

Reading Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance*: Book Clubs and Postcolonial Literary Theory

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Kim Scott's historical novel *That Deadman Dance* (first published in 2010) is a challenging read, offering a complex portrayal of cross-cultural contact on the so-called 'Friendly Frontier' of the southern coast of Western Australia in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Not only is the novel confronting in its subject matter, it is also what Derek Attridge might describe as 'serious literature' (*The Singularity of Literature* 35–44), in the sense that it is both innovative and singular: it jumps around chronologically, shifts narrative perspectives, and moves between different states of consciousness. In this way, at least aesthetically, we might call it an archetypal postcolonial novel (see Carter, 'After Postcolonialism').

That Deadman Dance has been widely (and mostly positively) reviewed in the media, particularly after it won Australia's most prestigious literary prize, the Miles Franklin Award.¹ But how have non-professional readers responded to *That Deadman Dance*? And what might such readings offer postcolonial literary studies? This article addresses these questions by contrasting academic responses to the novel with those of book club readers. It draws upon Derek Attridge's distinction between literal and allegorical readings to explore the extent to which book club readers respond to the novel as an unfamiliar literary work (*Singularity*). Employing Diana Fuss's work of identification, I investigate readers' capacities to respond to the central character, Bobby, by exploring the extent to which they feel able to identify with a character so different from themselves. In so doing, I suggest that book club readings, in their tentative and open-ended uncertainty, pose a challenge to the orthodoxies of Australian literary studies, and provide a model for reader engagement outside the confines of the academy.

Introducing the Novel

That Deadman Dance draws on archival research along with oral and academic histories to tell the story of Bobby Wabalanginy, a confident and highly intelligent but naïve young Noongar man from the southwest coast of what is now known as Western Australia. Bobby willingly appropriates whatever ideas and technologies the coloniser has to offer, including technologies of reading and writing. The novel also has a broader context, chronicling the Noongars' entry into, and facilitation of, the global whaling industry. As settler numbers expand and power dynamics change, Bobby serves as the main lens through which to observe the shift from the colonisers' early dependence on the Noongar to their increasing violence and hostility towards them. As a child, Bobby's intelligence and adaptability ensure him a significant place as mediator between cultures. However, by the novel's end—after a misplaced and ignored plea for recognition of the rights and humanity of his people for the generosity they had shown in accommodating the white settlers—he is forced to recognise that his more suspicious compatriots were right and that he had been wrong:

We thought making friends was the best thing, and never knew that when we took your flour and sugar and tea and blankets that we'd lose everything of ours.

We learned your words and songs and stories, and never knew you didn't want to learn ours. (Scott, *That Deadman Dance* 106)

By the time he is an old man, Bobby is a tourist attraction, dressed in kangaroo skin and red pants, 'throwing his flaming boomerang and holding his palm out for coins' (128). He is reduced to 'strut[ting] and swagger[ing]' as the tourists laugh, 'an old man parading a boy's innocent vanity' (*That Deadman Dance* 107). In ending Bobby's life story on this note, Scott, a Noongar man himself, is aware of the risks he is taking. He is quite deliberately working with ambiguity in a literary context that is dominated by a well-established mode of 'resistance writing' (Scott, 'Can you anchor' 231), a mode that lends itself to postcolonial analysis.

Scholarly Responses to the Novel

In a seminal essay on postcolonial literary reception, Bill Ashcroft argued that 'the cross-cultural text' strategically stresses 'the immense "distance" between author and reader through its very absences: textual gaps that prevent the easy, presumably Western, domestication of difference' (50). In the intervening years, however, postcolonial literary theory has to some extent been at the forefront of such domestication. Indeed, as David Carter has noted, postcolonial perspectives, as both theory and method, are pervasive in the Australian scholarly landscape, and the 'daily practice of postcolonialism . . . has . . . a properly banal and routinized—teachable—element to it' ('Tasteless Subjects' 293). Nicholas Birns suggests as much in his discussion about teaching *That Deadman Dance* in a single-book *Moby-Dick* course in the USA. Birns seeks to 'try and challenge the formulation whereby students are so ready to see an Australian indigenous text as a redemptive, healing vision of European depredation' (4). Birns is implicitly referring to the bold claims that postcolonial literary criticism makes for the political efficacy of readings of Indigenous Australian novels, assuming one knows or is taught how to read them.² According to Carter, what postcolonial literary criticism offers 'is no less than *liberation* (if that sounds old-fashioned, say *subversion* or *transgression*)' ('Tasteless Subjects' 295, emphasis in original).

