

BOOK CLUB NOTES

Benang Kim Scott

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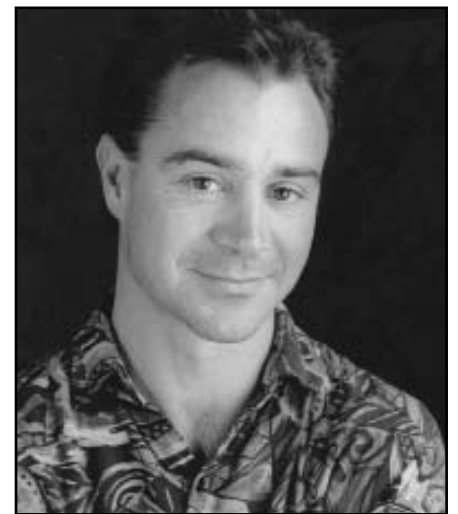
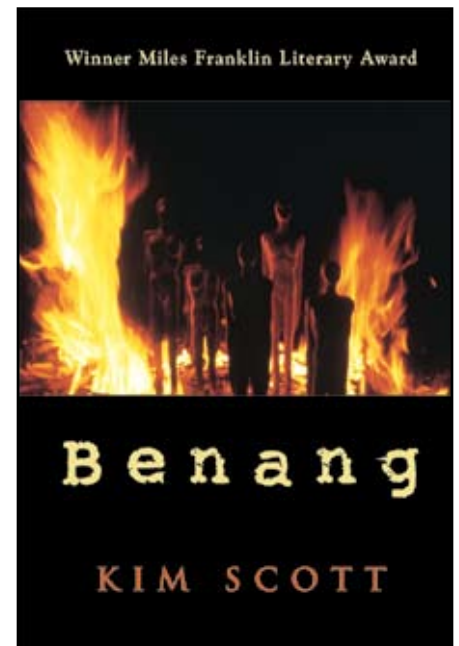
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Benang is the second novel by Western Australian writer Kim Scott. Born in Perth in 1957, he knew from an early age about his mixed heritage — both indigenous and colonial, Nyoongar and English. It is in part his own experience of cultural dislocation — that sense of not fully belonging in either culture — which impelled him to write about the anguishing problems of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations.

Interview with Kim Scott

I first met Kim Scott at his home in a southern suburb of Perth, on an enervatingly hot December afternoon. Shaded by backyard trees and watched over by the family dog, our conversation was punctuated by bird calls and the laughter of children. One of Kim's young sons came to ask for some apple pie, and the appearance of a neighbours' cat caused a momentary flurry in this scene of domestic serenity. Against this familiar backdrop of contemporary middle-class suburbia, Kim spoke about the altogether different world created in *Benang*. Always mindful that his own experience is not that of the majority of Nyoongar people, Kim discussed his novelistic intentions and methods, the politics of Aboriginal writing, and what he hoped this new work would achieve. *Benang* began, he explained, with a dual purpose: as an exploration of both his personal narrative or place in his own family history, and the wider social/historical narrative of the oppression of Aboriginal people. He wanted to deal with his sense of being psychologically damaged and culturally dispossessed as 'the first white man born' in his immediate family, the product of a long-standing, systematic, state-sanctioned policy of assimilation or the 'biological absorption', as it was called, of the Aboriginal race. *Benang*, in short, was written as a fictionalised version of family history, in order to investigate non-Aboriginal attitudes to Aboriginality, issues of power, and the psychosis which Kim believes lies at the heart of mainstream non-Aboriginal culture.

To this end, his research, conducted over a five year period, was both personal — tracing his family history through Welfare files — and more broadly historical — drawing on a diversity of sources including books, letters, Parliamentary debates, a Royal Commission report and newspaper articles. A detailed list of these sources is given at the end of the



novel, and makes clear the centrality for the writing of *Benang* of books and letters by A O Neville, the Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia from 1915-1940. Neville's documents are a testimony to the pseudo-scientific, racist arrogance of the government's assimilationist policies, and served as what Kim calls a 'major irritant' in the writing of *Benang*. An imaginative blend of fact and fiction, archival documentation and invention, *Benang* was designed to be educative in both historical and emotional terms — to inform us about the shameful history of the white treatment of Aboriginal people and also, and centrally, to 'speak from the heart'.

This educative intent of the novel has raised a number of politically and aesthetically problematic issues for the author. Firstly, it has meant acknowledging that, at this point in history, he must write for a predominantly white, educated audience. While he would like to be writing for Aboriginal readers, Kim recognises that their literacy problems — ironically, one of the legacies of white colonial oppression — makes this difficult.

Secondly, and mindful of his white, middle-class readership, Kim has consciously avoided didacticism and shrillness, preferring to 'educate' and keep his readers 'onside' through strategies of implication, indirection and obliqueness. This is evident in the novel's use of archival material; Neville's letters, for example, are left to speak for themselves, their racism rendered even more shocking by the novel's refusal to moralise or propagandise. Similarly, fictionalised scenes which depict the exploitation and brutalisation of the indigenous people are made emotionally compelling partly through the deliberate use of understatement.

