



# The Settlement

## JOCK SERONG

Discussion questions written by Nicholas Clements



### Praise for *The Settlement*

'Grips from the first page. It's unsentimental, truthful and profound.' **Don Watson**

'An extraordinarily vivid imagining of one of the most significant encounters in Australian history.' **Amanda Lohrey**

'A shocking but perversely beautiful evocation of the endurance and dignity of Aboriginal resistance to the sadism of the colony's God and guns.' **Paul Daley**

### About Jock Serong

Jock Serong's novels have received the ARA Historical Novel Prize, the Colin Roderick Award, the Ned Kelly Award for First Fiction and, internationally, the inaugural Staunch Prize (UK) and the Historia Award for Historical Crime Fiction (France). He lives with his family on Victoria's far west coast.

### About Nicholas Clements

Nicholas Clements is an Adjunct Researcher with the University of Tasmania. His PhD research and 2014 book, *The Black War: Fear, Sex and Resistance in Tasmania*, explored the motivations and experiences of both Aboriginal Tasmanians and colonists during that conflict. His most recent book, co-authored with Henry Reynolds, is *Tongerlongeter: First Nations Leader and Tasmanian War Hero* – a biography of the southeast Tasmanian chief's incredible resistance against the invasion of his country.

### About the book

On the windswept point of an island at the edge of Van Diemen's Land, the Commandant huddles with a small force of white men and women. He has gathered together, under varying degrees of coercion and duress, the last of the Tasmanians, or so he believes. His purpose is to save them—from a number of things, but most pressingly from the murderous intent of the pastoral settlers on their country.

The orphans Whelk and Pipi, fighting for their survival against the malevolent old man they know as the Catechist, watch as almost everything proves resistant to the Commandant's will. The wind, the spread of disease, the strange black dog that floats in on the prow of a wrecked ship...But above all the chief, the leader of the exiles, before whom the Commandant performs a sordid dance of intimacy and betrayal.

In *The Settlement*, Jock Serong reimagines in urgent, compelling prose the ill-fated exploits of George Augustus Robinson at the settlement of Wybalenna—a venture whose blinkered, self-interested cruelty might stand for the colonial enterprise itself.

### Discussion questions

1. The Commandant is based with some accuracy on the intrepid missionary George Augustus Robinson. Nowadays, he's generally seen as racist, opportunistic, and cruel, but in the 1830s he was considered a bleeding-heart humanitarian.

Should Robinson be judged by our twenty-first-century moral standards?

2. Many readers imbibe their colonial history through fiction. The Van Diemen's Land depicted in *The Settlement* is unusually faithful to the historical sources, but only a trained eye will spot where it is not. What responsibilities, if any, do authors of historical fiction have to historical truth?
3. On the face of it, the Catechist is a psychopath masquerading as a man of God. Could it be that he is symbolic of something else?
4. The historical sources leave no doubt that Aboriginal Tasmanians were devoted parents. The few children who survived the Black War were precious – the last hope for their people's survival. Yet in exile, they were segregated from their parents, the better to 'civilise' them. Some were sent to the Orphan Schools in Hobart. Others went to live with the Catechist, Robert Clark, a man only slightly less abusive and repellent than Serong's Catechist. The evidence suggests that parents offered no serious resistance to these separations. What could explain this?
5. The Catechist's wife is portrayed as wilfully ignorant, if not enabling of, her husband's abuses. Her passive complicity coupled with her Machiavellian marriage to a repulsive but high-status man invites the reader's contempt. But is this fair given that pragmatic marriages and slavish obedience to husbands were unavoidable for many women, especially the poor or widowed?
6. Bass Strait is one of the most treacherous stretches of water in the world. If this capricious environment is itself to be viewed as a character in the book, what role did it play and what feelings did it evoke in you?
7. The fate of the Aboriginal Tasmanians exiled to Bass Strait could scarcely have been more tragic. This is a difficult thing to treat in a work of fiction. What do you think of Serong's handling of this?
8. Between 1800 and 1830, several hundred Aboriginal women were enslaved by the sealers – villains and misfits who scratched out a living in Bass Strait. Most perished or were liberated by Robinson, but a small number stayed on. Today, most Aboriginal Tasmanians trace their lineage to these women. Understandably, there is disagreement among Aboriginal people about how to view their white ancestors. What do you make of Serong's portrayal of the sealers and their relationships with Aboriginal women?
9. How did you feel reading about the Catechist's fate?
10. The afterword to this book adds some extra historical information. Are there any other questions you would like to see answered?