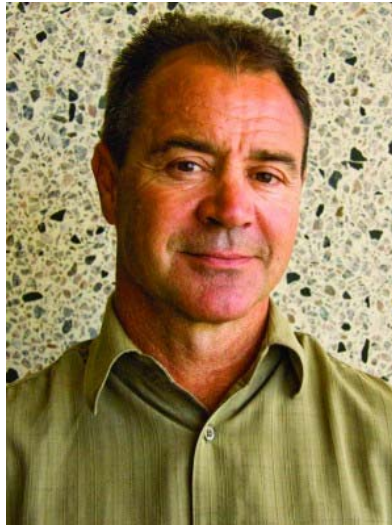
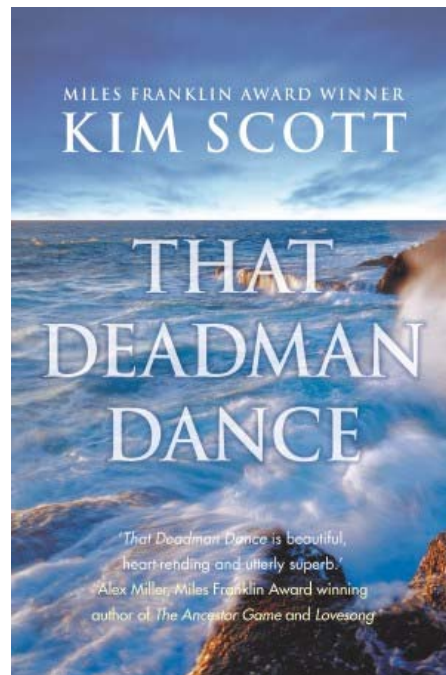


**PICADOR**  
**AUSTRALIA**

**NOTES FOR READING GROUPS**



**Kim Scott**



**THAT DEADMAN DANCE**

## Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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### INTRODUCTION

'There! Bobby saw a sail, a mast change its tilt, and then, sunlit among the grey and white tufts and tears of ocean, a spout of spray. Oh. Lotta spouts, a clump of silvery bushes blossoming in a great trunk of angled sunlight out there on the wind-patterned sea. For a moment he thought of sails, of a great fleet of ships rolling in from the horizon. But no, this was whales. Bobby, arms and legs windmilling down the sandy track, yelling out, yelling out, voice pricking men into action. No time just then, but he wrote it later.

*Thar she bloze!* (p 5)

Bobby Wabalanginy begins his story writing in chalk on stone. In this prologue Kim Scott establishes that this is a book about language and meaning as much as it's a tale of whales and men, of land and sea, of action and intention, and of colonial invasion and Aboriginal displacement. The interplay between the acquired and known words in Bobby's head (and hand) tantalise the reader with the 'near misses' of words to express themselves, along with their capacity to say more than they say. This is an emotionally charged appreciation of this meeting and blending of two worlds which transforms the anger often expressed in such post-colonial narratives into a celebration of Indigenous spiritual solidarity. The quote above suggests an ironic elision between the majesty of the whales and the apparent majesty of the colonial ships which sailed into view and which were to wreak such havoc amongst Aboriginal inhabitants. Kim Scott marvels here at the skillful local extrapolation on the language and customs of introduced white cultures, rather than simply lamenting the damage 'done' to Noongar people, although he also makes that clear. He writes this story in prose which is luminous and mesmerizing, and thus creates a work of literature which is irresistible, haunting, and unforgettable.

## THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'Laughing and loved, Bobby Wabalanginy never learned fear; not until he was pretty well a grown man did he ever even know it. Sure, he grew up doing the Dead Man Dance—those stiff movements, those jerking limbs—as if he'd learned it from their very own selves; but with him it was a dance of life, a lively dance for people to do together, each man dancing same as his brothers except for the one man on his own, leading them. It was a dance from way past the ocean's horizon, and those people give it to our old people.' (p 67)

