

SWEET ONE

PETER DOCKER

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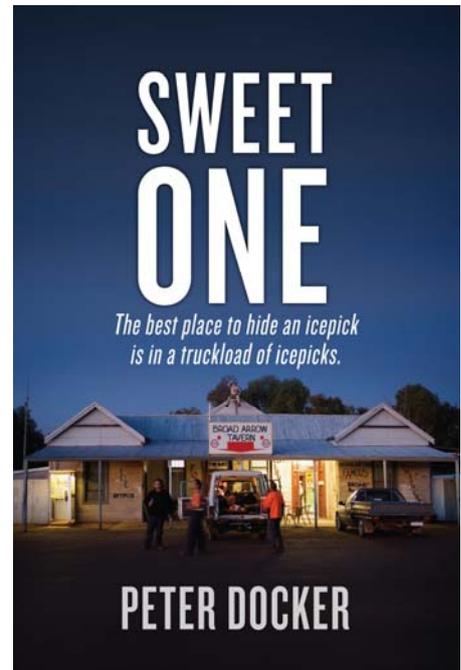
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ABOUT THE BOOK

A senior Aboriginal war veteran dies horribly at the hands of state government authorities. And Sweet One comes home to right the terrible wrong. Izzy, journalist and sometime war correspondent, and herself the daughter of a war veteran, flies to the goldfields of Western Australia to cover the death. Before long she discovers she is embedded in a story where there is no black and no white, and where for every action there will be an equal and bloody reaction.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

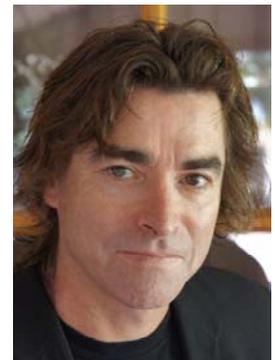
Peter Docker was born in Narrogin, Western Australia, the son of a motor mechanic, and grew up on remote Lort River Station, Coomalbidgup. He studied writing at Curtin University, Perth, and acting at Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne. As well as an extensive career on stage, Peter Docker has published a number of full-length literary works and short stories, and has written for stage and radio. He now lives in the Kimberley, Western Australia, and continues to write about the no-man's-land where black and white Australia meet. He writes about our nation's search for truth, and about the myriad ways that anyone can look into their heart – and find love. *Sweet One* is his third novel, following *Someone Else's Country* (2005) and *The Waterboys* (2011).



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

***Sweet One* samples on all sorts of cultural references, including the Old Testament. Can you tell us a bit about where this story came from, and what the characters of Mort, Sweet One and Smokey might stand for?**

I grew up as a Catholic, which included fairly intense Bible studies. In discussions with priests, nuns, and seminarians we delved into the stories – and we also analysed other ancient texts. One of the stories that stayed with me and set my imagination on fire was not so much the relationship between God and the mortals (us) – but God and the immortals: the angels (Dreaming Ancestors). Lucifer turns against God and a great war ensues. Juxtapose this with the rich Australian stories depicted in the songlines and other expressions of The Dreaming, and I am getting closer to the world of Sweet One.



There is also the overarching concept that I am representing the conflict inside myself, and therefore in the heart of all Australians.

With regard to Mort, Smokey, and Sweet One – I can't help but think of Henry Reynolds' comparison between those First Australians who fought and died to protect their country in this country – and those later Australians who fought and died defending this country in other countries. Those First Australians defending their home soil, came up against weapons so advanced that they originally believed them to be magic. Weapons are based on chemistry and physics, which could be described as magic – so perhaps that is true. This took me towards our colonial society suddenly facing a nemesis that it lacks the power or ability to confront or curb.

The Old Testament leads us to believe that there is a conflict in every human heart between good and evil. And that this conflict is ongoing. In each of our hearts it is represented by our own personal mythic figures – hence the haunting presence of 44 in *The Waterboys*, a nightmarish character drawn from my own dreams.

Mort, Smokey, and Sweet One search for the peace inside themselves. Izzy too. And as Martin Sheen's character says at the beginning of *Apocalypse Now*: *Everyone gets everything they want ... I wanted a mission ... And for my sins, they gave me one.*

The soil is iron-rich. So is blood. His face is screwed with some emotion he can't grasp. He is starting to edge towards understanding the men he fought in Afghanistan; how different the fight is, how much more complex, when you are in your own country. When the fight has nothing to do with a country. And all to do with the country. Maybe this is how they feel. Does Afghanistan really exist? Each man can vouch for his own tribe—but the country? Does Australia really exist? (p. 205)

This quote feels to me like one of the epiphanies in your novel. Can you talk about the Australia of which you write, and how you think Australia's experience of war, post-colonisation, has shaped it as a nation?

