Nothing personal

A new novel from the author of Benang

Patrick Allington

THAT DEADMAN DANCE
by Kim Scott
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Kim Scott noted in 2001 that the biographical notes accompanying his first two novels (*True Country*, 1993, and *Benang: From the Heart*, 1999) changed from 'Kim Scott ... of Aboriginal and British ancestry' to 'Kim Scott ... one among those who call themselves Noongar'. Scott probed his self-identification to make a more confronting point: 'There's a shift in a sense of self. It indicates a journey, I think. Or is it the shiftiness of a charlatan? Are you worried that I am going to have an identity crisis in front of you, to bleed in public as Australia seems to expect of its Aboriginal people? In the interests of Reconciliation, you understand. Of sharing the history' (Alfred Deakin Lectures, 14 May 2001). A more recent biography is even more layered: 'Kim Scott's ancestral Noongar country is the south-east coast of Western Australia between Gairdner River and Cape Arid. His cultural elders use the term Wirlomin to refer to their clan, and the Norman Tindale nomenclature identifies people of this area as Wudjari/Koreng.'

As with his biographies, Scott's fiction explores indigenous identity in complex and unsettling ways. *Benang*, which shared the 2000 Miles Franklin Award with Thea Astley's *Drylands*, is narrated by Harley, a man of mixed Noongar and non-indigenous ancestry. Set in Western Australia in the early decades of the twentieth century, it is a dense, sarcastic and raw tale about assimilation, eugenics and the cultural survival of indigenous people. Harley is so angry and confused that he literally struggles to keep himself grounded. He sets out to discover his Noongar heritage – to know his family – and to reject his grandfather's eugenicist description of him as the 'first white man'.

That Deadman Dance reaches further back into history, to the early days of colonisation on the southern coast of Western Australia. The story runs from 1826 to 1844 (although not chronologically). This time span reveals a stark change: at first, the colonisers depend on the Noongar, but after less than two decades the settlement is well established and the non-indigenous inhabitants of this new community are pondering their pesky 'blackfella' problem. Scott adds another stage to this story of cross-cultural contact by briefly moving forward decades to observe the main character, Bobby Wabalanginy, in old age. Dressed in a kangaroo skin and red underpants, Bobby puts on a clownish command performance for tourists, winking, dancing, singing, telling tales and launching boomerangs: 'He offered himself as a fine image of the passing of time.' *Benang* takes the story further. Australia is now a nation, and a policeman can say, 'You need licenses for possums, if you're selling. Oh, kill as many as you want for food, for yourself. It used to be your country.' A bank manager says, 'It's nothing personal ... It's the law, it's the colour of your skin, Harry. Who your mother was, and your father too.'

Bobby Wabalanginy is an aficionado of the Dead Man Dance, which is a potent symbol of first contact: 'By the time he was a grown man everyone knew it had never been dead men dancing in the first place anyway, but real live men from over the ocean's horizon, with a different way about them.' In Bobby's version of the dance, he *becomes* the white settlers: 'quick striding Soldier Killam, with that twist to his torso and the bad arm; the hulking Convict Skelly; Dr Cross (oh poor thing, remember him?); Chaine, bouncing up and down on his toes, throwing commands with his arms.'

Bobby's dance – his detailed mimicry, his comic timing – re-imagines the changes wrought by ambitious colonisers such as Geordie Chaine. So, too, does Scott's novel. Against a backdrop of agriculture and whales, he offers a subtle portrayal of cross-cultural contact, incorporating collaboration, deception, miscommunication and, especially, distinct and often incompatible interpretations of events and behaviour. Take, for example, sickly Dr Cross, the colony's first white landowner. Cross is genuinely respectful of his Noongar neighbours, but he also knows that he needs their support and goodwill to tame the land. He forms a special friendship with Wunyeran, Bobby's uncle: 'They sang to one another. Wunyeran initiated it, Cross accepting.' After Wunyeran dies, a grief-stricken Cross prays to God to admit him into heaven 'despite the many – not knowing him – who would say heathen, and insist he was but an uncultivated savage'. In contrast, Wunyeran's brother, Menak, carefully arranges the body and wants to spear somebody as payback for the death. When Cross's assistant mishandles Wunyeran's body, there is an excruciating tenderness about Cross's futile efforts to right the wrong. Eventually, Wunyeran and Cross share a grave, an outcome that Scott describes without turning it into a transparent parable on race relations.

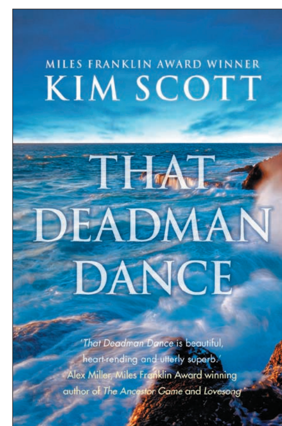
At the heart of the story is Bobby. He strides between worlds and between languages; he is a leader, thinker, innovator, diplomat and observer. He gets his Western education from Dr Cross and later from Geordie Chaine's wife. 'Look at me when I talk,' Mrs Chaine says, attempting to cure Bobby's shyness, but her offer, it seems, only holds while Bobby remains a boy. Bobby and Christine, the Chaines' daughter, are almost childhood sweethearts. He teaches

her the Noongar word for kiss, as well as a special song: 'They sang the song together, faces close, lips reaching out.' Years later, when Bobby carries Christine from a rowboat to shore, Geordie Chaine admonishes him: 'Damn you, Bobby. You are not children anymore.'

Eventually, Bobby realises that the settlers do not respect the Noongar, let alone consider them equals. He watches, shocked, as Chaine treats Menak with rough contempt. Bobby's downward spiral is swift. But even as he flounders, he hits upon a solution. He makes an impassioned public plea, an ingenious and courageous but utterly futile and misguided performance. Scott transforms this climax into a riveting, vibrant synthesis of the novel's themes. It is the most forlorn of comic moments, and the novel's brilliant high point.

Scott is an assiduous researcher and a deep thinker. *Benang* is a feat of storytelling: Scott weaves the complexity and the politicisation of language and the consequences of assimilation policies directly into the prose. But in *That Deadman Dance*, it is the author's imagination and his graceful prose that shine brightest. Colonisation has prompted in Scott a different imaginative response from the assimilation policies and the eugenicist belief systems of early twentieth-century Australia. Although *That Deadman Dance* does not have *Benang*'s sense of being a landmark book, a sardonic, tottering monument, it is nonetheless the better – as well as the more accessible – of the two novels. Politically charged and historically astute, it possesses a furious poise and yet is generous of spirit. Scott avoids gratuitous description, which serves only to heighten the novel's potency.

That Deadman Dance has relevance for debates about contemporary indigenous–non-indigenous relations. Not least, it stares down the equivocating, stultifying elements of the 'process of reconciliation'. But to whatever extent it 'educates' – a dodgy vocation for any novel – it does not, deliberately or accidentally, transform the past into a contrived version of the present. The political challenge for Scott's non-indigenous readers may be to resist the temptation to believe that they can redress inequality and injustice merely by exposing and embracing the messiness of Australian history. In the meantime, lovers of fiction should revel in – should celebrate – this compelling and beautifully constructed novel. ■



Patrick Allington's first novel, *Figurehead* (2009), was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Award. See http://patrickallington.net.au

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