



# BENANG

## FROM THE HEART

Harley, a man of Nyoongar ancestry, finds himself at a difficult point in the history of his country, family and self. As the apparently successful outcome of his white grandfather's enthusiastic attempts to isolate and breed the 'first white man born', he wants to be a failure. But would such failure mean his Nyoongar ancestors could label him a success? And how can the attempted genocide represented by his family history be told?

Oceanic in its rhythms and understanding, brilliant in its use of language and image, moving in its largeness of spirit, compelling in its narrative scope and style, *Benang* is a novel of celebration and lament, of beginning and return, of obliteration and recovery, of silencing and of powerful utterance. Both tentative and daring, it speaks to the present and a possible future through stories, dreams, rhythms, songs, images and documents mobilised from the incompletely acknowledged and still dynamic past.

*Winner, Miles Franklin Literary Award*  
*Winner, Western Australian Premier's Book Award*

## *from the heart*

I know I make people uncomfortable, and embarrass even those who come to hear me sing. I regret that, but not how all the talk and nervous laughter fades as I rise from the ground and, hovering in the campfire smoke, slowly turn to consider this small circle of which I am the centre.

We feel it then, share the silence.

Of course, nothing can stop a persistent and desperate cynic from occasionally shouting, 'Look, rotisserie!' or, 'Spit roast!' But no cynicism remains once I begin to sing.

Sing? Perhaps that is not the right word, because it is not really *singing*. And it is not really *me* who sings, for although I touch the earth only once in my performance — leaving a single footprint in white sand and ash — through me we hear the rhythm of many feet pounding the earth, and the strong pulse of countless hearts beating. Together, we listen to the creak and rustle of various plants in various winds, the countless beatings of different wings, the many strange and musical calls of animals who have come from this place right here. And, deep in the chill night, ending the song, the curlew's cry.

Death bird, my people say.

Obviously, however, I am alive. Am bringing life.

People smile at me, say:

'You can always tell.'

'You can't hide who you are.'

'You feel it, here?'

And, tapping their fists on my chest,

'Speak it from the heart.'

But it is far, far easier for me to sing than write, because this language troubles me, makes me feel as if I am walking across the earth which surrounds salt lakes, that thin-crust-ed earth upon which it is best to tread warily, skim lightly ...

Quickly.

The first thing is the first thing is that we always knew it was not the best way, but that there was no real choice and we had to keep moving if only to get past the bad smell of it all ...

And it is thus – with a bad smell – that I should introduce myself; even if such an aroma suggests my words originate from some other part of my anatomy than the heart.

Sadly, I can begin only so far back as my great-great-grandparents, for it is they – Fanny, Sandy One Mason, and their boy, Sandy Two – who limp by the government water tank, trying not to breathe at all rather than have this stench invade their nostrils.

Phew! Phew!

Something dead. Sandy One cursed the bastard who'd dumped a carcass by the edge of town. A dead kangaroo, he thought.

Well ... No. In fact, it was the body of a child. A boy. My family may not have even realised this, although I see Fanny – discreetly, indecently – sniff the air.

The poor boy had been only a few years old. His name? His name was ... I'm tempted to give him my own name, but his was that of a famous man, an explorer, a pioneer, a politician, and although I intend to write a history, it is not one at such an exalted level.

However, it is true that the explorer – a Premier Man – had travelled this very way, some years before. Before

the gold rushes, and even before the telegraph line which sprang up in his footprints. A very strange thing it was, that telegraph line; such thin wire, trembling with unseen unheard voices, looping from pole to pole across the country.

I admit I am not absolutely sure of the boy's name, or even why the body was left there. I merely happened upon the incident in my fitful attempts to supplement Grandad's research and my Uncles' memories. Kylie Bay's Board of Health had written to the Aborigines Department asking for funds for the disposal of the body of said child which, having been deposited within the town area by *blacks*, posed a hazard to the town's health.

I feel a certain kinship with the boy, but my kinship with Fanny and the two Sandies becomes all the stronger with the realisation that, when I began this project, I too breathed in the scent of something discarded, something cast away and let drift and only now washed up. It was the smell of anxiety, of anger and betrayal. Of course, it may equally have been the rank odour of my grandfather, his puke and shit. Or perhaps some olfactory nerve was triggered by the thought of a boy, left limp and lifeless and more like me than I care to admit.

But I anticipate myself. I do not wish this to be a story of me – other than in the healing – but of before me. I wish to write nothing more than a simple family history, the most local of histories. And to make certain things clear.

As reluctant as I am to face it, I may be the successful end of a long line of failures. Or is it the other way round?

So ... So, by way of introduction, here I come:

The first white man born.

## *the first white man born*

*As I see it, what we have to do is uplift and elevate  
these people to our own plane ...*

A O Neville

As the first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line I awoke to a terrible pressure, particularly upon my nose and forehead, and thought I was blind. In fact, the truth was there was nothing to see, except — right in front of my eyes — a whiteness which was surface only, with no depth, and very little variation.

