



GHOST RIVER

by Tony Birch

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THE STORY

'You remember that time, Ren, when you said to me It's no free country for us. I was so angry with you because I knew it was the truth. I reckon I could go any place and I'd find trouble. I'm good at it. Might just as well stay round here as be anywhere else.' (pp 285–6)

Sonny Brewer and 'Ren' (Charlie) Renwick become neighbours and then unlikely best friends. Ren's mum Loretta and her partner Archie Kemp, are both hard-working and caring. Sonny's mum cleared out years before with his younger sibling, and left him with his hard-drinking often violent father. Ren is a quiet kid who spends a lot of his time drawing birds. Sonny has a smart mouth and is often in trouble at school, but can do anything with his hands. The boys had been loners but become firm friends with a shared love for the river where they befriend a group of homeless 'river men.' Differences between the boys could have set them apart, but their shared loss drew them together. Sonny and Ren were also the only kids around the neighbourhood without brothers or sisters living under the same roof, which was unusual.' (p 10) After Sonny is expelled, his dad leaves home and Sonny finds work as a paper boy. Ren wants to buy a good camera to take beautiful photos of birds so he helps Sonny out. In the course of their work they discover some of the unsavoury types in their neighbourhood. Sonny's uncle Rory comes to look after him and also gives him work as an 'emu' at the races. Meanwhile a strange preacher moves in next door to them with his family, and his daughter Della seems to be reaching out to Ren, but is obviously troubled herself. And when the boys discover that 'their' river is to make way for a freeway, Sonny decides to do something about it.

This is a rite of passage novel. It's set in 1968 when Australian society is clearly changing. Ronald Ryan had been the last man hanged in Australia the year before (p 31). Conscripts to Vietnam haven't yet returned with their grim stories. But old habits in post-WWII Australian society are still dying hard, and this suburb is rife with domestic violence, social outcasts, educational mismanagement, police corruption, criminal collusion and SP bookies claiming their 'take'.

It is also a morality play as the boys find themselves increasingly compromised by the gangster Vincent's blackmail and the crooked and vindictive policeman Foy's standover tactics. They live in a tenuous society in which everyone scams everyone else, desperate to avoid poverty. They are also both kids who are at risk, despite Ren's happier homelife. Any young life can be damaged irrevocably by incidents such as those described in this novel. But through it all, the feeling the novel most arouses is hope and joy in the small pleasures of life.

And haunting all this action is the 'ghost river' – the place where the boys swim, and play, and dream – and where the old men can hide from society. The river claims its own. And gives back those it doesn't want.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Tony Birch was born in inner-city Melbourne, into a large family of Aboriginal, West Indian and Irish descent. His upbringing was challenging and difficult, and much of this is captured in his remarkable debut, the semi-autobiographical *Shadowboxing* (Scribe, 2009).

An altar boy and exceptional student at his local Catholic primary school, in adolescence, Birch went ‘off the rails’ as a teenager. He was expelled from two high schools for fighting and found trouble with the police for the same reason. Although somewhat adrift following his expulsions, he remained a voracious reader – once, when he was arrested by police, all they found when they patted him down was a copy of Camus’ *The Outsider*, which remains his favourite book.

Returning to night school to complete his studies, Birch met his mentor, Anne Misson, whose credo was very simple: ‘You’ll be great, but only if you work your arse off.’ Birch still lives by this and applies it to everything including his passion for running, which is where his writing is created and shaped.

Birch’s work is widely read and loved including by those who might normally avoid books, particularly teenage boys. Through his outreach work, he visits many schools to speak to students, and takes particular pleasure in returning to the two schools that expelled him, as both of his previous books are on the syllabus.

He has also published a short story collection *Father’s Day* (Hunter, 2009), his debut novel *Blood* (UQP, 2011) which was shortlisted for the 2012 Miles Franklin Award and a collection of short stories *The Promise* (UQP, 2014). He is a frequent contributor to ABC local and national radio and a regular guest at writers’ festivals.. He lives in Melbourne where he has been head of the Honours Program for creative writing at the University of Melbourne. In July 2015 he became the first recipient of the Dr Bruce McGuinness Indigenous Research Fellowship at Victoria University.

DISCUSSION NOTES

1. Metaphors of birds are frequently used in this novel, and relate to Ren’s drawings of birds. What else do the following two quotes symbolise?

