

Sarah Thornhill

Kate Grenville

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Fiction, hardback

Recommended for secondary students



Praise for Kate Grenville and *The Secret River*

'One of the most entertaining, accomplished, engaging novels written in this country...it will live on as a classic.' *Courier-Mail*

'Grenville does it with such inventive energy, descriptive verve and genuine love of revitalising history that you'll bite the hand that tries to haul you away from this book...*The Secret River* is fabulous historical fiction.' *Weekend Australian*

'A book everyone should read. It is evocative, gracefully written, terrible and confronting. And it has resonance for every Australian.' *Sunday Mail*

'An outstanding study of cultures in collision...a chilling, meticulous account of the sorrows and evils of colonialism...Kate Grenville is a sophisticated writer.' *Guardian*

'Grenville writes prose which is immediately engaging. There are overtones of Macbeth in this study in how a man, not inherently evil, can be corrupted by circumstances. Grenville's skill is to turn what could have been too obviously a representative moral fable into a rich novel of character.' *Sunday Telegraph*

'Kate Grenville, an Australian writer of impeccable talents, conjures up this new South Wales as few writers could—with sentences so astonishingly muscular and right that readers will dream the landscape at night... *The Secret River* is a masterwork, a book that transcends its historical fiction and becomes something deeply contemporary and pressing. Nothing save for pure genius can explain the quality of this book. Against every measure by which a book might be judged, this one transcends. It deserves every prize it already has received, and every prize yet to come.' *Chicago Tribune*

Synopsis

Sarah Thornhill is a coming-of-age story, not only for its main character, Sarah, but for Australia, as we begin to explore the legacy that white settlement has left for the indigenous population.

Sarah is the daughter of ex-convict William Thornhill, and lives with her family on the banks of the idyllic Hawkesbury River. Sarah, known as Dolly by her family, is a strong-willed character with hopes and dreams that seem set to come true when long-time friend, Jack Langland, becomes her lover. But secrets and lies have kept Sarah from knowing the truth about the past. Sarah's hopes to marry Jack are thwarted when Ma reveals a secret to Jack—that Pa took part in a massacre of indigenous people, Jack's relatives.

Sarah's brother Will is lost in a maritime accident, and his Maori child, known as Rachel, is taken from her home to begin a new life with the Thornhills. Her sense of dislocation keeps her from integrating with the family but William cannot accept this and will not let her return to her real home. Sarah goes on to marry Irishman John Daunt and starts a new life away from the river, but the idea of Jack still haunts her. Daunt is proud, a man of silences, which adds to misunderstandings between husband and wife. Gradually they learn to love each other, and when their child is born it seems they have settled into married life. When Sarah is called to her father's deathbed, she learns of the terrible secret and the truth behind Jack's absence from her life and she finds it hard to reconcile her truth—about Pa and Jack—with reality. When Rachel dies unexpectedly, Jack finally visits Sarah and asks her to set things right for her dead niece. It is only through journeying to New Zealand and presenting a eulogy at Rachel's wake that Sarah can

feel a sense of relief for the guilt that she feels for her father's crime and for her own.

About the Author

Kate Grenville is one of Australia's finest writers. She won the Orange Prize in 2001 for *The Idea of Perfection*. *The Secret River*, published in more than twenty countries, was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and was shortlisted for both the Miles Franklin Literary Award and the Man Booker Prize. *The Lieutenant* was shortlisted for the New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australian Premiers' Awards.

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Themes

- Identity
- Belonging
- Dislocation
- Secrets
- Loss
- Lies
- Conflict
- Family
- Grief
- Coming of age

Discussion questions

1. *That was what it was to belong to a place. To be brought undone by the music of the land where you'd been born. The loss as sharp a pain as mourning a lover. Us currency lads and lasses had no feeling like that about the land we called ours. It had no voice that we could hear, no song we could sing. Nothing but a blank where the past was. Emptiness, like a closed room, at our backs.* (197)

One of the themes present throughout *Sarah Thornhill* is the idea of dislocation. Consider the dislocation of the white Europeans from their home country, of the indigenous Australians from their land, of Rachel from New Zealand and her family, and of the first-generation white Australians, such as Sarah, who feel they don't belong anywhere. Discuss.

