

Someone Else's Country

Peter Docker

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From the author

I was driven to write this book. It was like a whirlwind that took hold of me, and would not let up until I wrote it all down.

At the time I was on tour with a play, which can be a lonely experience for an actor. When I would get home quite late after doing the show, I would sit up in my hotel in Adelaide and write until my hands got sore. I am an old fashioned writer who loves the visceral feel of the pen on the paper. As a child, I thought that the number of pens and pencils that one owned were a status symbol and an indicator of wealth. As an adult, I now know that I was right to believe that.

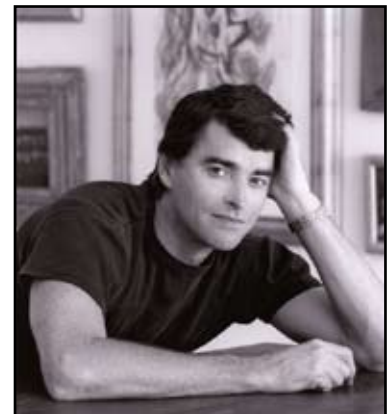
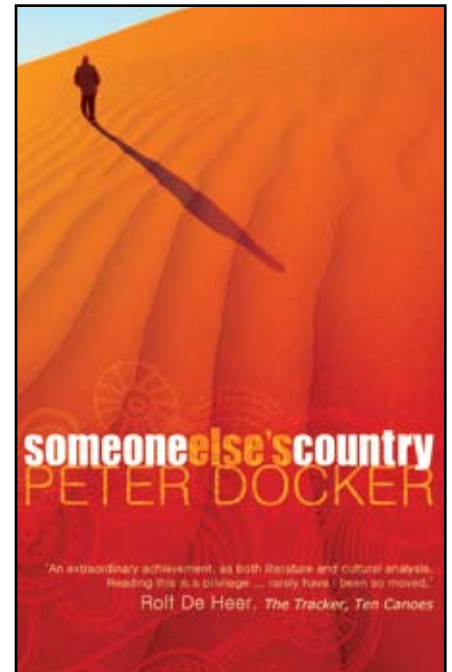
I was born into a community whose preferred method of living with aboriginal people was apartheid. The country towns were and still are a hotbed of a nasty form of racism. Perhaps it is because out there everyone knows inherently the fairy tale version of history, where the first Australians were somehow divested of all of their wealth and land with no violence, is a total fabrication. In fact, for many whites it is like the war is still going. And because of my belief that Australians are inherently good people who genuinely believe in community values, this set up a great conflict inside of me. How could this happen?

How could, for example, West Australians freeze the Nyoongar people out of our economic, education, and social systems for 150 years, and then blame Nyoongar People for the wretched state in which they find themselves?

And really, I wanted to write about how much joy and fun and belonging that I have experienced inside the other country within our country, which is Aboriginal Australia.

When the book first came out I was quite nervous about how it would be received in Indigenous circles. As it turns out, this would not be my main concern. For example, a dear friend of mine, a Wongathaa Woman, was very excited to read about the toilet block in Esperance where I had my first experience with drunken behaviour – she was excited because as she said – “ I learned to drink at that toilet block! “

I had unwittingly chronicled a kind of secret history that never sees the light of day outside of certain, closed circles. Overwhelming the response has been incredibly positive. Reactions from white Australia was quite a different thing. I was accused in the West Australian press of being a liar, and an exaggerator. I have lost most of my white friends, and all of my extended blood family, which was unexpected, and on a personal level, fairly



tough to deal with.

Unfortunately, I don't think much has changed for indigenous people. This is because the fundamental shift that needs to happen in this country has not happened, and, as yet is on no-one's agenda. The dominant white culture wants the Aboriginal people to change to be more like us. This has been tried since the arrival of the first settlers, and even though it takes many forms, it is all about assimilation. There is another way.

White Australia needs to become 'blacker'. We need to educate ourselves. We need to understand Aboriginal Law better. We need to learn about the relationship between country and story. We need to learn Aboriginal Languages so we can pay proper respect. There is vast ecological knowledge in this country – perhaps even the answers to the world's burgeoning environmental disaster – but this knowledge is not in the English language.

I always wanted to be a writer, but somehow fell into performing because of the intoxicating rush, and immediacy of the relationship with the audience. I think being a performer makes me more attuned to the drama and the urgency of any situation. Also, I play the scenes out in my head, and sometimes out loud (doing all the voices) as I am writing them. I have to really love a subject to write about it. I have to be obsessive.