Generally, academic responses to the novel can be understood within the domain of postcolonial literary criticism. Tony Hughes-d'Aeth's psychoanalytic reading of the novel as exemplifying 'the pattern of deferred action that characterizes the postcolonial treatment of the scene of contact' (23) is compelling, even convincing, as is his reading of Bobby as 'frozen' in adolescence and trapped in a fantasy of cross-cultural harmony. Yet his contention that no one 'can claim to have interpreted the novel until they have made sense of' (31) a passage he reads as the novel's primal scene, suggests a narrow approach to the interpretative possibilities that the novel provides. On the other hand, Philip Mead's wonderfully idiosyncratic reading of the novel is informed by the basic tenets of postcolonial literary theory: 'Scott's imagination also works with a kind of alternating documentary current . . . always resisting and probing the imperialisms embedded in the technologies and genres of writing . . . for their bias and prejudice' (149). While Mead elaborates on the postcolonial trope of 'resisting,' Anne Brewster draws upon the postcolonial notion of 'reworking,' arguing that '*That Deadman Dance* borrows from and reworks the register and lexicon of the colonial discourses which inform the ways in which "settlement" has historically been understood by white and other non-indigenous Australians' (61). For Brewster, 'the novel eschews the conventional postcolonial narrative of indigenous defeat in its creation of a countervailing narrative of the enduring sovereignty of the Noongar' (63). Alison Ravenscroft's reading builds upon the novel's representation of Indigenous difference in the

context of a comparison with Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, Rohan Wilson's *The Roving Party*, and Inga Clendinnen's *Dancing with Strangers*, all books by non-Indigenous Australian writers that engage with Indigenous themes. In a 'familiar gesture of critique' (Carter, 'After Postcolonialism' 118) that leaves white writers inevitably complicit with colonial discourse, she writes:

I trace connecting lines between these three novels and Clendinnen's *Dancing with Strangers* in order to unpick the places where, despite non-Indigenous writers' best efforts to revise the colonial story, they nevertheless risk revitalising it instead; and to wonder what it is about Kim Scott's writing that enables it to do such different work. (65)

For Ravenscroft, 'an emphasis on white imaginative powers risks repeating the same old story, with all the reiterations of colonial impulses that this implies' (65). Although the influence of postcolonial literary criticism is obvious, Brewster and Ravenscroft also draw upon the overlapping theoretical domain of whiteness studies, taking postcolonialism's emphasis on the racialised other and turning its gaze back on the white self. Both Brewster and Ravenscroft thus reflect upon the demands *That Deadman Dance* makes of white readers. Ravenscroft, for example, writes:

Scott is not telling the same old story, populated with men and women who are remarkably recognisable to white readers as a version of ourselves, or familiar from our fantasies of our others . . . It may be that to let the story of the Australian past, present and future be rewritten, white Australians will need to relinquish the position of novelist and historian, for now, in favour of the position of reader of Indigenous-signed textualities . . . (73)

Anne Brewster, likewise, considers the book's impact on white readers:

If the interiority of the novel allows readers to share the Noongar point of view, then the non-indigenous act of reading this novel constitutes a cross-cultural event (located in a contact zone homologous to the frontier represented in the novel) . . . The worlding of the novel returns us to the scene of cross-racial encounter and exchange, a scene non-indigenous readers experience bodily, psychically, affectively. (68)³

In 'Tasteless Subjects,' David Carter suggests, somewhat controversially, that 'postcolonial criticism in the first instance is about producing new sorts of readers within the institution' (293). For Carter, postcolonial literary criticism of the type outlined above provides tools to enable readers to interpret and make sense of cultural difference. However, this raises the question of the limits of such tools, and the related question about the value of modes of reading and engagement with texts that take place outside the academy.

