitive weapons, but settlers know that they can kill a man as surely as a ball of lead from a musket.

As he realises all this, Thornhill faces an impossible choice.

Some of his neighbours – Smasher Sullivan, Sagitty Birtles - regard the Darug as hardly human, savages with as little right to land as a dog. When the Darug object to being driven off, those settlers have no compunction in shooting or poisoning them.

Other neighbours make a different choice, and find ways to co-exist with the Darug. Blackwood has made a family among them. Mrs Herring "gives them when they ask".

Hostility between blacks and whites gradually escalates. Finally a group of settlers decides to go out and “settle” the Darug for once and for all. Will Thornhill join them?

The decision he makes is with him for the rest of his life.

The Secret River plunges the reader into the experience of frontier life. What was it like – moment to moment, day by day - to have been in that situation? It doesn't judge any of the characters or their actions, only invites the reader to ask the question, “What might I have done in that situation?”

***The Secret River* won the Commonwealth Prize for Literature; the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction (the NSW Premier's Prize); the Community Relations Commission Prize; the Booksellers' Choice Award; the Fellowship of Australian Writers Prize and the Publishing Industry Book of the Year Award.**

It was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award and the Man Booker Prize and longlisted for the IMPAC Dublin prize.

As well as Australasia, it has been published in the UK, Canada and the US, and in translation in many European countries.