This novel traces the early years of white 'settlement' in imagined places modelled on Albany in Western Australia and its surrounding area which has been inhabited for thousands of years by the Noongar people. The events take place in an area which was then forcibly defined by settlements dubbed here as King George Town, Cygnet River colony, Close-by-island Bay, Shellfeast Harbour and the Governor's residence at Keppalup Farm. It traverses two distinct periods in those few years—first a period beginning in 1826, when the Aboriginal people were 'tolerated', and found useful for their local knowledge by the white invaders, and for their labour in the fledgling whaling industry, and then a period of growing resentment and misunderstanding in which resources such as food became short and the Noongar people realised that they were not going to be treated equally nor repaid for their services. Bobby is the 'everyman' figure at the heart of this tale; for he is a pivotal figure in nearly every encounter. Bobby's friendship first with the benevolent Dr Cross who teaches him his letters, as a child, and then with the mercenary Mr Chaine, and his family, is representative of those two periods. When Dr Cross is buried with his friend Wunyeran, it offers hope of some reconciliation: 'A lot of bad things been done here—we won't speak of them now, my friends—but that was a good beginning.' (p 78) But this hope is challenged as the colony develops, and dashed when later their joint grave is desecrated.

'Wooral was in the pilot boat now, heading for where the ship rested, its wings folded and tied. But it is a ship, not a bird, Menak, reminded himself again.'(p 14) The novel constantly shows how the visitors were viewed through Aboriginal eyes and paints a picture of people adjusting their eyesight to strange things and re-envisioning them in images which were familiar (such as birds in this quote). This is a poetically imagined account of these first encounters, and it presents a picture of people only gradually apprehending that these 'ghosts' were not going to go away. Both sides in this dispute struggle to communicate, and it's this miscommunication which is at the heart of the novel thematically.

For the Aboriginal people, the new visitors are puzzling in their intentions, and in their strange ways: 'Such a closed-in life made Bobby ill, and for a long time he saw the trees and sky only through the frame of a window or doorway...The paper of his lessons was old skin beneath his fingers.'(p 26) They also foolishly choose camp sites which no Aboriginal person would select (p 151). And yet the Noongar are prepared to give them the benefit of the doubt and to trust that they can live together. As time goes by, the white and black inhabitants form a fragile bond, particularly between Bobby and Mr Chaine's children. Jak Tar, a sailor who has escaped a brutal captain, forms a relationship with Binyan, Bobby's sister, which represents another bond between black and white. But other older inhabitants become disenchanted long before Bobby does. Menak, Elder of the clan, expresses his suspicions by refusing to speak or evince his understanding of English, and the respected elder woman Manit is angry: '*Nitja wadjela*. Your friends? the old woman said, no longer so friendly and playful. *Tjanak!* Devils! Smile to your face but turn around and he is your enemy. These people chase us from our own country. They kill our animals and if we eat one of their sheep . . . they shoot us. *Baalap ngalak waadam!* The very smell of them kills us.' (p 24) Their views are at odds with Bobby's belief (hope) that Dr Cross's successors might still be friends.

There's a clash of cultures, too, in the way white people use the land and degrade its resources. For Aboriginal identification with each living creature is innate: 'Bobby felt like a bird, rising on a sweep of air; he felt like a porpoise slipping easily in and out of the wave face.'(p 32) In contrast, white people trample the earth which leads to erosion; they don't understand using fire to regenerate growth; they introduce wildlife which is both unsuited

to the area, and quickly decimates local fauna, destroying a balanced ecosystem; they hunt whales until there are few left. 'Sometimes Wooral addressed the bush as if he were walking through a crowd of diverse personalities, his tone variously playful, scolding, reverential, affectionate. It was most confusing. Did he see something else?' (p 46) White people fail to apprehend that in contrast to their methods, local people have created natural fish traps, a stone weir (pp 99-100) and set fires, demonstrating the ways in which they have managed their environment. Noongar people's entreaties to white men to keep cattle from murking the waters go unheeded, and increased demand for water contributes to the decline in local reservoirs: 'Already the waters were slowing, the level dropping.' (p 360)

