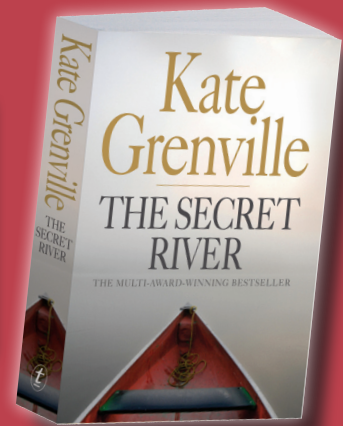


## The Secret River

Kate Grenville

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### Praise for *The Secret River*

'One of the most entertaining, accomplished, engaging novels written in this country...We always knew Grenville was good, but this one is brilliant...it will live on as a classic.' *Courier Mail*

'This is the novel as national confessional. However, 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.' *Australian*

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

'A powerful illumination of the history that has shaped us...This book may well be Grenville's best work yet. She has a reputation for elegant prose that cuts to the heart of her subject matter with breathtaking precision. With *The Secret River* she has done it again in spades.' *Vogue Australia*

'Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* stands out as a work of sustained power and imagination, of poetry and insight. No truer piece of fiction has been written about the Australian past.' Peter Temple, *Australian*

'Grenville's magnificent novel is an unflinching exploration of modern Australia's origins...[her] psychological acuity and the sheer gorgeousness of her descriptions pull us ever deeper into a time when one community's opportunity spelled another's doom.' *New Yorker*

'Harrowing and tremendously entertaining...you're barely aware of how heavy and profound its meaning is until you reach the end in a moment of stunned sadness.' *Washington Post*

### About Kate Grenville

Kate Grenville is one of Australia's finest writers. Her earlier works, which include *Lilian's Story*, *Dark Places* and *Joan Makes History*, have become modern classics and are admired by critics and readers around the

world. Her 1992 novel, *The Idea of Perfection*, was a bestseller and winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction, Britain's most valuable literary award.

In 2006 Kate Grenville won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and NSW Premier's Literary Award for *The Secret River*, and the novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Her very personal account of how she came to write this remarkable story is documented in her stunning memoir, *Searching for the Secret River*. Kate maintains a website at [www.kategrenville.com](http://www.kategrenville.com).

### A reader's introduction to *The Secret River*

*'In the rooms where William Thornhill grew up, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, no one could move an elbow without hitting the wall or the table or a sister or a brother.'* (p.9)

In Thornhill's London there is not enough food, not enough warmth, not enough room. Even his name belongs to someone before him. Grenville surrounds the reader with the brutality of need. *'There was a kind of desperation to it, a fury to be warm.'* (p.12) Men piss on their feet for relief from the cold, for a *'moment's bliss'*. In a place like this everyone is a thief.

Thornhill has some luck, though. Mr Middleton takes him on as an apprentice bargeman. With a trade, Thornhill can marry Sal Middleton. Grenville builds a beautiful intimacy between these two. We curl in the dark with them as they talk about their future.

Their luck doesn't last, though. Sal's parents die and they must steal to live.

Thornhill is caught and transported to New South Wales for the term of his natural life. Sal and their son, William, go with him: she as his master.

Within a few years he is pardoned and the family settle on the Hawkesbury River. It's *'a place out of a dream, a fierce landscape of chasms and glowering cliffs and a vast unpredictable sky.'* (p.101) Thornhill yearns for something that is his. Sal yearns for home. The landscape opens and the gap between them widens.

Thornhill's dream of ownership is understandable after a life of owning nothing. But the Darug people own the land. Tension grows between the settlers and the Darug. Some settlers, like Smasher, poison families. They rape women. They treat the Darug as less than animals. Some settlers, like Blackwood, find ways to live with the Darug.

Tension builds between the settlers and the Darug until one night it explodes. Thornhill must decide if he will do what only *'the worst of men would do.'* (p.300)

Grenville takes history and makes it real. We are with Thornhill in London: hungry and desperate and trapped by class. We arrive in the new land: brutal and beautiful and offering freedom. *The Secret River* is muddy with difficult questions. What would we do if we had lived Thornhill's life?