Reading Difference: Ethics and Identification

This article draws upon and draws together the work of Derek Attridge and Diana Fuss in order to think through how what we might call 'lay readers' engage with a novel such as *That Deadman Dance*. James Procter's work has examined the critical neglect of the ways that different readers engage with postcolonial literature outside the academy in order to explore both the limitations of academic readings and the question of what lay readers might have to

offer those readings. Against a postcolonial academic critical discourse suspicious of 'ordinary' readers' race politics, Procter's research reveals a high degree of openness among his study participants, an openness that the book club members in this study also share.⁴

Open, and open-ended, responses to literary texts are what Attridge refers to as 'literal reading' which, in contrast to what he calls 'allegorical reading,' does not apprehend the text as pre-formulated object. Allegorical reading, he notes, while often illuminating, is in danger of 'moving too quickly beyond the novel to find its significance elsewhere, of treating it not as an inventive literary work drawing us into unfamiliar emotional and cognitive territory but as a reminder of what we already know only too well' (*J.M. Coetzee* 43). Attridge suggests that the urge to allegorise is especially powerful when confronted with novels that, 'for one reason or another, are puzzling when taken at face value' (*J.M. Coetzee* 39). For Attridge, literal reading, in contrast, is 'grounded in the experience of reading as an event' and invites an ethical response because it engages with the work as unknown, and thus 'opens a space for the other' (*J.M. Coetzee* 64).

Fuss uses strikingly similar language in her understanding of identification, which is 'perhaps in its simplest formulation, as the detour through the other that defines the self' (2). For Fuss, identification 'opens up a space for the self to relate to itself as a self, a self that is perpetually other' (2). Fuss is, however, aware of the colonial implications of this process: 'identification operates on one level as an endless process of violent negation, a process of killing off the other in fantasy in order to usurp the other's place' (9). Although debates about identification with cultural others in colonial and postcolonial contexts remain unresolved,⁵ Kimberly Chabot Davis's work on book club readers ('Oprah's Book Club'; 'White Book Clubs') questions the suspicion with which scholars discuss the motives behind cross-cultural identifications. While stressing the need to avoid utopian interpretations of the role of affect in social change, her work invites us to rethink reading as a social practice in contemporary culture, and to reconsider its potential for transforming the self, a potential that one would neither want to overstate nor underestimate.⁶ Ultimately, this article seeks to explore the space that book clubs, without scholarly authority, offer their members to engage with otherness.

Why Book Clubs?

In undertaking research with book clubs, it has become clear how little currency contemporary postcolonial approaches in literary studies have among book club readers. Postcolonial critique, with its focus on highly theorised interpretations and implied readings of particular texts in isolation, has, as James Procter observes, very little to tell us about the 'local, contingent and messy work of meaning production' ('Reading after Empire' 6). James Procter and Bethan Benwell's recent research has reworked Stanley Fish's notion of 'interpretive communities' by conceptualising book clubs as 'reading formations.' For Procter and Benwell, reading formations do not refer to concrete interpretive communities, but

describe the specific alignments between a given community of readers, the texts they consume, and the wider institutional and discursive universe within and through which they encounter one another . . . reading formations mobilise the production of meaning, regulating what can and cannot be said about a given book. (10)

The book club is undoubtedly a significant reading formation. Empirical data are hard to come by, but available evidence indicates that book clubs constitute one of the most

‘widespread forms of cultural participation in contemporary Australia’ (Poole 280), and researchers are rapidly uncovering the cultural work of book clubs and the role they play in their members’ lives. Jenny Hartley, in her study of British book clubs, suggests that they provide a ‘forum for a level of debate and conversation not easily found elsewhere’ (137), and Frances Devlin-Glass’s Australian study argues that book clubs help their members participate ‘in global debates and negotiate their place in the world as individuals and collectively’ (583).⁷ More recently, in my work with Robert Clarke, we have looked at the way book clubs manage consensus and dissensus and draw attention to the book club as a space in which members engage in conversations that both ‘reflect and help to fashion their understandings of their own identities, their cultures, and others’ (Clarke & Nolan 131). Such research gives a sense of the ‘mix of aspiration and imperative, desire and discipline’ (Carter, ‘Colonial Modernity’ 67) that characterise book clubs as reading formations. So, although it is very clear that book clubs do not follow the conventions of a university literature tutorial, book clubs function as a lot more than mere social gatherings, and members take seriously their engagement with the books under discussion.

