

# TEACHING NOTES

## True Country

Kim Scott

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### About the Book

Kim Scott's first novel, *True Country* (1993), begins with a welcome from an unnamed Aboriginal voice to 'you' – both to the reader and to Billy, the part-Aboriginal teacher who is about to arrive at the remote mission town of Karnama in the far north of Western Australia. It is an invitation for Billy and for us to enter into the stories of the townspeople, to interweave our lives with the diverse and sometimes conflicting lives of the characters in the novel.

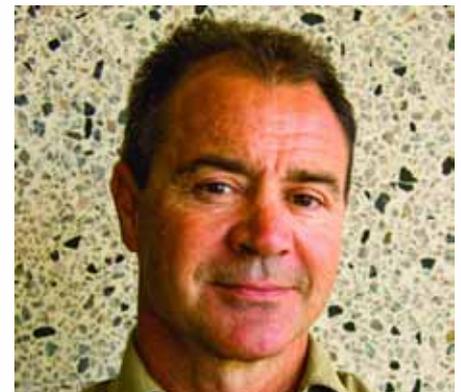
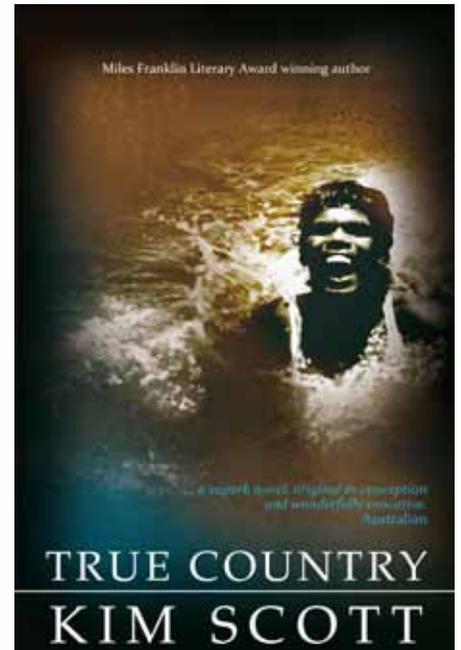
Like many others in the novel, Billy is struggling to find a meaningful cultural identity and to create a better future from the wreckage of the recent history of Aboriginal people. What he finds at Karnama is a disintegrating community, characterised by government handouts, alcoholism, wife-beating, petrol-sniffing and an indifference to traditional beliefs and practices. It is a depressingly familiar litany of social problems which confirms the smug racial stereotypes of the white community to which Billy initially belongs.

But the novel also offers more positive and enabling expressions of Aboriginality. There are stories of friendship, of the pleasures of the body and the natural world, of caring for family. There is the story of Gabriella, the university student who returns to Karnama and helps the elders teach traditional handicrafts to Billy's students. As well, there are those narratives of the past which speak of the potential power of Aboriginal people. Woven into Billy's narrative are the traditional stories of 'black magic' (p. 77) – 'true' stories told by a collective Aboriginal voice about magical transformation, of men changed into soaring birds and snakes and invisible presences with the power to punish and destroy.

There are also the stories of Fatima, the first-born of the mission, which Billy agrees to record and transcribe for his pupils. At one level, these are narratives of cultural and emotional dislocation and loss. They tell of enforced removal from her family, of the loss of her language, of the murder of her elders by white missionaries. But the stories' power resides in the dignified simplicity and the passion with which they are told, and in their capacity to contest the official white versions of history contained in the mission journals. As Billy begins to intuit, such storytelling is not only a matter of expressing one's feelings but also, and crucially, a demand for justice. Armed with the modern instruments of narration – the tape-recorder and the written word – he accepts Fatima's offer to co-author her stories: 'You can write what I say, what we say, all together ... So people will read it, and know.' (p. 50)

Billy's search for identity gradually becomes part of a larger cultural narrative, as the voices of other characters take over in the second part of the novel. Increasingly, these are the voices of confusion, anger and helplessness, and of misunderstanding between Aboriginal and white cultures. The social powerlessness of Aboriginal people has one of its most ghastly expressions in the killing of the young boy Franny, beaten to death in Broome by mindless white thugs who escape being punished by the system of white law. Based on an actual historical event from the turn-of-the-century, Franny's death constitutes a political turning point in the novel, its shocking injustice demanding a response.

The nature of that response in effect suggests the different ways in which Aboriginal people might define themselves at this moment in history. For the unnamed narrator, Aboriginality involves a return to the traditional narratives of 'black magic'; invoking the memory of the 'ones that could fix things, and could fly, disappear, punish' (p. 242), the narrator summons the magic to destroy Franny's killers. His is a story of joyous revenge.