Eventually, I realised my face was pressed hard against a ceiling.

I pushed out my hands and shot rapidly away from it. Thus, I fell. Still groggy from the collision with the floor, and once more floating toward the ceiling, I kicked out and managed to hook my feet in the wrought-iron bedstead. It was an awkward and clumsy process but I succeeded in securing the bedsheet (which must have fallen from the ceiling), and inserting myself beneath it. And there I lay, secure but trembling, staring at my hands which gripped the sheet so tightly.

I couldn't stay trapped like that. Summoning my courage and tentatively experimenting, I discovered that I merely had a *propensity* for elevation. I would rise in the air only when I relaxed, let my mind go blank.

I felt so weak but, obviously, it was not from the effort of supporting my body's weight.

Hovering before a mirror, I saw a stranger. It was hard to focus, but this much was clear; he was thin, and wore some sort of napkin around his loins. Dark blue veins ran beneath his creamy skin, and his nipples and lips were sharply defined.

The image shifted, and changed shape as I have seen clouds do around granite peaks above the sea. But it was terrible to see the shapes, the selves I took.

I stood motionless against a setting sun; posture perfect, brow noble, features fine.

Saw myself slumped, grinning, furrow-browed, with a bottle in my hand.

Was Tonto to my grandfather's Lone Ranger. Guran to some Phantom.

There appeared a footballer, boxer, country and western singer.

A tiny figure, sprawled on the ground in some desert landscape, dying.

And then I saw myself poised with a boomerang, saw myself throwing it out to where the sky bends, saw it arcing back again but now it was my tiny, cartwheeling mirror image which was returning, growing, merging with other crowding, jostling selves into one shimmering, ascending me.

I closed my eyes, and when the crown of my head gently nudged the ceiling I must have looked like some elaborate light shade. Perhaps that was what my grandfather meant when he said I was brightest and most useful in an uplifted state.

It was easy enough to come down again. I kept my eyes closed, and let the voice in my skull run through what I now

realise was the thinnest of narratives, my father's few words. Thus, it was anger which returned me to earth. Well, to the floor at least.

I dressed myself carefully, opened the door.

I wanted to be bold, but walking felt very peculiar. Had I ever known how? I held my shoulders back, placed each foot precisely and, flicking my toes and flapping my arms, desperately tried to propel myself forward. It was very difficult to maintain balance, and although perhaps it should have been laughable I was, in fact, desperate and tearful because – more than anything else – I wished to appear as normal as possible.

I mastered a way of walking, and my light tread – despite being little more than a series of soft touchdowns – sounded the floorboards like a drum.

It must have been morning, because I was blinded by light as I opened the last door.

Blinking, I saw my grandfather's back, and we were both looking out over a view of ocean, island, headland reaching in from the right of the window frame. The old man turned his pale and lined face to me.

'You're back,' he said.

He stroked my jaw with the back of his hand, ran his finger along a scar there.

'My son. You look so much better. You still don't remember, do you?'

His face shone with relief. Or was it the reflection of success?

Oh, I remembered all right, and I get better all the time. But I kept quiet. You might call it my *native* cunning.

In the window's frame I saw the ocean pulse against the

tip of the island. It blossomed, disappeared. Again. Again.

My heart was beating calmly, my own pulse lulled me.

I was between the sheets of my bed, and my grandfather's eyes, in that face so close to my own, were brimming.

He moved his lips, trying to speak, then reached out and patted the back of my hand. He was fighting back tears. I stayed mute, did nothing.

'You'll be all right,' he slurred. 'We'll get you back on track. Everything that's mine is yours, you know that.'

Oh.

I let him hear my voice.

'Thanks. Thanks, Dad.'

I knew that would get to him. He smiled, and a tear ran down his cheek. It was like one of his beloved bedside scenes.

I had come back from the dead. Obviously, I was not in the best of health; I was pale, my memory was poor, and it was as my grandfather's child that I sensed an opportunity. The old man wouldn't last long. Well, I've been raised to this, I thought. *It is survival of the fittest, and let the fittest do their best.*

## *raised to this ...*

When I was seven years old my father gave me to his own father to raise.

My grandfather owned and managed a gentlemen's boarding house. He and my father shook hands at the rear of the building to finalise the transaction.

Hands parted, and I followed my grandfather between walls of corrugated iron, teetering crates, empty glass bottles. Struggling with my plastic bags of clothing and breathing the air of unwashed laundry and indifferent cooking, I followed him up rickety and creaking stairs until eventually we emerged from gloom and into a wash of light. Before us an array of tables, set with cloth, cutlery and condiments, patiently awaited the arrival of those who would be served.

Grandad thought this would be a good place for me to start.