Having said that, book clubs exist in ‘middlebrow cultural space’ (Kaufman 239); generally speaking, they tend to choose realist narratives ‘that provide occasion for emotional and personal introspection, while steering clear of formally challenging’ or experimental literary culture (Kaufman 242). As such, book clubs are often accused of ‘dumbing down’ literary debate.⁸ Jenny Hartley notes that book club readers typically value texts with strong characters, plots and settings with which they can identify and empathise (125–38). So, as a member in one of our focus groups suggests, ‘It’s not as if [*That Deadman Dance*] is a kind of book club book.’ This article now turns to how book club readers, without all the sometimes stultifying, sometimes enlightening, but often over-determining tools of postcolonial theory, make sense of a challenging historical novel such as *That Deadman Dance*.

Introducing the Book Clubs

Before exploring these readings, a brief overview of each of the focus groups is required. The first, Group A, is a Brisbane-based book club interested in issues of reconciliation that meets once a month in a public library. The data from this group are based on a recording of the monthly meeting at which I was not present. This group generally reads non-fiction about Indigenous issues, or Indigenous life writing, but occasionally reads fiction, especially historical fiction. There are about sixteen people in this book club—people do come and go—most of whom are middle-class, white women over the age of 55. They take their reading seriously, often cross-referencing their readings with other historical texts. While this group of earnest readers was the most sympathetic to Indigenous issues, they also seemed to be the group most likely to romanticise or idealise Indigenous Australians and were most secure in their sense of themselves as well-meaning and knowledgeable anti-racists.⁹

Group B is a professional historians’ book club based in Melbourne. The book club meetings constitute part of their professional development, and they read historical fiction exclusively. It comprises seven members, five of whom attended the focus group at which we talked about their earlier discussion of *That Deadman Dance*. All are women, mostly in their thirties. This group reads historical fiction in order to learn how to write more engaging public history, and in this sense, when they read, they consciously attempt to, as they say, ‘put ourselves in the place of the author.’ They see themselves as doing something quite different from academic historians. As one asserted, ‘We’re engaged to tell somebody’s story, so it’s really important

that we tell it in a way that means something to them. And not for our peers necessarily.’ They read historical fiction by novelists because they tend to find that fiction written by historians wears its historical research too heavily, making for cumbersome reading:

What’s so fascinating about the books that we have done that are written by historians [is] that we don’t actually like them at all . . . they’re just not entertaining to read, and not going to get readers in. And that’s what we see as the benefit of historical fiction, it is to teach people something.

The third group, Group C, is a book club run out of an inner-city Brisbane bookshop. This book club is part of an Australian literature group, and it is facilitated by the shop’s owner, who runs a number of other book clubs and is well-versed in the Australian literature market. To call this facilitator a non-professional or lay reader would not then be completely accurate; however, she is not an academic. This is a relatively large book club that is open to all. Although men occasionally attend, the club consists predominantly of middle-aged, middle-class women, and only women participated in the focus group. Unfortunately, on the night the book club met to discuss *That Deadman Dance*, the facilitator was not able to attend, although she did join in the subsequent focus group, from which these data were drawn.¹⁰

Book clubs tend to read prize-winning novels, and these book clubs are no different. All three groups in this study were aware that *That Deadman Dance* had won the 2011 Miles Franklin Award, and this accolade at least partly influenced their decision to read it. This suggests that book clubs are not immune to cultural authority and membership is seen as one way of accumulating both cultural and social capital. The data also support the more general truism that one reason people join book clubs is to be exposed to, read, and engage with books that they otherwise would not encounter themselves. *That Deadman Dance* seems to have fallen into this category. Indeed, many participants commented that they would not have finished the novel if it were not for their obligations to the book club. Given this, I was particularly interested to see how book club readers would engage with a novel that was neither plot- nor character-driven. As Kim Scott has said of this novel, ‘If there is a plot, it’s strategic thinking versus something like creativity’ (‘Can you Anchor’ 234), hardly the plot-driven narrative that is representative of typical book-club fare. How would readers engage with a novel in which the main characters are very different from the (predominantly) educated white readers of contemporary urban Australia?