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By contrast, the young man Raphael's response to powerlessness is to destroy those even less powerful than himself; the repeated beatings of his wives are what the narrator calls 'a real story ... to try show he is a powerful one, and to have control.' (p. 286) This is a story, he laments, that 'should not be.' (p. 286)

For Billy, to whom the narrative now returns, the initial response is withdrawal or disengagement – a resigned acceptance of his own helplessness in the face of the seemingly intractable social problems raised by the novel. A reluctant storyteller, he leaves unfinished Fatima's narratives of the personal and historical past to wander, disillusioned and disengaged, to the river.

*True Country* offers no clear-cut solution to the realities of powerlessness. What it leaves us with is Billy's vision of the 'true country' which he shares with the unnamed Aboriginal narrator in the final pages of the novel. The nature of this country remains, perhaps deliberately, undefined, imaged in richly poetic terms as a kind of release or rebirth. Perhaps finding the true country suggests a state of being or way of seeing which draws on the past as a source of strength and continues to struggle with the present. Perhaps the very difficulty of definition suggests the novel's lack of faith in political solutions.

Perhaps in the end it is about making a commitment, through art itself – an insistence on telling the stories of Aboriginal people as a means of nurturing continuity and identity, 'singing our place little bit new, little bit special, all the time.' (p. 299) Open-ended and inconclusive, *True Country* ends where it began, with a welcome and an invitation to 'you'. As stated earlier, this is addressed to Billy and so, it might be argued, the book expresses his acceptance of his commitment to tell the story. It is also an address to the reader in general. What this country means, then, is for each reader to decide, by listening respectfully to the stories of others and by weaving our own stories into the making of the nation.

## About the Author

Kim Scott was born in 1957 and grew up on the south coast of Western Australia. He began writing for publication when he became a teacher of English and his first novel, *True Country*, was published in 1993 by Fremantle Press. His novel *Benang: from the Heart* won the 2000 Miles Franklin Award. In 2011 Scott won a second Miles Franklin Award for *That Deadman Dance*. He has had poetry and short stories published in a number of anthologies and now lives near Fremantle with his wife.

## Questions for discussion

1. Towards the end of the novel's first section, Billy distinguishes between the written and the spoken word as a means of relating the stories of Aboriginal people: 'You needed to hear the voice ... And you needed other things; like hands waving in space, and lips pointing, and drawings in the sand.' (p. 91) Why does he feel the need for the presence of a voice and a body in the narration of their stories?
2. What is the value of the white education system in the novel? How does Billy see its role for his students? For himself? Does it help either Billy or Gabriella come to terms with their sense of cultural dislocation, or does it merely intensify their feelings of loss and alienation?
3. The power of traditional Aboriginal beliefs appears to resonate in the present: in the singing of Beatrice, for example, and in the revenge enacted on the murderers of Franny. How much credence does the novel give to these beliefs, or are they merely what Brother Tom calls 'mumbojumbo' (p. 28)?
4. Children play an important role in helping to bridge the gap between the two cultures. What special qualities do they have in this regard?
5. The section entitled 'Preparations' (pp. 41–51) offers two different versions of history – Fatima's story and the official white version written by the missionaries. In what ways do the two narratives differ? Is there a 'true' story, and if so, in what sense is it 'true'?
6. Billy's wife, Liz, offers a different perspective on the Aboriginal culture from most of her white colleagues. What are her strengths and limitations as a commentator on that culture? At what points does she actively intervene in the activities of the Aboriginal people, and why?
7. The older generation of Aborigines often holds different views from the younger generation. What are these differences, and what do they suggest about the effects of white culture on the Aboriginal people?
8. What significant cultural differences between Aborigines and whites are suggested by the two contrasting communal meals – the first ('The Midst of a Battle') on pp. 22–31 and the second ('Communion') on pp. 52–57? What role does food – catching it, preparing it, sharing it – play in the novel?



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## Questions for discussion continued

9. What is the possible significance of Jasmine's pregnancy near the end of the novel? Why does she liken her baby to Billy's 'baby' – his act of writing Fatima's stories? (p. 288)
10. How do you interpret the final, hallucinatory section of the novel? We are told that Billy at last 'knew who he was'; what does this self-knowledge entail? Is Billy's 'rebirth' a hopeful sign for the future?
11. Speaking of his readers, Kim Scott has said that he hopes *True Country* 'brings people together.' How does the novel work to create possibilities for cross-cultural understanding?