The colonialists came with gifts and trade to tempt the 'natives', too, often with worthless things. 'A collection of objects lay in a pile beside their old campfire and, even coated with ash, their smooth surfaces screamed. Such hard and bright things—Bobby would learn the words, we all would: *beads, mirror, nail, knife*— were passed around as the rest of the family arrived. Look, feel, smell them; and oh the sharp taste of steel. Some said they remembered them, from the time of the dance. And the footprints without toes.' (p 71) They were also given foodstuffs such as flour and sugar which they came to rely on, to the detriment of traditional food crops, and were introduced to alcohol which had its own dire legacy. Later Bobby reflects on how accepting such gifts was bad trade: 'We thought making friends was the best thing, and never knew that when we took your flour and sugar and tea and blankets that we'd lose everything of ours. We learned your words and songs and stories, and never knew you didn't want to hear ours' (p 106). Introduced illnesses were another way in which resistance was gradually quelled, for not only did Cross die of the illness, but also uncle Wunyeran and Bobby's mother Birtang, her partner Wooral, and most of Bobby's relatives. Abuse and virtual slavery was another tactic often employed— Jeffery and James never had a hope, for they were adopted young to work as labourers with no pay, and received their sexual initiation as children at the hand of their adoptive 'father'.

Religious zeal was also used to enforce a Protestant work ethic and to justify colonial power. 'Cross had begun this, he said ... He encouraged ideas of entitlement, Papa said. Not respect and a work ethic; not the necessary discipline to defray one's immediate and short-term gain, and understand self-sacrifice' (p 383). Grace Chaine believes her children have 'moral superiority' (p 199), and are watching over Bobby, but the reverse is true: 'The twins, Christopher and Christine. You know, named for Christ. Who died for us and came back from among the dead.' (p 34) When Convict William Skelly is speared by Menak (p 92) he is convinced by Cross to turn the other cheek, in order to maintain the fragile peace: 'He had been like a Christ not only for these savages but for this entire community.' (p 94) The stark truth though is that those in power generally sought not salvation but gain at the expense of others: 'Chaine knows what he wants. Profits, not prophets.' (p 293)

Aboriginal spirituality and kinship systems were equally unknowable to the visitors: 'He is family, so Wunyeran told me, but whether nephew or some relation more distant I do not know. Almost everyone seems related, in one way or another. Even to birds and animals, and plants and things in the sea.' (p 39) Wunyeran told Dr Cross 'sky stories of how things became the truths they are.' (p 130) Bobby is a spiritual man who 'feels' the land around him. 'Bobby looked into future graves, and into some people's hearts and minds, went into the hollows within them, into the very sounds they made. All his friends and their goodness kept him alive. And he never learned fear, because he was not just one self. He was bigger than that, he was all of them.' (pp 127-8) His powers save a man from snake bite, another from being speared, and after his initiation (pp 296-7), he is even stronger. 'He was very spirty, Bobby Wabalanginy, even in these years before he reached adolescence.' (p 147) His connection with the earth is other-worldly: 'The smell of earth in the ochre and oil, his increasing sense of the fine and delicate paths of blood and nerves and the many fine sinews connecting him to this place, this perpetual moment.' (p 334)

Language offers a bridge between two cultures, although that communication is tragically imperfect. 'As if you're someone else altogether, some new self trying on the words.' (p 86) Bobby adeptly acquires the English language and then transforms his confused memories into songs and dances which are one way of interpreting what has happened to his people. 'He has a language for the real story inside him, but it is as if a

strong wind whips those words away as soon as they leave his mouth. People say he twists words, but really it is the wind twisting and taking his words away to who knows who will hear them.' (p 160) Bobby's skill at mimicry is legendary; he puts on voices and attitudes at will, sounds more like the English than they do, and creates performances describing them. His ship dance (p 58) is based on what he's observed at sea, and similarly, 'Wunyeran's performance of the journey was structured in the way of an expedition journal. Or was Cross imagining things?' (p 113) Such performances shock the invaders' sense of superiority: 'Heads snapped up when he sang like that. Surprise, and hurt, too, shows on their faces when we walk like them, fold our arms, cross our legs. Speak their way. When we be like a looking glass, and show their way back at them.' (p 135) When Mrs Chaine assumes Bobby's education after Mr Cross dies, Bobby writes a letter of condolence to Mrs Cross (pp 167-9) which is a perfect iteration of such letters. And Bobby's Dead Man Dance (p 376) is the most telling performance of all. But even more than being a form of communication, Bobby recognises that the act of writing has power in itself: 'And then, slowly, he came to need the feel of all those small and intricate movements required to build up a picture, a story, a permanence. Came to need the ritual of it, the absorption in the doing of things, and then—stepping back—oh look what had been brought forth. It was like you froze things, froze the fluid shift and shaping, held it. Like cold time. *Nyitiny*. Like a seed in cold time, and when the sun came out the waters rose. *Roze. Roze a wail.*' (p 201)