A doorway to my right led to a room with a desk, filing cabinet, television and bed. My grandfather introduced me to his business partner, Aunty ... I can't remember the name. There was a succession of them over the years. She sat up in bed, wearing a thin dressing-gown, and with receipts, money, accounting books and magazines scattered across the bedclothes. The desk was beside the bed and supported a worn typewriter, a box of chocolates, and an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts and chocolate wrappers. The solemn visage of the Queen observed a crucified Christ pinned to the opposite wall. Aunty looked at me from between the two of them, and gave a very quick smile.

I was led to an old verandah enclosed with glass louvres. My room. There was a bunk-bed with a desk beneath it, and three walls lined with the books I was to read in the long weekend and holiday hours before me. How familiar I became with them, their smell, the way words can blur, and shift, and welcome you among them.

In that room I always woke with dawn light on my face. One step brought me up against the louvres, and a view of the shabby, flaking backs of other tall buildings. Below, in the middle of a small concrete enclosure, a tiny, stubborn rug of buffalo grass defied the cars which nosed up to it. A tap hung over a little drainwell.

‘We all have to make our way in this world,’ Grandad said, ‘on your own. I want to give you an even chance. You will never get that with your father.’

Grandfather – Ernest Solomon Scat – told me that my father had agreed it was for the best.

At first, adjusting to the new circumstances, I had an unfortunate run of bed-wetting, but once cured of that – with an ingenious system my grandfather designed whereby an electric shock was administered to my penis each time the sheets became wet – I was off to the very best of boarding schools.

I suppose it was effective enough.

In the school holidays Grandad trained me in all the tasks required to run a boarding house, and ensured I did extra studies. He made up a timetable. I served our gentlemen guests, and cleaned up after them, and made their beds, and washed their dishes, their clothes, their sheets ... Except

when it was a necessary part of my duties I tried to avoid the boarders, many of whom were alcoholics.

I accepted the books Grandad had mailed from this or that book club; classics, instructive manuals of one kind or another, best-sellers ... I read them all.

There was nothing else to do. Like many isolated youths, reading was a great comfort to me.

I knew Ern was a reader, but it was only in the later years of his life that I became aware of his interest in local and family histories, and realised he had always kept notes, worked to a plan, documented his activities and research.

Grandad was very insistent that I achieve well at school, and I was still very young when I brought home a report which indicated that I was not achieving to my potential, was somewhat lazy. Grandfather said nothing as he stood beside me reading it but, having accomplished that, he suddenly struck me to the ground and delivered a kick which sent me sliding across the floor. It was a startling violence, and as I lay there curled up in shock he told me I was to stay in the room and study for the duration of the school holiday. I was relieved to be left alone.

It was many years later that I crept through Aunty's bedroom/office so as not to wake her, and into the dining room. White plastic tablecloths, stainless steel, grubby lace curtains and grey light. The old fellow, Uncle Will – who I dimly remembered from a time before I came to live with my grandfather – was the only one in the room. Grandfather had told me I was not to call this man uncle.

The old fellow motioned me over to where he sat very straight, eyes twinkling, and with his damp hair combed

back along his scalp.

‘How those girlfriends of yours?’ he asked.

His comment caused me some anxiety. I had been sneaking out in the evenings to see a girl. She had an adopted sister, and the two of them were remarkably close and supportive of one another. One or the other of them had said, ‘But just imagine, what if we were twins.’

‘But,’ I said, ‘you look nothing like each other, and ...’

They laughed a little, were patient with my dim-wittedness.

‘But just imagine, Harley, if we were twins.’

We did more than imagine. Perhaps I was merely following in the steps of my grandfather and father. It was the stuff of male fantasy, but I have come to believe — despite how I strutted and flattered myself at the time — that there was far greater intention, passion, and — yes — even love implicated in our intimacies than the three of us knew. And I remain exceedingly grateful, because since then ...

Well, all of this will become clear.

Uncle Will said, ‘She looking for her family, is she?’

I did not reply. Will was smiling, but he seemed nervous.

I was at what Grandad referred to as *a most dangerous age*, and can’t say what caused him to become so lax over those long summer holidays. Perhaps he was preoccupied with his latest business partner, who I recall only as another new ‘Aunty so-and-so’, or it may have been that Uncle Will covered up for me. Whatever the case, had he known the extent to which I had freed myself from the timetable set for me, my grandfather would have said I was like *an oarless boat adrift on a wide sea*.

But, at that *most dangerous age*, I in fact had an oar —

or something very like it – secreted away in my trousers. In return for accounts of my exploits Uncle Will had made himself a wonderful accomplice, and when I let him know – after all, I was isolated, I was proud, and I had to tell someone – that the girlfriends and I were ...

Please forgive my coyness, but how can I summarise all this, having now started?

Uncle Will, with a knowing smile, said, ‘No wonder you look so tired.’

I asked for his help!

And it was in the subsequent search for the biological family of one of my girlfriends that so much trouble began, and led me to reconsider who I am.

Raised to carry on one heritage, and ignore another, I found myself wishing to reverse that upbringing, not only for the sake of my own children, but also for my ancestors, and for their children in turn. And therefore, inevitably, most especially, for myself.