

'Extraordinarily vivid.'

*Amanda Lobrey*



The

'Serong's finest work.'

*Robbie Arnott*

Settlement

'Grips from the first page.'

*Don Watson*

Jock

'Perversely beautiful.'

*Paul Daley*

Serong

# Embers

When he came to the clearing where the child had gone, the bad feeling was already well ahead of him.

The boy, Whelk, was there in the open, looking back over his shoulder at his own small footprints in the ash. Tiny whirls where the air was hot and escaping.

He had walked into the centre of the clearing, high trees all around him. A little smoke still rose from the place where the fire had been, and even several yards back the Surveyor could feel the warmth of it on his face. The ground must be glowing hot under the boy's feet, but he was paying no heed, and seemed unaware of the Surveyor watching him. He reached his fingers into the gloom, seeking balance. A misplaced step could crush through the powdery surface. A burnt foot would slow everybody down. The Man would be displeased. The Man was often displeased.

The charred timbers splayed outwards: the Surveyor saw now

that Whelk was standing in the ghost of a hut. The air was thick with menace: no birds, no breeze. The rest of the party were out in the bush around them but there were no voices. The world was dumb and blurred as he watched the boy, and he felt as though he had been struck over the head. In the white powdered ash he saw an iron door latch, sooted black. The barrel and breech of a rifle. Bottles standing in a crate now burnt away.

The smell of it was powerful, recent. Not the smell of a cooking fire, of the burning grasses, of the pyres he'd seen that these people made for their dead. This one was just timbers, but it hadn't started of its own accord. There would be people.

He called Whelk back from the clearing, and the boy looked up at him, returning from wherever his mind had gone to.

~

They'd watched from a high bluff earlier in the day as the smoke rose from the far side of the plain. It was far away, where the forest resumed beyond the grassland. The Man believed it was the news they'd been waiting for: the Big River tribe, signalling that they were willing to talk. When he'd seen enough he started making orders, bustling about in high excitement, sending advance parties to flank around the place, ensure it wasn't an ambush. That meant sending white men with black men, so that a trap set either by stockkeepers or by the Big River warriors might be averted.

Once the parties were provisioned and another group selected to watch over the supplies, the Man turned to Mannalargenna, the old chief.

'I want you to come down there with me. Be my emissary among these people.'

The chief watched him, his face unmoved under the ochred hair.

‘Emiss—’

‘Emissary. I want you to talk to them. In place of me.’

The chief frowned. He looked at the Man, then at the sky. ‘Good day to hunt,’ he said, as though he’d been asked something else.

The Man took off his cloth hat and crushed it in one hand, and the Surveyor saw his frustration.

‘Plenty *tara-na* that way.’ The chief waved a casual hand to the east. ‘Good hunting.’ The men had already brought out the blocks of ochre they had been keeping. The chief wandered off to gather his tools for the hunt, leaving the Man fuming.

His gaze fell upon the Surveyor, taller than him but unthreatening. His long cheeks and poking bones obscured his nature somehow; he knew this. His was a face in clouds. It meant his inner thoughts were concealed, and he preferred it that way.

‘You will come with me,’ said the Man, and the Surveyor, accustomed to these sudden demands, looked for the satchel that contained his maps of their route. He would be able to sketch the valley floor, he supposed. All of it was useful work. Useful work for an honest wage, and an honest wage drew a man closer to financial comfort. Closer to asking for the hand of a woman.

Whelk appeared with the satchel slung in hope over his small shoulder. The Surveyor thought to tell him off, then relented. There was no one else for the boy to follow. Mannalargenna would not hunt with a child, and if Whelk stayed with the older ones who were guarding the camp, they would make him fetch for them. The Surveyor rested a hand on the boy’s head and smiled back at him.

The people were naked now, glowing in the sun, bodies rubbed with grease and draped in strings, necklaces and bracelets. They stroked and murmured over scarifications. The Surveyor watched this transformation, watched the bold streaks of ochre striping their flanks, and he saw that the Man had noticed it too and, in his bottomless pride, had made no comment.

So they set off together; the Surveyor, Whelk and the Man, down from the high rocks that had been their lookout. The land levelled at a narrow creek and they waded through, and the Surveyor saw in Whelk's eager motion the pride he took in being this person, chosen to accompany the Man.