**The mistaken belief that the demise of Noongar culture was unavoidable, underpins many colonial actions and events in this novel.** 'A lot of his people had died, Mrs Chaine was coming to realise. Our arrival means their death though we do not lift a hand.' (p 166) Even Mr Cross, despite his benevolence, had not predicted any good end (p 62) and he'd been ominously prescient when he'd observed of their mobility, 'And there is an order to their movements, according to season and the laws of their society. They do not yet need us. They will return, he said, and later wrote it down as if for reassurance.' (p 60) Thus, as the settlement becomes more prosperous, the white settlers became more cavalier in their treatment of local inhabitants, and Bobby is made heart-sick when Dr Cross's body is re-interred in the town cemetery and Wunyeran's skeleton is left in the grave they formerly occupied together, and violated (p 354). As the Noongar dependency on limited resources grows, their unrest does as well. When Governor Spender informs Chaine that 'steps must be taken' (p 359) it is clear that the form of rapprochement which had existed between Noongar and white inhabitants is soon to end. Laws are enforced to ensure that 'Natives' be properly clothed and without arms should they wish to enter town. Even Bobby is demoted from 'darling' of the settlement, to something of an embarrassment, and later an outcast and rebel. Christine Chaine reflects on the bitter truth that in the past Menak and Bobby and others were treated with respect as owners of this place, but that now, having created a settlement Chaine and his fellows feel no such obligation: 'It may have been expedient at one time, but was no longer necessary.' (p 367)

**Bobby in his final act of resistance hopes for a treaty; a written agreement between black and white:** 'We will sign a paper with them about how we might live. There will be no more gaol. We show our talent and good grace, and Wooral and them no longer need use fire and spears and fight them and their guns.' (p 390) But having been forced to sign a lie by the white men, he might have realised that words will be used only to enforce submission, not to forge a new relationship based on good will. 'Bobby laughed. Hadn't he escaped the lock-up just from a few words on paper? Child's play. What was that against dance and song? They'd seen how people fell back before him, joined their voices with his. It is like the dance to dodge the spears; they cannot match us.' (p 390) Bobby's tragedy is that he both understands the power of the white man's words but also believes them to be insignificant when confronted by his own cultural beliefs. Unfortunately white people did not perceive that this was the case, and this, too, continues to be their great loss:

'Because you need to be inside the sound and the spirit of it, to live here properly. And how can that be, without we people who have been here for all time?' (p 394)

## WRITING STYLE

1. The novel consists of a **Prologue** (p 1+), and of four parts: **Part I** 1833-1835 (p 6+ ); **Part II** 1826-1830 (p 65+); **Part III** 1836-1838 (p 163+); **Part IV** 1841-1844 (p 299+) and concludes with an **Author's Note** (p 396). The timeline observed in the parts is not entirely chronological. Why does the author choose to tell this story using flashbacks? What effect does this have on the reading?

2. Kim Scott writes in the **Author's Note**: 'I say the novel is 'inspired' by history because, rather than write an account of historical events or 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.'(p 397) This offers a real insight into the blending of narrative style and genre here, and in the novel's blend, too, of fiction and fact. Discuss.