Kim insists, too, that the refusal to sensationalise is also a mark of respect for the suffering of Aboriginal people. The novel's use of understatement is also an enactment of passive resistance: telling their stories of cultural oppression in a guarded or oblique fashion is a survival mechanism for Aboriginal people, a way of looking out for one another, of not giving too much away. Finally, understatement creates 'gaps' in the narrative — a sense of untold stories, unknown or silenced histories — which Kim sees as a way of making spaces for other Nyoongar stories. In this way, he hopes *Benang* will be part of an ongoing process of cultural regeneration for Aboriginal people, and a means of continuing to 'educate' white readers.

Central to the novel's educative project is the political and spiritual education of the narrator himself. Kim wanted to use his narrator as a paradigmatic case: as someone whose investigation of his personal history shows the possibility and the importance of moving from ignorance to knowledge; from anger and outrage at injustices to a more compassionate view of the oppressors of the past; from a sense of being psychologically damaged and spiritually disinherited to a healing identification with his people and the land.

The process of recuperating an Aboriginal identity has been informed by Kim's desire to promote a sense of the diversity of Aboriginal culture, partly as a way of contesting the racist tendency of white colonial discourse to categorise and hence control the indigenous people as the homogenised 'other'. To this end, he has sought to create a sense of the remarkable diversity — the rich variousness and specificity — of the native flora and fauna, of landscape and seascape. He has wanted to show, too, the range of Aboriginal responses

to the facts of their oppression, in their varying attempts to resist, accommodate to or collude with the dominant white culture.

Benang is also centrally concerned with a sense of place as integral to the Aboriginal psyche or sense of self. Kim is particularly wary of the term 'spirituality', recognising the ways in which it has been trivialised by various New Age movements; but he nevertheless insists that an effort must be made to convey the spiritual value of place for indigenous people and its contestation of white notions of the land — legal, commercial, individualistic, to do with issues of ownership, control and power. An Aboriginal sense of place is evoked in the novel through a respectful attentiveness to detail and almost magically invoked through the use of arresting imagery and the rhythms and cadences of language. Kim also draws attention to his concern with the ethics of story-telling — the issue of who speaks for whom, and for what purposes. In what sense if at all can the author claim to be speaking on behalf of Aboriginal people? Acutely aware of his relatively privileged social and economic position, and distinctly non-Aboriginal in appearance, Kim understands why some Nyoongars have been wary or suspicious of his motives in writing about Aboriginal suffering or desire, and he remains adamant that it would be exploitative and disrespectful to assume the status of a spokesperson for indigenous people. He is nevertheless prepared to make himself a target as a novelist, in the hope that some good will come of his writing. In giving white readers access to some aspects of Aboriginal experience, by sensitising them to the complexities and diversity of such experience, he writes to make a contribution to the process of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Finally, Kim speaks of writing *Benang* as a means of refusing the victim position. Just as his Aboriginal characters demonstrate the most extraordinary capacity for resilience, courage and generosity in the face of injustice and betrayal, so too the narrator moves from self-pity to compassion, from anger to a sense of pride in his indigenous heritage.

Benang is thus designed to make the reader think and feel. Highly self-conscious about its aesthetic and political principles, it requires the reader to think about history, representation and ethics, and to question our own actions, beliefs and attitudes. It also, and importantly, engages us at the level of affect — of emotions and sensations — eliciting from us feelings of outrage, shame, sorrow, compassion. 'I wanted the novel to be moving', Kim concludes; 'it's no good if it doesn't move people.'

Questions for discussion

1. The narrator of *Benang* is characterised as hovering or flying — an action which can be interpreted in many ways. What ideas are suggested by this use of a flying narrator? Does his 'elevated' status suggest the success of white attempts to 'civilise' or educate Aboriginal people? Or is it a metaphor for his lack of groundedness or connection? Is 'flying' an attempt to elude the fixity of white categorisation? Does it give him a privileged perspective on history? What change in the narrator is suggested by his status at the end of the novel as a billowing consciousness?
2. Language is a key issue in the novel, and is centrally linked to notions of power. Consider the possible functions of language in *Benang* — its power to control and categorise, its limitations and inadequacies, its capacity to communicate and to heal.
3. *Benang* is not a chronologically sequential narrative; rather, it is structured in spatial rather than temporal terms, through the repetition of various motifs, images and the sense of place. What effects are created by this refusal of linearity, and how might its spatial rather than temporal structure be related to notions of Aboriginality?
4. The use of a first person narrator is associated with European rather than Aboriginal literature, which is traditionally communal rather than individualistic. How does the use of a first person narrator in *Benang* attempt to negotiate the difference between the communal and the individual, between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of knowing and experiencing the world?
5. Consider the novel's use of the four elements of earth, air, water and fire to represent concepts of Aboriginality and as a structuring device.
6. What is the nature of the psychosis which the author believes underpins white mainstream culture, and what does its representation in the novel suggest about the possible origins of racism?
7. Aboriginal culture is repeatedly characterised by acts and attitudes of generosity towards the dominant and oppressive culture, which are in turn betrayed. How is this generosity manifest across the generations, and in what ways is it betrayed?
8. Consider the novel's representation of white male sexuality and its connection with misogyny and racism.
9. Why is the non-Aboriginal culture depicted in the novel so obsessed with 'categories' of Aboriginality?
10. Does the novel offer any hope for reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures? What are the sources of its political optimism?