



KIM SCOTT

TABOO

TWICE WINNER
OF THE MILES FRANKLIN
LITERARY AWARD

'Taboo seizes and will not release.' ROBERT MACFARLANE



Blurb



One may as well begin, 'Once upon a time . . .'

We thought to tell a story with such momentum; a truck careering down a hillside, thunder in a rocky riverbed, a skeleton tumbling to the ground.

There must be at least one brave and resilient character at its centre, Tilly Coolman (one of us), and the story will speak of magic in an empirical age; of how our dead will return, transformed, to support us again and from within.

Except this is no fairy tale.

From Kim Scott, two-times winner of the Miles Franklin Literary Award, comes a work charged with ambition and poetry, in equal parts brutal, mysterious and idealistic, about a young woman cast into a drama that has been playing for over two hundred years...



The Author

KIM SCOTT grew up on the south coast of Western Australia. As a descendant of those who first created human society along that edge of ocean, he is proud to be one among those who call themselves Noongar. His second novel, *Benang: From the Heart*, won the 1999 Western Australian Premier's Book Award, the 2000 Miles Franklin Literary Award and the 2001 Kate Challis RAKA Award. His third novel, *That Deadman Dance*, also won the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2011, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Western Australian Premier's Book Award. Kim lives in Fremantle, Western Australia, and is currently Professor of Writing at the School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts, Curtin University.



Plot Summary



A group of Wirlomin Noongar people travel to the small Western Australian town of Kepalup for the opening of a Peace Park, which the local community has arranged to commemorate a massacre of Wirlomin people by white landowners that happened several generations ago. The area has been taboo ever since the massacre, and no Wirlomin have been back to it in a long time.

The land on which the massacre took place is owned by Dan Horton, whose ancestors committed the killings and whose late wife Janet was very involved in the Peace Park plans. Dan himself is desperate to make amends and has extended a welcome to the visiting Wirlomin.

But this is not to be a simple coming together of peoples. Tilly, a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl with a Wirlomin father and a white mother, both now deceased, comes along to the camp to make a connection with her father's people. She discovers that she was fostered by the Hortons when she was a baby, although she has no memory of this. Battling her own demons, she struggles to find a way to fit in.

A relative of Tilly's, Gerald, recently released from prison and trying hard to forge a new path, grapples with the temptations of his former life as well as struggling to connect with a heritage he knows is his but of which he has little experience.

Unbeknown to the Wirlomin, Dan's beloved only son Doug, a parole officer who has caused trouble for many of the Wirlomin men and with whom Tilly recently had an abusive relationship, follows the group to Kepalup.

In the days leading up to the Peace Park opening, the group visit the land of their ancestors and try to find ways to reclaim an identity that has been long lost to them. At the same time, they try to decide how best to participate in the Peace Park opening, while the temptations of the modern world are never far away.



Themes

Aboriginal cultures in today's society

1. '...we stumbled and were still learning to properly speak and breathe again; we are hardly alone in that regard' (p. 3). Why do the spirits in this scene say they are newly arisen? What do they mean when they say they are not alone in this?
2. "'Reconciliation,' someone yawned.' (p. 97) '...Culture and Community Development, she said, the capital letters loud in her voice. She repeated this phrase many times, along with Funding and Program of Activities.' (pp. 99) Some words are repeated over and over in relation to the Peace Park opening and its associated activities: 'Reconciliation', 'Acknowledgement', 'Cultural Development', 'Close the Gap'. What is the effect of the repetition of these words and phrases, and the body language from the characters that often accompanies it? What does this say about the use of these words to try to promote real change for Aboriginal peoples in Australian society today?

Cultural identity

1. 'It was true what people said: every old one left a hole in the world when they died, when they took language with them. That old language was a world itself, and one by one the words let you in.' (p. 14) In what ways do you think language is crucial to a sense of cultural identity?
2. Maureen McGill, the Aboriginal Support Officer at Tilly's school, suggests that Tilly take part in an Aboriginal dance for the College Ball. "'It's natural, you'll see, it'll come to you. Aboriginal people are all great dancers ... but maybe change it just a bit, make it more Aboriginal.'" (p. 189-90) How is Maureen's attitude emblematic of the problems facing Aboriginal people who have not been able to build their own cultural identity? What does this say about society's understanding of Aboriginal cultures in general?