There is great beauty in the small details in this book, too: the loss of intimacy between husband and wife, father and child. The loss of intimacy with your own truth, when the choices made are too hard to face and the world is too hard to understand. The loss of intimacy with land, culture and spirituality.

*The Secret River* explores how class, gender and race shape the individual. What happens when people are dehumanised? Are humans always trapped by their pasts or are we capable of seeing a larger landscape? It asks the reader to step into the lives of white and indigenous Australians and explore the conflicts that have shaped the debate we face today.

### Questions for Discussion

1. *The Secret River* explores the brutality and vulnerability that co exist in people. This is where its power lies. We are not positioned to take a side. Or are we?
2. *'How had his life funnelled down to this corner, in which he had so little choice?'* (p.300) Discuss what led Thornhill to Blackwood's at the end of the novel. Discuss Grenville's description of the landscape in this scene and how it underlines the forces that pushed the men to this place.
3. Grenville's descriptions of death are brutal but at the same time, banal. In the final battle with the Darug people, one man gasps as though about to sneeze. Whisker Harry holds his middle politely. Even Smasher's description of rape uses domestic imagery. Discuss the impact of these descriptions.
4. *'As I wrote, I kept coming back to the central question: what would I have done in their place?'* Kate Grenville's comment haunts every page of this story. What would you have done in their place?
5. How do you feel about the way Grenville has explored racial conflict? What is her purpose? Is she successful?
6. Grenville's descriptions are beautiful and deliberate. The reader feels as though the indigenous inhabitants are the *'very earth made human.'* (p.243)
7. Thornhill's descriptions of the land are filled with desire. Like the Darug people who can disappear into the landscape, so do parts of Thornhill's humanity and his intimacy with Sal. Discuss how Grenville threads metaphor and symbolism through the narrative. Why is the book called *The Secret River*?
8. Discuss Thornhill and Sal. They are passionate lovers. They swap, in many ways, the roles of master and servant. Their relationship shifts from intense intimacy to distance. *'He had not thought that words unsaid could come between two people like a body of water.'* (p.324) Where are they at the end of the novel? Where is Sal?
9. Where is Thornhill at the end of the novel? Why does staring through the telescope bring him a *'measure of peace'*? (p.324)
10. *The Secret River* explores how class shapes people's lives. Are Thornhill's needs only partly explained by a need to rise above his class, though?
11. Does the power of the book lie in the complexity of Thornhill's character? Part tenderness, part rage, part animal. Or is he not complex at all? Is he just driven by a need to own and to control?
12. Jennifer Byrne comments on 'The First Tuesday Book Club' about the silence in *The Secret River*. *'What I do love is at the very end of the book there is silence, there is silence between Thornhill and his wife, there is silence between Thornhill and his son who has gone off to be with Blackwood who does treat the aboriginals well and he is so appalled by the way his father has been part of this massacre, I mean there is silence at the scene of the massacre, there is silence everywhere...'* Why is the silence so significant to the themes of the text?
13. So many things are lost in this story. There are moments of such sadness and cruelty, for black and white. Discuss the scene that haunts you the most.
14. *The Secret River* is an accurate exploration of where rage begins and how it grows. Are the justifications for cruelty in *The Secret River* so different from the justifications people give for acts of cruelty today?
15. *'On their way back to the hut for Thornhill to pick out his dogs, Smasher shouted over their barking: Got something to show you.'* (p.251) This scene is brutal. Is it all about gender, though? *The Secret River* explores the vulnerabilities and strengths of women. Discuss the idea that gender traps as strongly as class does but it does not unify with the same strength.
16. The only white person in the book who might be called *'good'* is Blackwood. Do you agree?
17. Grenville has received some criticism over the idea that the novelist has become historian. Is there danger in using history as inspiration for fiction or is it an important way of exploring the angles of the past?