They had walked the flat, weaving between tussocks and saplings as the sun went high then started to fall in the west, and all that time they could see the top of the smoke plume where it faded into the blue sky. Sometimes the Surveyor imagined stockkeepers crouching in the shadowed distance with their guns levelled—the country was crawling with them, intent on slaughter—but when he looked at the Man and the small boy he saw no sign of fear. The whole party thought the Man was a fool, that he was pompous and possibly mad. But no one questioned his bravery.

They did not talk as they travelled. The Man appeared triumphant, marching faster and faster so that at times Whelk had to skip into a run to keep up. Small creatures burst out of the grasses. Barefooted, the boy stayed directly behind the Surveyor's thumping boots.

It was late afternoon when they reached the clearing, when it became apparent that this was not the moment they had hoped for, but a cruel mistake. The Man broke through the thick scrub first, so that the Surveyor had to swing his arms through the clouds of swirling insects he'd raised. The air was hazed with

smoke as the Man surged forward, surely by now suspicious at having heard no voices. Whelk saw him slump, saw the loss of all that energy. This was no signal fire; it was no gathering of the Big River elders and their chief, come to offer their submission to the Man and his great Conciliation.

Something terrible had happened here.

~

The Surveyor watched the boy standing at the centre of the clearing, and for a long moment he could not decide what to do or say. He hated this indecision in himself, and the boy felt important to him in ways he couldn't fathom.

Whelk was apparently transfixed, or waiting for his senses to guide him. It was a white man's hut: it would have been a stockman's, like the ones they had seen many times in the three weeks they'd walked the high country. But there was nothing to say who had burnt it, or why.

Just as the Surveyor determined that he should walk through the ash and retrieve the boy, his small body seemed to remember itself, and he walked out the far side of the clearing. The Man remained where he stood, watching, but the Surveyor went after him. Whelk was moving into the trees, picking his way through the dry twigs of the undergrowth, as though following the scent of some dark suspicion.

When they found her, it was not a surprise.

Face down, her hair thrown forward, she wore a possum coat and a large kangaroo skin over her shoulder. It had been full of pups: they had spilled near her outflung arm, fawn bodies entangled and sleeping peacefully on the dry leaves. Whelk had stopped and was staring at them, entranced again. The Surveyor

was still gathering his breath from the headlong plunge through the scrub. As his gaze rested on the warm mass of the pups he saw movement and briefly thought the woman was alive. But it wasn't that, he realised. There was another pup trapped under her.

Whelk had noticed it too: and together they knelt and lifted the poor woman's shoulder. Her flesh was cold and the twigs and leaves stuck to it. They felt underneath the shoulder for the pup's legs, and the boy pulled them free. There was some blood stuck in the fur of the hind legs he had in his fist. The tiny dog yelped as its body stretched, and once it was free it circled about, confused, then sat in the waves of the woman's hair, pawing at the strands.

Whelk squatted and clutched his knees. The Surveyor sat on his haunches and waited. He was a patient man, not given to rushed decisions. The sun came down to him in shades through the canopy, angular now and nearly gone. He didn't know what the Man would want him to do. He had no spade to bury the woman, and it would be hours of work: the boy was too small to assist him. But presently his dilemma was solved for him. The Man appeared out of the undergrowth: his eyes fell on the boy and the woman and the pups, and the sadness pierced him.

'Ah,' he said. 'Oh dear Lord.'

He came over, ignoring the Surveyor, and placed a hand on Whelk's shoulder, and the other one on the woman's neck. His fingers searched her throat gently, then reached down her back and shifted the possum cloak away to reveal a circular scar on her skin.

'Big River,' he said to himself. 'Such a shame.'

The Surveyor could not tell what was the shame, the fact that the woman had been killed or the fact that she was Big River. He said nothing. The boy was crying, the Man looking

at him, looking at his tears, and suddenly Whelk got up and stormed off into the trees. Finally the two men locked eyes, and the Surveyor saw only bewilderment in the Man's face. No one knew where Whelk's country was, what his true name was, or how these sights affected him. He was an orphan in more ways than the word had means to carry. He had been assigned to the Man for so long that he had more of the Man's language than his own.