Themes

3. “Not our people, we never been in these talks about the Peace Park. Them ones weren’t the original family, they’re the pretend people.” (p. 223) Who are the ‘pretend people’ Milton talks about here?

Mystical and spiritual elements

1. What role do the ‘old ones’ or ‘old people’ play in this novel? In what ways is it suggested they make their presence felt, and influence the events of the novel?
2. How, in particular, do the spirits help Gerald and Tilly, and how important is their involvement for those two characters?
3. What does the sticks-and-stones man that Wilfred makes represent? What is the implication of his becoming animated in the flow of grain in the final scene? And whose voice do you think it is that ‘called out Triumph. Victory. Called it out in the old language. Then: “Did it, Tilly.”’ (p. 279)? What do they mean by this?



Characters

Tilly

1. With a white mother and a Noongar father who, until recently, Tilly has never known, and whose relationship was both destructive and violent, Tilly could be said to be a metaphor for Aboriginal and white Australia today: inextricably linked, but in conflict. What similarities are there between Tilly's story and that of Aboriginal peoples since colonisation? What hope can be drawn from Tilly's story for the future?
2. About halfway through the novel, we no longer see Tilly self-harming. Why is this, do you think? What is it that has started to heal her, and how has this come about?
3. What parallels can be drawn between the rape of the child which led to the massacre at Kokanarup, and the near-rape of Tilly by Gerrard and Doug? How are the two events different, and what might the outcome of Tilly's encounter suggest to the reader about things to come?

Gerald

1. What analogies can be drawn from the identical twin Gerrys, one newly awakened to his cultural identity and the other more closed off, more mired in the problems of many of his generation?
2. Tilly - and many of the others - can often not tell which twin is which, in spite of their different natures. What does this say about the struggle Gerald faces?
3. 'Gerald was disappointed in himself. The grog and that. He went through words in the old language; it didn't seem they could sustain him, not against his own weakness. Weaknesses. Maybe his connection to ancestral country was too long broken. Maybe it was all bullshit.' (p. 254) How is Gerald attempting to change his life? From where is he drawing the strength to do so? Do you think, ultimately, that he will succeed?



Characters



4. '[Gerald] followed in [his ancestors'] footsteps, but must travel a little further too.' (p. 257) What does Gerald mean by this? Why must he travel further?

Dan Horton

1. Dan is very nervous and emotional on page 219 when he addresses the Wirlomin mob and tries to give them the river stones he has collected over the years. What do you think is making Dan so anxious?

2. Although Dan feels deeply connected to his land, the connection he feels is described differently from that of the Wirlomin. In what ways is it different? Why, do you think? What conclusions might you draw from this?

3. 'As they drove away from a waving Dan, Milton said, "Nice to get those stones, but if he give us the farm, that would really mean something!"' (p. 228) In fact, Dan is indeed intending to give them the land on which the massacre occurred - at least, to Tilly, as representative of the traditional owners. Did this surprise you? If so, why, do you think?



Setting



The novel is set in and around a fictional small town in southern Western Australia.

- 1.** The name of the small town of Kepalup means 'place of water' or 'welling', and yet it is described as dry and parched, 'near-barren'. What parallels can be drawn between this setting and the events of the novel?
- 2.** There is a lot of description of the natural world in this novel. How does this affect your experience of the novel, and what does it tell you about the connection between the characters and their ancestral land? How does this contrast with the manmade features that are described?



Writing Style



- 1.** Kim Scott begins and ends the novel with the same scene, though our perspective of it is quite different the second time we see it. What effect does this have on your understanding of the characters and how the events of the book have changed them?
- 2.** The book is written predominantly in the third person ('he''she') and in the past tense, but with the occasional segue into the first and second person ('I', 'my', and 'you', 'us', 'our'), and present tense. Why, do you think? What effect do these different styles have, and whose voice (or voices) are being referenced?
- 3.** "'Words, see. It's language brings things properly alive. Got power of their own, words. Some more than others. You'll see, you'll see proof soon enough.'" (p. 98-99) The old language of the Noongar is used throughout this book, but the words themselves are very rarely actually written or reported to the reader. Why not, do you think?