

celebration Kim Scott

Australian authors
past & present

By Christina Neubauer

KIM SCOTT's work, with its nuanced focus on cultural conflict, land and identity, has helped put indigenous writing top of mind in Australia.

Perth's skyline recedes in the rear vision mirror on the drive south towards Curtin University. The four-lane highway follows Swan River's meandering shore high above the calm, lake-like water, letting commuters guess what the actual shore looks like hiding underneath the highway's stilts.

Amongst lush trees the university's eclectic mix of buildings, added during different periods of growth, are spread over a suburb-sized campus. There is still plenty of empty lawn ensuring the institution's future growth. Tucked away at the end of a maze of corridors in one of the concrete blocks is Professor Kim Scott's office. Outside his window, beyond tall trees, lies the Centre for Aboriginal Studies and somewhere further, the Faculty of Health.

Here, in Scott's office at the Department of Media, Culture and Creative Writing, an invisible link connects the different academic fields. Scott, appointed to his current cross-faculty role for a few months short of a year, develops departments' curricula and ensures collaboration within the university. Almost as an afterthought, he adds to his academic list of things-to-do that writing another literary piece is "supposed to be" part of his job. It seems hard to find a beginning and end to his work, similar to the black swirling lines on his vibrant blue shirt. He drifts into thoughts for a moment and scratches his head. A black, red and yellow beaded bracelet appears from under the shirt's sleeve.

His humble, unconventional appearance matches his attitude. Twice winner of the Miles Franklin Award, along with a list of accolades for his literary work, Scott was also announced as Western Australian of the Year and winner of the Indigenous Award this year. "I don't know whether I can articulate how that feels. It's kind of uncomfortable, which might be surprising." He admits having fretted about the responsibility of becoming a public figure and articulating his views. It led him into hiding after the award ceremony.

"Rights activists would argue to hand back the prize. I thought about it a little bit, but I'm not that sort of person. I believe you can have more traction and actually get

somewhere by being politically strategic and inclusive. If there is influence that comes with an award like this I want to make it useful. The trick, I tell myself, is how to make it useful, but I do feel a lot of pressure."

Issues of identity have been a recurring theme in Scott's work for more than a decade. His three novels take readers on a journey through time with his first *True Country* set in the present, following Billy, a young school teacher working in remote Australia. There is the apparent discrepancy between the beauty of the country and the ugliness of dispossession, dislocation and confusion about belonging, which Billy encounters. Elizabeth Jolley, whose former office at Curtin University is today occupied by Scott, described *True Country* as capturing "the ambiguities, the troubles and the rewards which accompany the brutal and delicate nuances of relations when particles of one culture pass, as if through a fine sieve, into the heart of another culture".

Similar ideas of cultural conflict, identity and cross-influence continue in Scott's further work. His second novel *Benang: From the heart*, which shared the 2000 Miles Franklin Award with Thea Astley's *Drylands*, travels back in time to the early 20th century. Harley, a young and angry half Noongar half non-Aboriginal man, sets out to reconnect with his family by writing its history enabling him to reject his identity as "the first white man born" and reconnect with his Noongar ancestry. It is a disturbing account of how Australian policies of assimilation and eugenics have deeply affected people.

With *That Deadman Dance*, Scott reaches even further back in time to the early 19th century. The novel is set in the southern coast of Western Australia, the so called "friendly frontier" where early settlers' survival depended on Noongar people. It is a magical place in time – Billy Wabalanginy a naïve yet curious performer immerses himself in both Noongar and coloniser's culture and becomes a master at imitating both. It is a time when horrific events of the future are yet unwritten and possibilities for two cultures to coexist remain – or maybe not. *That Deadman Dance*, a dance Noongar people reappropriate from early



Honours

- Western Australian of the Year, 2012
- Indigenous Award, Western Australian of the Year, 2012
- Centenary Medal 2003

Literary Awards

- Miles Franklin Literary Award, 2011
- Commonwealth Writers Prize (South-east Asia and Pacific), 2011
- Victorian Prize for Literature, 2011
- Victorian Premier's Literary Awards: the Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction, 2011
- The ALS Gold Medal, 2011
- Kate Challis RAKA Award, 2011
- Indie Book Award (shortlisted), 2011
- Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature: Premier's Award, 2012
- Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature: Fiction, 2012
- Braille Book of the Year, 2011
- Western Australian Premier's Book Award: Premier's Prize, 2010
- Western Australian Premier's Book Award: Fiction Prize, 2010
- Matilda Award for Cultural Excellence (UWA Convocation), 2007
- Western Australian Premier's Book Award, 2000
- Miles Franklin Literary Award, 2000
- Queensland Premier's Award (shortlisted), 2000
- Dublin Impac Literary Award (long listed), 2000
- Tasmania Pacific Literary Award (shortlisted), 2001
- Kate Challis Award, 2001

Novels

- *That Deadman Dance* (Picador, 2010)
- *Lost* (Southern Forest Arts, 2006)
- *Benang: From the Heart* (Fremantle Press, 1999)
- *True Country* (Fremantle Press, 1993)