In analysing the data, I was struck by the sheer diversity of readings both within and between the book clubs. Although this article focuses on the ways and extent to which readers are able to identify with the novel’s Indigenous characters, and particularly the central character of Bobby, it is worth mentioning that there was general agreement across all three book clubs that the novel was both a difficult read and a sad one, given that everybody already knows how this story is going to end. All three clubs also found the unfulfilled promise of an alternative present deeply frustrating. Comments such as ‘We all found it challenging, not just for the content but the structure of the book,’ and ‘My recollection is that it wasn’t generally loved, but we had a very interesting discussion,’ and ‘I think people tended to find it a fairly dense read and a hard read’ reoccurred across the three groups. Although *That Deadman Dance* is a novel that demands a lot of its readers, all concurred that it was worthwhile work that needed to be done.

Perhaps the forum of the book club and the difficulty of the book lent themselves to literal readings in the sense that Attridge uses the term, who asserts that ‘allegorical reading of the

traditional kind has no place for this uncertainty and open-endedness, this sense that the failure to interpret can be as important, and quite as emotionally powerful, as success would be' (*J. M. Coetzee* 48). As one participant stated: 'It was hard, wasn't it? But it was ultimately rewarding.' Only a handful of participants commented on enjoying the beauty of the writing, and only one person across all three groups, a member of the open bookshop-based book club and a published author, discussed the novel's complex and sustained engagement with language and literacy as systems of mediating encounters with others. This is a striking finding considering the centrality of reading and writing in the novel, and in academic responses to it, including my own (Nolan, 'Shedding Clothes'). Moreover, these readers had little interest in the novel's metatextuality, or its intertextuality, two facets of the novel that have been of most interest to academic critics. Having said that, almost without exception, all readers seemed to appreciate the complexity, balance and nuance with which Scott conveyed early cross-cultural encounters in the novel. Nevertheless, two expressed cynicism about Scott winning the Miles Franklin Award, believing it to be awarded to him purely on the basis of his Aboriginality. None had looked at, or even seemed aware of, the reading group notes supplied by Picador that offer a brief synopsis and discussion questions. Nor had they shown much interest in reviews. But they were not completely averse to cultural authority; it was the Miles Franklin prize that had led these book clubs to read and discuss the novel.

Identifying with Bobby Wabalanginy

One of the conventions of book club discussion is that members are allowed, even encouraged, to discuss the extent to which they feel personally connected to a character, a discussion that would be anathema to the university classroom. As Elizabeth Long has observed:

Books give distance yet promote a discourse that gives access to parts of the self not usually mobilized by the hurly-burly of everyday life or by the disembodied rationality required by technical, bureaucratic, even academic ways of thinking. Yet books can only further such discourse in a discussion that encourages the airing of personal interpretation, even excursions into personal life that the book may inspire. (111)

As we will see, such excursions, including readers' sense of identification with characters, are central to book club discussions. As Fuss suggests, identification is habitual, voluntary and involuntary (1–2); it is dangerous, violent, pleasurable and unpredictable in its effects. Significantly, Fuss and Attridge suggest in very different ways that reading has the potential, albeit problematically, to open up a space for the other. Taking these theorisations seriously, I asked members of the surveyed book clubs about their identification with the character of Bobby in *That Deadman Dance*. Group A's responses were particularly interesting because, in spite of the fact that this group of readers was most connected to Indigenous issues, their discussion reveals little sense of connection to the Indigenous characters. Rather than a strong sense of identification with Bobby, or any of the Indigenous characters, their emotional responses seemed oriented much more towards dis-identification with and anger towards the white settler characters. Ironically, it is as if their considerable knowledge of Indigenous issues and their political commitment to social justice foreclosed that space of otherness that the novel invites. In Attridge's terms, it seems that they read the novel as an allegory of colonisation, seeing it as a manifestation of another in a long line of injustices that white settlers had imposed on Indigenous Australians. Indeed, one member of this group read the novel as emblematic of any and all capitalist oppressions:

It's sort of the exploitation for profit, it's no different today, I mean you look at raping the land for the coal seam gas, sand oil in Canada, and who gets exploited? Whether it's the white farmers here in Queensland, or the Inuit people, or the Indians on the Amazon, it's the same story just happening.

Despite this limited sense of connection, the group had a general discussion about the 'believability' of Bobby, with one member stating that he was 'too strong a character, I thought, for a child. Ah, that's just the way I felt. Boy's Own type story.' For this reader, Bobby was not a 'real' enough character and, as such, was difficult to connect with.

The other two groups also felt that it was hard to connect with Bobby, as this exchange in the professional historians' group demonstrates:

- A: I think I just felt, yeah, I guess I couldn't connect so much with [Bobby] the main character . . . I think I just felt like it was just too distant. Which sounds like a cop out, because everything we do is historical fiction and everyone is distant. But sometimes you can just get in straight away.
- B: He's so necessary though, isn't he? You've got to have someone who represents both . . . He's sort of important to have there, but I agree he is a bit hard to connect with.
- C: He's not your classic central character *where you see yourself in them*, or you can relate . . . (emphasis added).

Similarly, the bookshop book club also felt disconnected from the central character. As one member said:

I guess I tend to look for connections between people when I read and, maybe, perhaps the connections weren't between people . . . And without those connections . . . that, for me, is where the essence of what good books, for me, are about . . . is how people relate to each other. And maybe with this book the connections are not between people, but between people and the land or between people and the whales. *And maybe I do not identify with that* (emphasis added).

This quote encapsulates something fascinating about *That Deadman Dance*, in particular the way in which it thwarts readers' drive to identify with characters, preventing them from imaginatively taking the place of its Indigenous characters. While the novel opens up space for an encounter with the historical Indigenous other, these book club readers were not able to fill that space with their own imaginative understandings. The novel, and particularly the central character of Bobby, did not seem to offer them the opportunity to put themselves in the place of its central character. What seemed to emerge, instead, was a fragile and at times alienating appreciation of Indigenous difference *as difference* that could not necessarily be co-opted, through an act of identification, into the white readers' sense of self. Instead, the novel seemed to offer these readers a perspective on a different and unassimilable lived reality. As one of the members of the social justice book club stated:

I thought one of the strong aspects of the book . . . is that the story is told through Bobby's eyes and through the eyes of an Indigenous person, all of it. His acquaintances, friends, his experiences, friends, connections with land and changing perceptions really . . . And maybe the theme there is, I don't know, that his story, his people's story is as important as another story that is normally

told. The story is the same, but the story is different because of different experiences, those intricacies of culture that make a story different.

And, in spite of not being able to ‘connect’ with Bobby, one member of the professional historians’ book club said:

Yeah, I think it’s really important. I mean, I think the more people write, particularly from an Indigenous point of view then I think that *is* the most important thing because so many people just ignore it. So if it can be popular, and it can win prizes, I think it’s the most wonderful thing. And it is clear that, you know, a lot of Indigenous people have a completely different way of thinking and running their lives and what’s important, and time span and those relationships between family and things like that, and the importance of items and things.

Another member of this group, when discussing a scene of a first meeting between an English settler and an Indigenous man, said:

But their meeting, I thought it was really beautifully written, but I thought it was also really an interesting and nice idea as well. How they were smelling the different smells, and thinking about just the totally different lives that each other had. And to try and, trying to in that moment to get some sort of understanding of each other. Even though they couldn’t communicate or anything.