The world of *Sweet One* is pointing to the conclusion that we still *are* a colonial society, that we as a society are stuck in the mud, and can't get out. The paramilitary force that hunted Jandamarra in the 1890s was the Western Australian Police. This is significant, not just because the culture of police from those times has been passed down through successive generations of officers. It was an out-and-out war for the control of Bunuba Country. But because it was the police doing the fighting, the insidious notion that this was somehow a law and order issue crept into our thinking, and has dogged us ever since. And now, over a hundred years later, when three percent of the population make up forty-six percent of the prison population, we are still pretending that this is a law and order issue.

The ongoing violence that Aboriginal people are suffering at the hands of the authorities certainly make us look like a colonial society. When the senior constable was dropping his knee onto the head of a handcuffed Aboriginal prisoner facedown on the floor of the Broome Police Station, several other officers can be seen on the video standing by, watching. This was 2013. Surely this is a scene from a colonial age? When teenage Aboriginal girls sell themselves on the streets of Broome for grog, smokes, or pot – surely this is a scene from *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* – not 2014.

And I don't mean to blame the police. They are part of the colonial structure. The frontline. Their actions are inevitable as long as they are representative of a colonial state.

It is interesting to note that many Aboriginal people would not consider themselves to be Australian. They have been at war with the British, and at war with Australians. In many cases they still are.

Australia has recently begun to define itself more and more by our military exploits abroad. Paul Keating observes that the idea that our nation was born under a hail of bullets at Gallipoli is preposterous. And yet we cling to it, pushing out other possibilities of our emerging value systems.

Perhaps part of the problem is that politicians have got control of the debate. This is not a realm for politics. This is to do with our soul.

There are some fundamental questions that our nation appears no closer to facing:

- Why hasn't anything that the over-culture has tried worked?
- Why doesn't it ever look like it will work?
- Why do we continue on with policies that can't work?
- Why haven't we tried to do what Aboriginal people want?
- Why doesn't White Australia love Black Australia?

This novel reads like, and yet unlike, a crime thriller. How would you describe its genre?

It's a whodunnit – and yet it's not. The story defies the form. Just like all those hundreds of investigations into deaths in custody. An inquiry – but not really. When a young man who is fit and healthy is arrested for swearing at a police officer whilst intoxicated is found dead a few hours later having endured a massive violent attack, and the only other person present, or with access, was the same officer – there is an inquiry – but not really. We all know what happened. We are not stupid. We know our country better than that. But we proceed with our proceedings as though they have legitimacy – as though the inquiry with no outcome really is the justice process.

Trying to jam this story down into a particular genre has created a tension which is sometimes useful, and sometimes not. This is partly because the false peace is so hard to quantify. Hard even to see it all, for most people.

You have commented that in Aboriginal culture, there is no such thing as coincidence. Can you please tell me a bit about that and the way in which this idea plays through your novel?

Firstly, I'm no expert on Aboriginal cultures. All my observations are as a whitefulla looking in. Aboriginal people have always been incredibly generous with me in allowing me in. For me it is a journey, a search for my own 'Australian-ness' – if there is such a thing. I'm sure I get it wrong often, even if I do try to always 'look with love' (a concept from my acting training). Everything is connected to everything else. Everything happens for a reason. The country is a living, breathing entity. The country is constantly communicating with us through many avenues. We are the country. We are literally made of dirt. The common ground between Christians and blackfullas.

Things that Westerners may consider coincidental are most certainly part of these communications. This goes to the heart of connectivity; how we all connect. Australia has a small population. The whole place is like a country town. Everyone is connected to everyone. Collectively we are all part of the soul of our country. And even though we are a good and generous people, our soul has a festering wound that will not heal. It cannot heal. Only love can heal it.

Soon will come the will.

How does *Sweet One* fit in with your two earlier novels, *Someone Else's Country* and *The Waterboys*? Altogether these novels feel as if they are following a kind of trajectory – even a kind of dreaming – as a way of exploring where we are, how we got here, and how we might move on in a different way from here.

Sweet One is the final book in a trilogy. When I began to look into my heart with the fundamental proposition, 'The trouble with white Australia is that it's not black enough', I didn't really know what I would find. To begin with I didn't even know the question. This trilogy is as close to what I found as I can get.

Someone Else's Country has Stephen Motor emerging from ignorance. Emerging from the apartheid of a childhood in remote WA. Realizing that the apartheid still exists, that it has morphed into something else. Motor confronts the nation's history in a deeply personal one-on-one way, as the true history is revealed – how it was taken, settled, and occupied. Motor searches for the love.

In *The Waterboys*, the few drops of rain from *Someone Else's Country* turn into a torrent as wild as the Darbal Yaragan in full flood. The world of mystery, and the power of the country that Motor's heart became open to – propels a story framed most completely by the 'history wars'. All of the characters are haunted by their pasts. Just like our country. Here is a story haunted by the future. Where are we going? When is white Australia going to start really looking for our blackness, for our Australian-ness?

