

“Reading for Reconciliation”

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**Expanding Conversations: Social Innovation, Arts and Anti Racism**

May 15, 2012

Australian Human Rights Commission

In this presentation I wish to reflect on the role of book clubs in furthering the aims of reconciliation. The basis of these reflections comes from a study that I am conducting with my colleague Robert Clarke from the University of Tasmania. We are interested in how reading groups work—the kinds of cultural functions they perform. And we are particularly interested in what reading groups do when they read recent works of Australian fiction that focus on the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. We hope, in this National Year of Reading, to provide insights into the role of literature in the pursuit of an anti-racist agenda.

Because of time constraints, I won't go into the debates about the meanings of reconciliation. We are aware of the criticisms of the concept especially in relation to the official process. Suffice to say, reconciliation means different things to different people and it has different meanings depending on whether one is talking about a state-sponsored process or an individual's self-reckoning in the quiet of their own hearts.

Book clubs, though, are located somewhere between the public and the private spheres and as such they provide insights into how talk about reconciliation is generated

and negotiated by 'ordinary' citizens and readers. Today, I want to talk about one book club, the Brisbane-based "Reconciliation for Reading" book club, and their discussion of Kate Grenville's 2005 novel, *The Secret River*. *The Secret River* is a historical novel that follows the life of William Thornhill, from his birth in extreme poverty in late seventeenth-century London to his transportation to New South Wales in 1806 for theft. Having served his sentence, Thornhill and his family 'take up' land on the Hawkesbury River. What follows is a portrait of early rural colonial life and the fatal failure of co-existence between European colonizers and the Aboriginal occupants. The narrative culminates in a vividly portrayed massacre against the local Darug people, in which Thornhill participates. The novel ends with a prosperous Thornhill engaged in actively forgetting the violence through which his wealth has been secured.

In spite of it being perhaps Grenville's most critically and commercially successful novel, *The Secret River* attracted some intemperate criticism from historians. Responses to the novel from literary critics were also quite hostile. Key concerns of the literary critics included the novel's realism, its popularity and the fact that it was written by a white celebrity author, all of which made it, self-evidently, morally suspect. Added to that was a concern that the "general reader" would inevitably identify with the apparently sympathetic Thornhill.

So, this confronting novel, clearly written as a reconciliatory gesture (see Grenville's *Searching for the Secret River*), has been overwhelmingly interpreted, at least by literary critics, as enabling white Australians to feel better about themselves. How, we wondered, did this happen? And who exactly is this misguided general reader about whom the literary critics are so concerned? What are the ethical effects of general readers' engagement with this novel? If we are interested in addressing these questions, and the ways in which novels

such as *The Secret River* are read in the contemporary Australian context, then conventional postcolonial literary criticism may not have much to offer

Until relatively recently, book groups have been largely unexamined by academic scholars. As one scholar has noted from the perspective of the academic humanities, reading groups are mostly invisible. This is despite—or perhaps because of—the popularity of such groups, especially amongst women. Whatever one thinks of book groups, they are clearly one of the most widespread and popular ways that people engage with culture. In Australia there are only a few general studies on reading groups. Scholars in the UK and the US however, are beginning to consider more specific questions of book groups and the ways they read in relation to particular social and cultural issues. One scholar, Kimberley Chabot Davis, suggests that reading groups can produce cross-cultural empathy and may play an important role in “the development of anti-racist coalitions”.

So let’s turn to the Reading for Reconciliation group. Obviously we are dealing with a very specific group here – an issues-based book club – and we are in the early days of our research, so we are hesitant to make too many general claims. This book group, however, shared a number features with general book clubs – it is predominantly female – only one man in a group of about 13, (and he is also a priest and one of the women is a nun – which also probably makes for quite an unusual group); and apart from one Indigenous woman who had not attended the discussion on *The Secret River*, they were all white. Almost all members of this group were over 55, and educated at least to at tertiary level – so, as a demographic, the “Reading for Reconciliation” group looks very much like other book groups.