Short Stories

- "A Refreshing Sleep", in *The Best Australian Stories* (2009)
- "Naatj" in the *Best Australian Stories* (2006)
- "Capture", in *Southerly* (2002)
- "Dallas's Dad" in *From Two Islands* (Fremantle Press 2000)
- "Damaged but Persistent" in *Siglo* (2000)
- "Into the Light" in *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember: An Anthology of Aboriginal Writing by Anne Brewster* (Fremantle Press, 2000)
- "Registering Romance" in *Summer Shorts 3: Stories - Poems - Articles - Images by Bill Warnock* (Fremantle Press, 1995)
- "An Intimate Act" in *Summer Shorts by Peter Holland* (Fremantle Press, 1993)

Children's Picture Book

- *The Dredgersaurus* (Sandcastle Books, 2001)

Art, Australian History

- *Mamang* (alongside Iris Woods and members of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, UWA Publishing, 2011)
- *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* (alongside Lomas Roberts and members of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, UWA Publishing, 2011)

Non-fiction

- *Kayang and Me with Hazel Brown* (Fremantle Press, 2005)

encounters with white people, sketches the complex relationships between conflicting cultures right from the beginning and leaves little hope for a different future.

In his author's note Scott says "the novel is 'inspired' by history because, rather than write an account of historical events on Noongar individuals with whom I was particularly intrigued, I wanted to build a story from their confidence, their inclusiveness and sense of play, and their readiness to appropriate new cultural forms – language and songs, guns and boats – as soon as they became available."

Scott superbly blends facts and fiction with his beautifully crafted narrative that flows between people, landscape and time. Despite his poetic style, playful wit and sharp humour it is an uncompromising impression of the past offering no solution and leaving non-Aboriginal readers with doubts whether this brutal, unjust history can be somehow nullified in the present.

When *That Deadman Dance* was described as a work of "post reconciliation", Scott cringed. "It is just very convenient to call my work 'post reconciliation' when in fact we're a long way from reconciliation having even taken place."

Scott describes his perception of our times like this: "There are a lot of red necks who aren't interested in what I do. On the other hand there are, what I call, 'enlightened non-Aboriginal members of the community', who live in a multicultural society and really want to know about Aboriginal culture. It is their sentiment to feel, belong and almost be grafted on to ancient roots of this country." Scott says part of this reconciliation process is to manoeuvre this spectrum of people and is adamant it should be regional Aboriginal communities who control this process. "They are the ones still carrying all of the marks of oppression that need healing first. Restoring the strength and health of Aboriginal communities is the first step before we can help other people feel they belong to this place and develop a sense of self. Beginning with small stories might just be a way to get there."

Even though Scott's stories don't spell out a concrete road map to

reconciliation, nor are they meant to, they do reinterpret Noongar culture for the present.

Among the most deeply personal contributions, though left unmentioned in his public award nominations, is his community work, in particular the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project. For over five years it brought together elders and members of the regional Noongar community, of which Scott is a part. The project was about language regeneration, cultural consolidation, returning historical and traditional material to its home community and empowering its members to interpret, control and share their heritage. In concrete terms it entailed creating a film and two beautifully crafted books, *Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*, both shortlisted for this year's Australian Publishing Association's Book Design Awards. Based on ancient oral Noongar stories, the books contain a crucial link between the past and present by providing a contemporary interpretation of traditional stories in Noongar and English language, but also in images and paintings.

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The book were also sent to Western Australia's prisons, where a long term inmate of Aboriginal background, who read Scott's work, *Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* started running his own "cultural healing" workshops, engaging other inmates some

of whom were unable to read. With a dozen men involved they put on dances, inspired by the books, during NAIDOC week when outsiders came to visit.

Scott recalls: "This inmate said to me. 'Mate, I'm in here because I'm too angry, too violent and I've got troubles with drugs. And this stuff is about who we really are. They lock us up because they want to isolate us and then put you in solidary to isolate us even more. But Kim, I wasn't even lonely in there.'" The inmate went through the list of characters from the books and the names of actual people they represent saying all of them were right there with him in his cell. "It sounds clichéd, but it was exciting feedback of my work and gives me energy, validation and affirmation."

The inmates' change of perception of identity and culture is a development Scott experienced first-hand, albeit in a very different setting and context. In his anthology *Disputed Territory* (2000) he described his own sense of Aboriginality as "a strange mix of pride, shame and isolation." He explains that in the past he may have defined Noongar culture by deficit and depression, but his father's heritage also provided a source of curiosity which Scott explored extensively. "I've learned what other readily available discourses say about Noongar culture and I've reworked what I've learned into my own interpretation and rearticulated it."

What will be the next project Scott delves in? He says he is playing with the idea of creating contemporary stories that aren't "niched completely as Aboriginal stuff" despite his concern of "glamorising Aboriginal realities." Working with the heritage without exploiting it and reducing it could be an approach he feels intrigued by. "When you start writing you also have to let it take you elsewhere."

Scott's readers are always taken elsewhere with the author's play of language and ideas taking place far beyond his small cubicle office and the university campus. Perhaps now, with another prestigious award under his belt, even more people will follow Scott on his journey beyond Perth's glittering skyline, proof of an industry's success in gaining access to the State's profitable natural resources.