This appreciation and acknowledgement of the importance of coming to terms with difference, of being able to sit with that difference, neither making it the same nor turning away from it as utterly other, led to a very interesting response from a member of one group. At the time, she was working with Indigenous people and was alive to the ways in which the novel modelled positive interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in a context of shifting and unequal power relations:

Because I was working [with Indigenous people], we were talking a lot about cyclical time and understanding time and the past and the present and the future all existing . . . yeah, so for me this book opened up, it helped me to understand it and comprehend it in a new way. That I never would have done otherwise, so, like it brought it to life a little bit more for me.

And then she went on to say:

It’s not easy to work together; there is a lot of angst that goes into it and to really work collaboratively you just have to try and push past it. It’s really not always easy but, yes, so for me thinking about how people historically have worked together as well and come together I think I also found that a sort of comfort in the book. . . . So this felt really real to me too.

This quality of book clubs, where reading moves beyond the book and connects with the networks and concerns of readers’ everyday lives, is palpable here. These comments seemed to have a profound impact on the other book club members, who had not considered how reading the novel might have an impact on contemporary relations with Indigenous people. This moment suggests the potential of group reading and book-focused discussion for

producing mutual imaginings, for bringing into being new possibilities for thought, which may then affect interpersonal and cross-cultural relations in the world outside the novel. In this instance, the book club context enabled its members to explore difference in relation to character through reading and conversations with one another.

Concluding Remarks

Although book clubs are often derided as middlebrow spaces dominated by white, middle-class, middle-aged women, it would be unfair simply to dismiss the cultural work they nurture. The discussions considered in this article suggest that it was only through and with the support of their book club that many of these readers read the book at all, and they were prepared to work hard to reckon with it. Their readings were contrary, generous and tentative—and incalculable in their effects. Their subsequent discussions enabled them to shift perspectives and question their understandings of Australian history and their place within it.

I am not trying to make a case here for a superior form of non-professional reading, or suggest that postcolonial literary analysis does a disservice to Scott's novel, and I found the academic readings of the novel illuminating and thought-provoking. Rather, I am suggesting that book club readers, or at least some of those in this study, may be more able to encounter a novel as different, in Attridge's literal sense, without the allegorising domestication that postcolonial literary theorists, myself included, tend to both invoke and critique. Book club readings, moreover, are able to eschew the kinds of appeals to mastery that academic readings seem to require. Such suggestions raise the question—at least implicitly—of how much education or background readers *do* need to engage with this text. It *might* be the case that the further away readers are from an understanding of complex postcolonial issues and theories, the better they can avoid falling into what Attridge identifies as allegorical reading, although I suspect Attridge may not see it this way.

Such questions remain, for now at least, without a clear answer. What does seem clear, however, is that because the communal space of the book club encourages and validates personal responses, it offers readers an opportunity to imagine otherwise: to experience loss for something that might have been and sorrow for what was (emotions sorely lacking in contemporary Australian debates), and to do so without necessarily annihilating or assimilating Indigenous experience into the non-Indigenous self.

I am mindful of Patrick Allington's caution that the 'political challenge for Scott's non-indigenous readers may be to resist the temptation to believe that they can redress inequality and injustice merely by exposing and embracing the messiness of Australian history' (12). This caution, however, strikes me as a challenge more pertinent to postcolonial literary studies with its discourses of resistance and countervailing narratives. In addition, there is reason to believe that, although reading historical fiction cannot redress historic inequality, it may offer some potential for transformation. Elizabeth Long suggests that membership in a book club challenges 'individual members' pre-held notions and allows them the possibility of new epiphanies about both literature and life' (187). This possibility is epitomised by the thoughts of one of the members of Group C, the inner-city book club, who really did not enjoy reading the book:

I think this book has to change the way you think about the past because it does describe a situation that, as a white Australian, I hadn't really thought about . . .

This was a peaceful . . . It started off as a peaceful settlement of people living amongst one another, trying to live amongst one another. And you can't help but think, if things had gone better, would we have a better world. Would Australia be in a far better position today had that scenario panned out differently?

