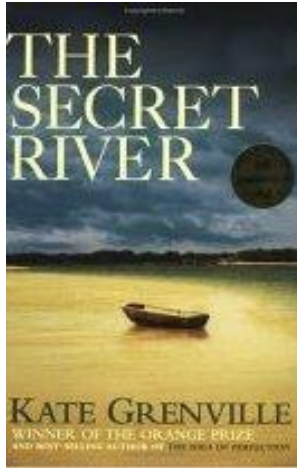


BOOK REVIEW

Grenville, Kate. *The Secret River*. Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2005.



In the early nineteenth century William Thornhill, a boatman on the River Thames, is transported from the slums of London to the penal colony of New South Wales for the term of his natural life. He arrives with his wife Sal and their children in a harsh land they cannot understand.

Sal lives only for the day when she can return to London, but Thornhill dreams of starting a new life in this emerging settlement. Eight years into his sentence Thornhill is free, and sails up the Hawkesbury River with his family to claim a hundred acres of land on a bend in the river, and establish his own river transport business.

However, the spot he has chosen is not uninhabited; it has been occupied for thousands of years by Aboriginal people. The aspirations of William Thornhill and his fellow settlers are incompatible with the traditional way of life of the Aboriginal people. Thornhill slowly comes to the realization that, if he is to fulfill his dream and secure his acreage, he will have to follow the shocking example of many other white settlers before him and 'resolve' the question of the land once and for all.

In perpetrating an act of unmitigated cruelty on the local tribe, Thornhill achieves unchallenged possession of the land, and ensures a secure future for his family in New South Wales. But these actions are not without personal and emotional repercussions for Thornhill and his family. The shadows cast by the most difficult decision of his life are long and persistent. Thornhill loses one of his children, and destroys his own peace of mind.

Inspired by research into her own family history, Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* is a powerful and groundbreaking story about life on the frontier. This is fiction at its best – realistic, challenging and provocative. It is not comfortable reading, but neither is it gratuitously violent or moralistic.

Grenville uses a powerful, evocative style and a clear, well-paced tale as vehicles for the exploration of critical ethical issues in the history of black and white relations in Australia. The book will generate much soul-searching on the part of its non-Aboriginal readers, and painful emotions for its Aboriginal readership.