There was another sound in the bush, apart from the cries of the butcher birds and the tapping leaves. The Surveyor listened intently. Sometimes the squeak of a split tree could sound that way, but no—it was steady and did not come and go with the wind.

They started to move towards it. The brush was thick and tangled—it had not been burnt—but it was veined with slender paths under the low boughs. A fat orb spider was creating its web for the coming night, running threads across a gap in the faint track: Whelk darted below without heed, but the web draped itself over the Man's chest as he passed.

He stopped then, flicked the spider from his coat and listened. A ledge of rock towards the setting sun. There. An overhang.

The rocks had formed a hollow and it had been barricaded with snapped boughs. The Man bent down and pulled them away, crouching to look in. Whelk and the Surveyor peered in too. The air inside was cool, the space lined with flat sand, and on the sand sat a little girl, fat and naked and crying.

She stopped when she saw them. Her body jerked with the echoes of lost sobs. There was some substance, perhaps dried food, on her chest. She assessed them, saw no threat and began to study Whelk's skin. The Surveyor understood it was white men who had done the thing, whatever it was. Whelk must

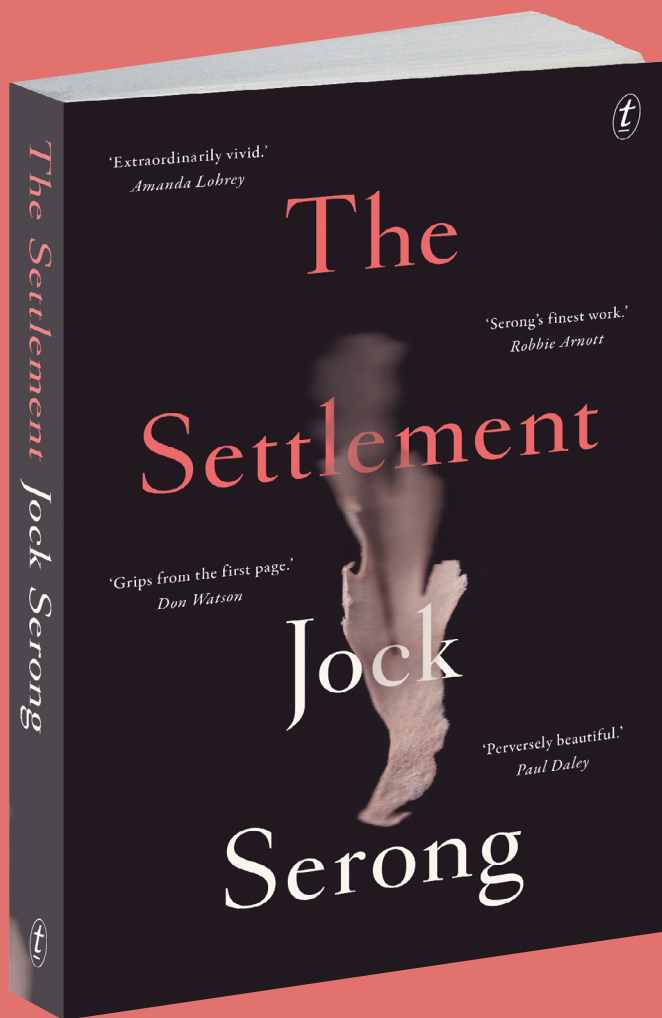


have appeared safe with these white men—by extension they were not murderers.

The wall of stone behind her offered no retreat. They were blocking the entrance, and without discussion they sat back, pulled away to each side and the Man made a soft sound of encouragement. The girl eyed the opening they had created but at first she did not move.

A single shaft of light cut through the leaves of the canopy and down between all the timber, over the Surveyor's shoulder and into the hollow, and it found the girl's eye, wide and wounded and sad beyond measure. Deep in her eye was hidden the evidence of all she had endured. There in the forest, on the high country that belonged to the Big River mob, they had come under a responsibility. She gazed at the boy and he was tied to her immediately.

Her breath shuddered and her face moved out of the light, was lost in shadow then crossed into the light again. She stood and bent low, came forward out of the crowding space and took hold of Whelk's hand.



**Loved this extract?**

Learn more at [Text Publishing](#)