I wrote earlier of Bobby's lament about the lack of engagement of settler Australians with his culture: 'We learned your words and songs and stories, and never knew you didn't want to learn ours' (106). Perhaps, in the twenty-first century, book club readers might be rising to the challenge. Alison Ravenscroft was right, I think, to suggest that 'to let the story of the Australian past, present and future be rewritten, white Australians will need to relinquish the position of novelist and historian, for now, in favour of the position of reader of Indigenous-signed textualities' (73). They may even, at least sometimes, need to relinquish the position of the *academic* reader of Indigenous-signed textualities as well.

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NOTES

¹ This is the second time that Scott has won the prize; he was the first Indigenous author to win the Miles Franklin when he was a co-winner in 2001 for his novel *Benang. That Deadman Dance* also won the South East Asian Commonwealth Writer's Prize, a less well-known award in the Australian context.

² See David Carter, 'After Postcolonialism' 115.

³ This trope of listening is a significant one in the Australian context. In key documents of the official ten-year reconciliation process instigated in 1991, 'telling' and 'listening to' stories are promoted as key practices of reconciliation. *Bringing Them Home: The Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* published in 1997, midway through the reconciliation process, gave previously silenced people a space in which to speak, and represented a demand that Australia must listen to Indigenous perspectives. Indeed, one might argue that the *Bringing Them Home* report, with its considerable use of oral testimony, fostered this demand, elaborated upon by Brewster and Ravenscroft, that non-Indigenous Australians have a responsibility to listen to Indigenous stories and voices.

⁴ Kimberly Chabot Davis examined book talk by readers of the racially mixed Oprah Book Club in the US and concluded that, 'Although cross-racial sympathy can often devolve into a colonizing appropriation, my reception analysis underscores the importance of empathetic crossings within cultural space can play in the development of anti-racist coalitions' ('Oprah's Book Club' 399).

⁵ For some, such as Doris Sommer, underlying white consumption of minority culture represents violent neo-imperialist fantasies of displacement. bell hooks, among others, has been relentless in reminding white consumers of the pleasures of identifying with cultural others. Alternatively, for scholars such as Elin Diamond, identifying with cultural others is a moral duty, through which alliances are formed and the boundaries between social identities are realigned.

⁶ This article is less interested in questions of empathy than in the complex role of identification in literature, particularly among white readers of Indigenous texts. For the purposes of this article, I draw upon Diana Fuss's conceptualisation of identification with its attention to both its unpredictability and danger. Empathy, by contrast, is overwhelmingly understood in purely positive terms and might be described 'psychoanalytically in terms of receiving, processing, and making available unconscious material transferred from one person to another.' See Bondi. Unpacking the complex relationship between identification and empathy is beyond the scope of this article, but Chabot Davis's work pursues a much more empathetic perspective. See also Megan Boler.

⁷ Lindsey Howie's work also seeks to understand the nature of book club interactions. She draws on psychoanalytic theory to consider the centrality of relationship in book clubs and explores book club dynamics

'and personal experience as self-reflexive practice that supports the development of shifting self-knowledges' (141).

⁸ There is already a tradition of scholarly research that scrutinises such claims, their gendered dimension, and the problematic relationship of book clubs to professional cultural authorities. For fuller discussions of these debates in contemporary book club research, see Kiernan, Rehberg Sedo, Radway, and Missner Barstow.

⁹ See Bethan Benwell for a discussion of common sense anti-racism.

¹⁰ Unlike the first two groups, this group does not seem to perceive itself to be qualitatively different from general readers, and the role of the facilitator is crucial. As one member said, amid laughter: 'I do remember feeling at book club that we were missing you.' The data I gathered supports existing research about open facilitated book clubs, that is, that they have and allow for more diversity of opinion, and the facilitator's role is crucial in mediating readings and interpretations. When I asked why they missed her, one replied: 'Not that she would give a more positive take on the book. [She] is great at . . . When the conversation, is perhaps . . . is just maybe . . . People are saying, "I didn't like it, I didn't like it", [she] will say, "Right, well, why was that?" or "What did you think?" She's very good at not letting anyone go on too long, and guiding things. And perhaps she'll highlight something a little bit provocative . . . And that's a wonderful role.'

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