

Kate Grenville, *Sarah Thornhill* (Text Publishing, 2011)

Only the passage of time will determine whether Kate Grenville's fictional construction of a massacre in her prize-winning novel *The Secret River* (2005), now cemented in *Sarah Thornhill* (2011) its subtitled sequel, will become an apocryphal story that attaches itself to local and evidence-based history of the Hawkesbury River.¹ *Sarah Thornhill* continues the story of Grenville's ancestor Solomon Wiseman, fictionalised as William Thornhill. He and his two wives, who are to some extent complicit, bring down the curse of beneficiary privilege gained by violence on descendent members of their family to this day. Their 'taking up of land' prompts Grenville's question: 'what can we do about the past?'

'By God but I wish that day back again, and have it all come out different' Thornhill rues (29).

Apocryphal family stories about Wiseman precipitated Grenville's archival research and the creative praxis that transformed them in *The Secret River*. Her inspiration for *Sarah Thornhill* came from another set of stories told to her by relatives, about his daughter – in fact, a granddaughter, she decided later – who died young after he threw her out of his house. Experiencing an epiphany while researching the veracity of these stories, on Stewart Island, New Zealand, Grenville felt moved to write the first draft of this novel, there and then, on a paperbag, choosing eponymous protagonist Sarah, loosely based on her great-great-grandmother, an illiterate currency lass ignorant of the civilised world, to narrate it in simple, ungrammatical language: 'they called us the Colony of New South Wales ... We wasn't new anything. We was ourselves' (3). Early in the novel, her voice sounds childish, dull even – 'a fat lizard made me jump' and 'Mary got a blister' – and later clichéd and curiously adult for a teenager – 'my word Phillip had a good way with horses'; 'you got me in a pickle'; 'he was no oil painting' (20-1, 36, 69).

At the opening of the narrative, Thornhill has retired from labouring on his 300 acre farm on the banks of the Hawkesbury because he has been assigned government workers whom he governs firmly and by flogging. Sarah describes him as an 'old colonist', no doubt an opinion considered unreliable further down the stream. Older brother Will trades cedar along the coast and seals across the strait to New Zealand. Sarah idealises her birth mother, now dead, who smoked a pipe and sang the nursery rhyme 'Oranges and Lemons ...'

The narrative builds gradually, with a great deal of taking afternoon tea on the verandah: a place for physical observation and symbolic domination of the land and river. Chapter Two reintroduces the traditional landowners ['blacks'] who move intermittently through the narrative like shadows, unreliably described by Sarah, as she tries to make sense of community stories about cruelty on both sides, of hidden family history and of the reasons why her father's attempts at reconciliation with them seem irrevocably contaminated. They treat his offerings of food and baccy with scorn: 'they lay on the ground like so much rubbish' (26). 'Damn your eyes... What does a man have to do!' (27)

¹ Gay Lynch, 'Apocryphal Stories in Kate Grenville's *Searching for the Secret River* (2006),' *Text* 13.1 (April 2009).

Thornhill dominates the first half of the book and haunts the second. In his nether years, he remains irascible, violent and a self-made man, with bad table manners. He whacks his kids, and throws them out if they shame him. Early on, he acquaints Sarah with the existence of a missing brother and then slaps her down for asking questions about him.

Neighbour Mrs Herring reminds her to stay on song: 'Best look forward, lovey' she said. 'I don't never look back' (17). Grenville uses 'don't look back' as an Orphean and ironic refrain: Thornhill's and Grenville's anguish arises from looking back. His desperate attempt to adopt his Maori grandchild underlines the tragic and intergenerational consequences of Stolen Children policies; like Gail Jones's Indigenous character in *Sorry* (2007), this one loses her voice: 'her misery was like a dark ugly creature with us in the house night and day' (123).

One way or another, Thornhill loses his sons. His second wife, ruthlessly guards the family line, acting as antagonist in Sarah's love story; a manipulative controlling woman she is depicted as almost diabolical: 'Ma was waiting in the parlour like a spider' (149).