3. This novel is extremely poetic in its use of literary devices to infuse the text with emotional meaning, for example, similes such as: 'damp chalk, brittle as weak bone.'(p 1) Metaphors animate the landscape, too, reflecting Aboriginal belief in the power of the land and sea: 'All day they worked to escape the confinement of scraggly, twisted, pressing scrub. It was as if a great many limbs restrained them, disinterestedly; as if thousands of fingers plucked at their hair and clothing. Tree roots tripped them.'(p 49) or 'The trees were women leaning to the water to wash their hair, and when the children stood under their limbs they were among loved ones.' (p 204) Ocean and land are often compared evocatively, too: 'The tightly bound mallee all around him was like waves of the ocean. Clouds in waves, too, and the moon a ship, itself plummeting.' (p 226) Governor Spender and his wife Ellen think: 'You might drown in forest, sink and never be seen.' (p 174) or 'Beneath his feet the bow tossed foam and water like scattered applause, and the swollen sails were all pride and power.'(p 19) Bobby's awareness of the white man's power is poetically described here, as it is later: 'Chaine, rising up and down on his toes like a buoy bobbing on the ocean swell, watched them.'(p 197) When the elderly Kongk Chaine visits Bobby in his shelter, metaphors of 'dogs' describe him. Descriptive words also often have violent associations such as 'Rain spat on the walls...made sharp silver thorns' (p 3) or 'The only thing worse than sailors in a ship was whalers in a ship; maggots in a floating abattoir.'(p 303) Discuss a passage you found particularly evocative in this novel.

4. There are several main Characters in the novel. Noongar Characters: Bobby, Menak (elder of the clan), Manit (elder woman), Uncle Woonyeran (brother to Menak and friend and 'brother' to Dr Cross), Bobby's mother (Birtang), her younger partner (Wooral), Binyan (Bobby's sister and partner to Jak Tar), Jeffrey and James. White 'Settlers': Dr Cross, Mr Geordie (Kongk) Chaine, Grace Chaine (his wife), Christine (daughter), Christopher (son), Alexander Killam (former soldier and publican), William Skelly (freed convict and carpenter), Governor in Residence Spender, Ellen (wife), Hugh (son and suitor to Christine), Jak Tar. Choose a character and discuss their motivations and actions in terms of the themes of the novel.

5. Humour constantly undercuts even the tragedy which is implicit in many of the scenes in this novel. For example, when Jak Tar wakes by a fire lit by Bobby, the boy speaks authoritatively to him: 'Ah, my man Friday, the wide-eyed boy said. Clear English like a dream surprising Jak Tar.' (p 196) Bobby is a performer and a maestro in the art of entertainment. Discuss any particularly amusing scene.

6. Stories are told in a mixture of narrative perspectives, and Bobby is prone to becoming a third, or second, or first person narrator in the space of one performance. (We also hear his voice as it will be heard in the future, when Bobby is an old man.) Discuss this interplay in the novel.

## THE AUTHOR

Born in 1957, 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.

Kim's professional background is in education and the arts. He is the author of two novels, *True Country* and *Benang*, poetry and numerous pieces of short fiction; has worked as secondary school teacher and at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies, Curtin University, in a variety of roles, including co-ordinator of the Aboriginal Bridging and Indigenous Tertiary Enabling courses, mentor to students and staff, and as manager, lecturer and tutor. He has also taught Creative Writing at Murdoch University.

He has been a member of several state education committees, most recently as chair of the WA Education Department's 2006 Literacy and Numeracy Review Task Force's Writing in the Upper Primary School Working Party, and has served on state and national arts boards, and judged a number of national writing competitions. Kim has been a representative on the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council's Wagyl Kaip (region 4) Working party since 2003. He has been a cultural awareness workshop leader at BHP Billeton/Nickel West's Ravensthorpe mine site, a writer-in-residence, visiting scholar at Trinity College, University of Melbourne and an invited guest at numerous national and international writing and cultural festivals. Kim is currently Associate Professor, Aboriginal Health, Education and Research at Curtin University.

He lives with his wife and two children in Coolbellup, south of Fremantle, Western Australia.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'Menak had seen ships come and go since he was a child, had seen his father dance with the very earliest visitors. Not that he really remembered the incident, more the dance and song that lived on.' (p 12) Such a description challenges the view that Captain James Cook 'discovered' Australia on the *Endeavour* in 1770. It seems that Aboriginal people had been observing new arrivals and making them part of their own cultural history for a long time prior to that. Discuss.