2. Look at artwork by early white Australian settlers that depict the Australian landscape and fauna. Compare these to later artworks—50 to 100 years on—and note any similarities and differences between the two periods. What could account for the discrepancies?
3. *I hadn't done it, no. Hadn't lifted the gun. But Dick was right. I'd eaten the good food off the cedar table with the double damask cloth. Slept in the soft beds. Sat in the parlour, never known a day's hunger or cold, never asked where any of it come from...I'd lived in a cosy place made out of secrets and lies.* (255)

What responsibility does Sarah bear for her father's role in the massacre of a group of indigenous people? Should she bear any? Consider the 1998 'Sorry' marches that took place across Australia in response to the issue of the Stolen Generation. Discuss.

4. *In this house from now on the girl would always be Rachel. Her New Zealand name was gone for good. However long she'd be remembered, she'd be Rachel. Her own true name, whatever it was, gone from the world.* (150)

Does it matter if someone's name is changed? Does it change who they are? What does it say about the people who enforced the change?

5. *The only person in this bed was someone called Sarah Daunt, new to the world...* (180)

Consider Sarah's reaction to her new name. Does this new name change who she is? Or is there another reason she might be changed?

6. *You can wish for too much, I thought. You can want so much, you lose your own children and grandchildren.* (164)

When European settlers came to Australia, they brought with them the idea of a class hierarchy. Pa is happy when Mary marries Archibald Campbell, but feels more at ease outside talking to the stable hands than sipping tea in the sitting room. Consider the terms:

- old colonialist
- gentry
- emancipist
- the broad arrow
- currency lads and lasses

and organise in a hierarchical class structure from lowest to highest. Where does Sarah sit in this hierarchy? Where does Pa sit?

7. *I'd sit with Pa on the verandah, he let me have the telescope if I didn't ask too often.* (44)

Pa spends a lot of his time sitting on the verandah and watching life on the river through his telescope. Why do you think he does this? Discuss the ramifications of using only one eye to view the world. What might the author be suggesting?

8. *I found myself shy of Jack. He sat in my husband's chair, a man contented in his own skin, no matter how extravagantly that skin was decorated. He'd chosen who to be, and to show it on his face. This Jack had travelled into a different self. Another man had been carved out of the one I'd known.* (275)

Tattooing has been practised worldwide for centuries. A tattoo can serve as a rite of passage or describe the nature of the person who has been tattooed or be used as protection against evil. There has been a resurgence in the popularity of the tattoo today in Western society. Discuss why this might be so and what purpose it serves.

9. The dialogue in *Sarah Thornhill* is presented without quotation marks. Discuss why the author chose this style and how it affected you as a reader.
10. *I'd go up to the cave, look for the marks we'd left on that silky sand. Surprising how quick the wind smoothed them out. The floor of the cave was as if no human had ever touched it. Only the curving line through the sand where a snake had been.* (96)

The author has used the metaphor of the serpent, Adam and Eve and their fall from grace in this description of Jack and Sarah's cave and their sexual encounters there. How does this metaphor foreshadow the fate of Jack and Sarah's relationship?

11. *This was grief. Your loss wasn't just the person who was dead. It was the gap in the ones left behind, a hole that swallowed everything else too.* (104)

Death was a frequent visitor in the early days of white settlement. Imagine you are Death—describe a visit to a settler's home and the ripple effect your visit has on those around you.

12. *Such pretty pretty stories. I'd swallowed them down and smiled. My Pa, that good man, so generous to the blacks, oh, how proud of him I was. And Jack, a grand story, wasn't it sad, lost to me because he was proud and Dolly Thornhill so much higher up than him.* (255)

What part does deception play in the way Sarah views her life? How does her perception change when she learns the truth?

13. How are the indigenous people of Australia and the Maoris of New Zealand depicted in the text? Similarities? Differences?
14. *It was a surprise to me that you could be more lonely, sitting with another person who didn't speak to you, than out in an empty paddock. There could be lonelier things than empty.* (198) Discuss.
15. *Whatever part of my words she understood, she didn't need them in her own tongue. She was looking past the words, into the woman speaking them. My voice was thready, telling it with those eyes on me.* (301)

Language is only one part of communication. How else do we communicate with people? Discuss.