Three kinds of love feature in the story: Sarah's childhood crush that becomes infatuation for big, handsome Jack Langland of the golden skin, who can pass for a Portugee (57); her considered and practical affection for Scottish Mr Gaunt, an older suitor, who admires her pluck and, to her delight, proves an adept and experienced lover; and filial love and its betrayal at its darkest hour. Grenville based Langland on the historical figure of whaler and sealer, Thomas Chaseland. She whips up sexual tension between him and Sarah and then skips over climactic scenes. The courtship sub-plots offer forward momentum, and limited agency for Grenville's protagonist when propositioning Langland – 'You're the only feller for me ... Know that don't you' – that is until she exposes their love to family and community and sees it brutally thwarted. Her weighing up of a second love reveals her disappointed pragmatism.

Sarah, an experienced domestic worker, has played house since childhood, and the reader should be in no doubt that she will triumph over the adversity of separation from her family and the primitive kitchen in her bridal home. Langland never forgives her for her father's harsh rejection of him as a worthy suitor, considering both of them to be tainted by a stain worse than that of being a convict or black; she fantasises about him until he dispels all her allusions and demands a reconciliatory and symbolic gesture – to abandon her child, in fact, risk losing her forever, by taking a voyage alone to New Zealand. Grenville presents Maoris as a united, warlike people and more successful negotiators than their Indigenous brethren across the ditch. One of their matriarchs offers Sarah redemption: 'It wasn't the hows and the wheres and the wherefores she wanted ... What she needed, what I was here for, was to watch me go through the telling of it' (301).

Grenville has previously disavowed a literary fiction readership, but nevertheless, she showcases deft similes and metaphors that demonstrate her mastery of the historical period: Ma who 'turned over the places and names and dates like coins in her hand and recounted them for the pleasure of it' (8); 'ship's biscuits so full of maggots they was rich as a Welsh rabbit when you roasted them' (36); and Sarah's love for Langland described by Pa as 'a breach'; she 'laying out words like paving stones to cover the glistening black thing that had opened up at our feet' (131). She beautifully realises the language of Irish settlers, 'a sort of hawk-and-cough thing in

the middle', and their fiddle 'a wild and keening voice, frantic you could say, a soul in a torment of sadness' (80, 196). Her description of Sarah's childbirth scene suggests real danger but the good fortune that sometimes comes with active and optimistic labour: 'I could in a manner of speaking, become the pain' (230).

In an interview with Ramona Koval, Grenville explains herself as only one of a range of contributors – oral family historians, memoirists, fiction writers and scholarly historians – to the 'truth' of Australian history. 'The worst would be to let the story slip away,' her protagonist concludes. 'For what it's worth, mine had best take its place, in with all the others' (304). *Sarah Thornhill* articulates difficult ideas in an accessible way. Grenville frankly explains her creative process, on her website and during interviews, allowing readers to make their own decision about historical truths, fictional or other.

I have to confess that *Sarah Thornhill* is not my favourite Grenville book. It may not matter to her devotees that the book lacks sparkling repartee, because they will understand and admire her legitimate efforts to imagine an uneducated great-great-grandmother. Yet gaps in formal education have never precluded sharp wit or love of oral language. Grenville's descendants may not thank her for fictionalising their paternal settler bloodline as springing from a massacre, nor their maternal line from an inarticulate girl questing after personal and family identity – even if she's right.

Delia Falconer's review of the book in *The Monthly* describes Grenville's three books culminating in this one as 'an act of atonement and the narrative as 'compelling and fable-like' (September 2011). Perhaps Langland got things right: 'Look, every family got something, he said. Not a family doesn't have its secrets big or small. No business of anyone else' (67). Grenville, like Sarah, has 'done the right thing', been 'a good brave soul', in facing up to her tough imagining of Wiseman family secrets (291). She offers them to the reading public as a creative and reconciliatory gesture.

Gay Lynch