2. Aboriginal adoption of and re-invention of introduced languages is covered in Penny van Toorn's *Writing Never Appears Naked: Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia* (Canberra, ACT, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2000) which you may choose to read as background. The loss of so many Aboriginal languages is complicated by the way in which they also appropriated and re-invented the English language to suit their own communication purposes. Bobby's inventiveness in creating 'songs' and dance in a mixture of English and Noongar language, is a stunning example of this practice. Discuss.

3. The history of many places in Australia includes an early period of reliance on Aboriginal people's knowledge and then a rejection of their claims to ownership of the places gradually 'settled' by white people. Those interested in understanding more about the Noongar people (as background to this novel) might visit the website of the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council <http://www.noongar.org.au/>. [ or to read Tiffany Shellam's *Shaking Hands on the Fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal World at King George's Sound* (University of Western Australia Press, Crawley, 2009) which offers insights into the history of colonial contact with local inhabitants in this region, or John Mulvaney & Neville Green's *Commandant of Solitude: the Journals of Captain Collet Barker 1828-1831* (MUP, Melbourne, 1992) which is a first person account of such encounters.

4. The whaling industry is said to be Australia's oldest industry, and finally ceased in Albany WA in 1978. The contribution made by Noongar people to the early whaling industry is often underestimated (as is Aboriginal contribution to the cattle industry elsewhere). Read more about the industry (perhaps referring to texts listed in Kim Scott's Author's Note) and discuss your findings.

5. 'Firelight reflected in a whale's eye; himself dissolving there. Be the whale.' (p 245) or 'He'd come from the ocean that same way, and been borne by the wind like a bird. Now he was earth and stone.' (p 178) What do Bobby's words mean?

6. Chaine, Killam and Skelly each gradually improve their prospects in the settlement. This was typical of such early colonies, where a hierarchy of power was maneuvered which often placed the formerly desperate, criminal or impoverished in positions superior to the original inhabitants, in an extremely unequal balance of power. Discuss.

7. Environmental degradation is another topic suggested by the novel. What did Aboriginal people do to cultivate the land for food?

8. Influenza pandemics are said to have reduced the Noongar population from 6500 in 1851 to around 1500 people in SW Western Australia in the mid 1860s. Discuss in relation to other such incidences throughout Australia.

9. 'Bobby sang, and it happened just as in the song: the boats left the shore and home receded, but the singer was on the boat, not on the shore like in the old songs, not on a hill and watching others leave, not scanning the seascape for a first or last sight of whale spout or tilting sail. Singing, Bobby thought of the marks he'd made when he was on lookout: his pen on paper, his chalk on slate, his *roze a wail* and the like, but there was no getting those marks into song, though sometimes he wrote letters in the sand, to show whaling men he knew their schooling and way of being civilised, too.' (p 317) This is a gloriously complex passage about the interplay between oral and written languages which exist in Bobby's head. It explains how he is both 'inside' the song and yet 'outside' it as well. Discuss.



10. 'Bobby wrote and made it happen again and again in seasons to come, starting just here, now.' (p 5) Having read the novel, read the Prologue again. Bobby is writing in his shelter and watching for whales when Kongk Chaine joins him. How does this scene relate to the rest of the novel?

11. There is a magnificent lament to the passing of Wunyeran and of the many other spirits who died: 'His footprints disappeared ...The lapping and chuckling ocean ripples.' (p 134) Read this passage and discuss what it conveys to you.

12. 'Bobby wondered if he could explain what his people were saying. Could he? Sheltered like an insect among the fallen bodies of ancestors, he huddled in the eye sockets of a mountainous skull and became part of its vision, was one of its thoughts. Moving across the body, journeying with the old people, he drank from some transformed, still-bleeding wound.' (p 52) The novel ends with the moment when Bobby has told his story and is confronted by the mute crowd of people gathered together in Chaine's new house. He has delivered an eloquent defence of his people's qualities and beliefs. Was there ever any hope that his words would be heard?

## THAT DEADMAN DANCE

Kim Scott

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