My first big break was meeting my life partner, Jane, because after that, whatever I did, I knew I'd always be happy and fulfilled. *Someone Else's Country* is my first full-length work in print, so I would have to say that. The then publisher at FACP, Ray Coffey, believed in me and then project when no-one else did. I had accumulated 19 rejection letters for the manuscript before Ray said that he thought it could work with some heavy editing and restructuring, which we then embarked upon.

After this book was published, I was approached by Ray and Peter Mickelberg, who wanted me to write a play about their experiences with the justice system. I was immediately interested because I greatly admired these men who stood up at the Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths In Custody and gave evidence about a young Aboriginal prisoner whose murder by the prison guards they had witnessed, in spite of massive pressure (death threats) brought to bear on them by the authorities. The outcome is an explosive play which goes to the heart of corruption in the Police Force and the Judiciary of WA. Many West Australians who for years have swallowed the smear campaign run on them by certain sections of the media will be quite shocked by what they see. This is a seminal West Australian story – two innocent men sent to jail for a crime that they did not commit – who simply refuse to lay down. Two innocent men, one a returned soldier who gave his all for his country on the battle fields of Vietnam, who suddenly find themselves in one of the most brutal prisons in the Western world, where living conditions for the inmates are unchanged since the 1850s.

The play will be produced in Fremantle by deckchair Theatre Company August – September 2010.

Currently I am working on a novel set in the future in a time when the water supplies in Australia are almost gone. It is a novel about dreams, and about the different choices available to us in history. The characters look back on a completely different history in WA, for example, a history where the killing times did not happen.

I am very aware that there are a very few myths, or stories, or narratives, that illustrate Indigenous-Non-Indigenous relationships, that aren't about rape and theft and destruction. It was also one of the reasons I wanted to write *Someone Else's Country*, when my research revealed many settler Australians who have trod the path I tread before me, and that their stories have been disappeared by the dominant whitefulla culture. So I wanted to find a way to express my inner self, and what happens in my inner dialogues and narratives. I've also almost completed a sequel to *Someone Else's Country* where I follow a similar format, but find myself more in a political world than an artistic one – as well as the usual car chases, fights, and fun that punctuate Stephen Motor's life.

To emerging writers – I say JUST DO IT. Get it all down, and edit later. Don't judge anything. And when you do come to edit – don't be precious. Keep writing and your voice will begin to emerge and define itself. I write instinctively and rarely plan anything – that all comes later when I try to decipher what I've written. NEVER tell that part of the story that does not belong to you, unless you have very specific permission. Find a way to love sitting in that little room by yourself.

Discussion points

- Peter Fonda said of his 1969 cult classic movie *Easy Rider* – “ This is a story of a man who goes looking for America... And can't find it anywhere. ”
- In *Someone Else's Country*, Stephen Motor (Peter Docker) goes looking for Australia. What he finds is a hidden Australia inside the Australia he thought he knew – Aboriginal Australia.
- What is it that propels Motor on this search, this journey?
- The original title of *Someone Else's Country* was *War Zones*.
- What is the nature of the war that Motor discovers?
- Why has this war remained out of sight, and yet on-going?
- Motor finds himself accepted into Aboriginal circles when many other gubbahs (whitefullas) are not. Why is Motor accepted?
- Even though all events depicted in *Someone Else's Country* actually happened – why does Docker choose to fictionalise identities? Is this effective?
- Does it interfere with the reader's enjoyment (not knowing the true identities of his Aboriginal Brothers, Sisters, Mums, Aunts, and Uncles)?
- Motor discovers on his journey that even in urban settings, and in the southern half of Australia, that Aboriginal identity and cultural practise remains strong.
- Where has the perception come from that the 'real' blackfullas live up north?
- Why do we (Wadjulas) think that skin tone, i.e. how 'black-looking' a person is – has anything to do with Aboriginality?
- Because the author must adhere to Indigenous protocols surrounding ownership of story – there are many instances where the reader is not being told everything the author knows. Even though this is done out of respect – does it interfere with the enjoyment of the reader?
- Of all the new world countries, Australia is a standout nation in its inability to be open about our brutal past – for example, the extreme violence on the frontier (sparking off the so-called 'history wars').
- Comparing ourselves to the USA, RSA, and Canada – we are most certainly in denial. Much of the written down history in this country is either a direct lie, or untruthful in

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it's leaving out of crucial details – and the oral histories are more often where the truth is to be found.

- What is so different about our dominant culture that we are unable to openly discuss such issues?
- More than anything, Docker intended *Someone Else's Country* to be a teaching story – to share what he has learnt. His position is that all racism in this country stems from simple economic expediency at a state level, and from ignorance and fear at a personal level. Discuss.