But it is a book club with a purpose. As the group’s founder said, “we don’t really discuss the literary formation or the characterisation, it really is, let’s learn what we can

about Indigenous issues.” As a result, this book club rarely reads fiction – there are only a handful of novels in their backlist, and more often than not the group reads Indigenous-authored books. Yet, although they had read and discussed *The Secret River* some years before we did the focus group (which obviously raises some methodological problems), it was one of the most memorable discussions they had had. They vividly recalled details of the novel and the effects that it had on them both emotionally and intellectually, and their discussion of the book prompted spontaneous reflection on the roles and relationships of fiction and history in understanding and enacting reconciliation.

We asked the group members whether Grenville’s whiteness was an issue: for some it wasn’t, but a few felt impressed that a white writer had tried to deal with her past with such even-handedness: “She was actually brave enough to dig deeper, that was her story, it wasn’t an impersonal history lesson, her ancestors had actually done that and been there”; Another asserted: “I think there is a bit of gutsiness in there as well. To be able to portray something knowing that you are exposing. But also that you might not be telling the whole truth. You don’t know all sides of it.”

For many participants, the group is a place where they can talk together about the things they care about as well as reflect upon their implication in the issues they are trying to understand: “Let’s not kid ourselves, we all have, I’ve got biases. You find yourself, the way you are brought up and that, you’re possibly challenged when you read this stuff I get confronted by my biases. Let’s not kid ourselves, we all have biases.” As one participant said: “I know there are issues that I just let go when there is people outside of the group because I know I can discuss them here. But outside the group I still find that there is a lot of, I don’t know if it’s ignorance, or ‘don’t want to know’, or ‘everyone should get over it’ or ‘that’s happened in the past’.”

We were particularly interested to know how the group's members related to the characters: especially the character of William Thornhill who some critics have considered too sympathetic. Most of the readers in this group felt uncomfortable with the suggestion that they would identify with this character especially given the crimes he committed. When readers did indicate an identification with this character, it was expressed in complex terms that didn't provide the easy consolation the critics feared. One participant put it this way:

I think one of Kate Grenville's skills is to make it believable and to make us say that if I was in the situation I would have done the same thing and not realised what devastation it was to the Aboriginal people. ... And it makes it understandable to me that huge injustices were being done to the Aboriginal people who were being subjected to all this. And being subjected in a way where there wasn't an equal power. ... It doesn't excuse them, but it helps me to understand, yes, I believe that it happened. Whereas before you would say, people wouldn't have done that. Now I say, yes, I can see how that happened.

Such comments provoke reflection on the role of empathy and emotion in literature, and fiction as an agent of self-transformation. While there has been much skepticism about the role of empathy for readers of fiction, our research suggests that reading has enabled the development of understanding as part of an ongoing process of self-reflection. What is really interesting about this group is that they were already very knowledgeable about Indigenous history and affairs, and yet having the issues that they knew so much about, especially the brutality of the colonial frontier, embedded in a fictional story had quite a profound effect. As one participant stated: "I'd read books about Aboriginal massacres and

so on, very much in your face. But because this was put in a novel, because the whole novel brought everyone to life, it all made sense. The brutality made sense.”

I want to close with some observations in response to the question of what, if any, difference reading and discussing a book such as this makes. I know these statements are self-reported, and are thus subject to self-censoring or self-promotion. But they do suggest that a particular kind of empathy may be an important ingredient in developing a reconciliatory sensibility, which has the potential to influence actions in the public sphere. One participant responded:

I didn't learn anything I didn't know, but reading these books I think deepens my understanding of it and my empathy which then effects what I do, in telling others about it and advocating. So in that sense it makes a difference... I guess it's in the sense of standing in the shoes of someone else. In particularly in the shoes of Aboriginal people and in the white people who are aware of something happening.”

Another concurred: “Yes, that was where I was going exactly. Because I don't think we can ever underestimate the value of the impact we can have if we are speaking to someone else ... I don't think you can underestimate the ripple effect.”

So, this preliminary analysis reveals the possibilities that reading groups may provide for the circulation of ideas of contemporary significance, including the idea of reconciliation. The kinds of responses to *The Secret River* that we have observed in this particular group are very different to those many critics have predicted. It would be wrong to think that this particular group is representative of all reading groups. Yet it does provide a model of how committed readers are using their experience of reading recent Australian fiction to reflect on the meanings and implications of reconciliation.