The face on the cover of *The Waterboys* could be *Sweet One*. It probably is. Just as *The Waterboys* could be Motor's dream. Conway and Motor are coexistent, or co-dependent. Something like that.

By the time we get into *Sweet One*, the ensconcing of Maban reality, given its head in *The Waterboys*, has become subtler. Sometimes I forget it's there. Also, the energy strongly suggested by the cloud of hope and despair that is the story of the false peace – is female protagonists. This came as a surprise to me. I thought it was all about the men – the warriors, the soldiers, the police, the killing, and the dying. But the women just marched into the story and took it over.

The experience I have with writing is that the story flows through me. *Sweet One* brings the story back to the right now. Given that the working title for the first book was *War Zones*, it is inevitable that I would end up here.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The book contains several false binaries: black–white; war–peace. But nothing is 'black' and 'white'. Two of the main characters are amalgams of different races: Queenie and Sweet One for instance are descended from Afghani men and Wongatha women. Mort, apparently on the same side as Izzy, was ostensibly a brother-in-arms of Sweet One, but in fact is anything but. The war is false, and so is the peace. Discuss the ways in which the two major plotlines (retribution for the death of the Old Man; Mort returning to hunt down Sweet One) trouble these binaries.
2. *I never liked my skin*, Smokey tells us (p. 315). Discuss this simple statement in relation to a complex character.
3. What is the role of Queenie, who seems to be connected to most of the players in this story?
4. What kind of magic is at play in this book? What is the role of the maban in this context?
5. Bearing in mind the author's comments about angels and magic in his interview, what do you make of the final scene, in which there appears to have been a physical substitution of one character for the other. What does the Old Man have to do with this? And why does this switch happen?
6. Izzy says: *Macca said I would be embedded*. And Queenie replies: *You are embedded, Aunty*. (p. 298) How long does it take for Izzy to realise she is doing more than just covering this story? What is the scope of the story that she is covering? Why is she embedded, and what difference does this make to Izzy's understanding of the story and its players?
7. Throughout their history, Australians have fought in other people's wars on foreign soil. This is a novel about people whose lives are immersed in wars, and whose parents and grandparents have fought in wars. Since colonisation there have been Aboriginal participants in these wars. All of these characters are people whose lives have been soaked in war. They have been scarred and traumatised by it. Discuss the ways in which the women in this story are connected to each other and are affected by war. In what ways is the experience of war different for the men in this novel?
8. Is there a difference between fighting in a 'true war' and a 'false war'? Is it possible to see the effects of the difference by comparing characters like Mort and Sweet One?
9. Elsewhere the author has said: *Izzy goes looking for the deaths in custody revenge story – only to find that she is personally connected to the story. We all are*. Do you agree with this statement?
10. Consider the following statement made by the men to Izzy in the bunker: *We're already at risk. It feels like a war. To us it even looks like a war. But not to the haters. The haters have disguised it. Like it's somehow really all our fault. It may not be a war but it is a false peace. There is no peace for us. Me and Smokey go and fight. That turns out to be a false war. So here we are, back in the false peace where we belong*. (p. 215)

Elsewhere, the author has said: *I think of my trajectory as a war poet. Poet of the false war. Poet of the false peace*. What is the role of a war poet? In what way is *Sweet One* the work of a war poet?

11. *Sweet One looks at the kids moving in the darkness. He knows Smokey is right. They are exactly the type of kids the Taliban would recruit: desperately poor, desperately short of meaning, completely uneducated, unpoliticised, full of disaffection for the system that put them here, and left out of everything. Sweet One shakes off the thought. Soldiers fight. Soldiers die.* (p. 254) This is Australia, though we may choose not to acknowledge it. Discuss.
12. Why did Big Bill have to die? Why is Sweet One the one to kill him?
13. Ned Kelly's Jerilderie Letter can be read at nedkellysworld.com.au/history/letter.html. Compare that letter with Smokey's Balboorlie letter: *We came here looking for something. Something we lost along the way. But when we found what we were looking for, we were so angry with ourselves that we attacked and destroyed the very thing that we came seeking.* (p. 177). Why do you think Peter Docker deliberately sets up the echo of the Jerilderie Letter as a vehicle to enable Smokey to voice his thoughts here?
14. *I've got a rule for you. For every action – there is an equal and opposite reaction. Although, I do admit, there has been much discussion between a colleague and myself recently, regarding the notion of 'equal'. Anyway, the point is, there's a motherfucken reaction to shit happening.* (p. 206) How does the author use violence in this novel? What kind of justice is at play?
15. What is the power of fiction as a means of commentary and observation about the Australia in which we live?
16. What difference does a book like this make to the way we see Australia and the way we see ourselves?