‘Sonny Brewer was an oddly built boy. He stood long and pale with dark ragged hair and a bird-shaped chest. From a distance he resembled a scarecrow standing in a field. Up close there was something of a scraggly pigeon about him.’ (p 5)

‘The wren is a bird I know from another time. And you’re that one. Don’t go forgetting it. One day ya will need to fly.’ Tex stepped forward and rested an open hand on Ren’s forehead. ‘There is no doubt you are a bird. I can feel you have heart and spirit in you, boy. Don’t matter that you know nothing of it now. You will sometime in the future.’ (p 16)

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2. The ghost river lies at the heart of this novel as a symbol of life and death. (Birch refers to his love for the Yarra River in his Acknowledgments.) Discuss the following three quotes in relation to this theme:

‘Ren knew his river as good as anyone and better than most. As well as drawing birds and other animals, his exercise books were increasingly filled with maps of the river, including sketches of the swimming holes, the hollows where rabbits burrowed into the ground, the fox holes hidden beneath the barbs of blackberry, and the drainways spewing out rubbish from the streets above. Ren’s thoughts of the river were so constant he sometimes woke in the night, recalled an image of his most recent visit, opened one of his books and began drawing.’ (p 12)

‘The river took such good care of the men that Tex called it their mother.’ (p 21)

‘This is her. And when a body dies on the river, it goes on down, down, to the ghost river. Waiting. If the spirit of the dead one is true, the ghost river, she holds the body to her heart. If the spirit is no good, or weak, she spews it back. Body come up. Simple as that.’ (p 109)

3. Telling stories is another integral part of this novel: ‘The river men told prison stories, drinking stories, lost dog stories, and tales of their years on the road. Ren was a good listener and quickly understood there were strict rules governing how a story was told and listened to. Interjections were occasionally allowed, by way of a jeer or a hand shooting into the air, requesting a point-of-order. Big Tiny was the most common culprit in that regard. Other stories were sacred, recited in hushed tones and observed in silence, except for the crack and groan of the fire.’ (p 24)

What role does storytelling play in these characters’ lives?

4. Sonny has an ‘eye’ (p 15) which Aboriginal men say is ‘a sign’. What other references to Aboriginal culture did you find in this novel?

5. The rules of the river men’s camp are strict: ‘Never call a man a dog unless he is one. Never take another man’s food or bed unless he offers to share. And never touch another man’s fire.’ (p 19) How well do these rules relate to everyday life?

6. Tiny’s story about a kid in a mattress store treating him well was a contemporary fable of how appearances often distance people from each other. The salesman treated Tiny with respect, for which he was grateful (p 29). Discuss this theme in relation to other characters in the novel. For example Brixey Booth’s respect for Sonny’s work ethic overrides local prejudice about his being a troublemaker.

7. ‘Silence was a valued lesson he learned during his years away, a reference to a stint in prison for which he provided no detail, except to say, ‘It was where I come to know to keep the mouth shut and lay doggo.’ (p 31) Is this the unwritten law of all those who are disadvantaged?

8. ‘You have it the wrong way, Sonny. Those who have the money, rich people, don’t share. Think of the times you’ve had a feed round Tex’s fire. That’s his own he’s giving us. And don’t forget, he found the river long before we did. He knows more about it than anybody, and shares stories with us too.’ (p 52) Discuss.

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9. Police corruption is rife in this novel (p 53) and standover men seem to be on every corner. ‘Remember what Rory told us. With people like Vincent you never stop paying, is what he said.’ (p 216) What does this suggest about the prospects of the disadvantaged, and particularly of children like Sonny in this society?
10. The story of the diver (pp 56–7) intrigues the boys, and they also challenge each other to dive into the river from a great height. Why do young men test themselves like this?
11. The milkman Mick O’Reagan’s son has been conscripted to fight in Vietnam (p 84). Discuss this conflict and how Australian society changed as a result.
12. ‘The truth is, all of us will be forgotten one day. Unless we do something special.’ (p 110) Do Sonny and Ren ‘do something special’ in this novel? Are they ordinary or extraordinary kids? Discuss.
13. ‘Go home, love, he said. He’ll be sober in the morning. I never have forgot that.’ (p 123) What does this policeman’s advice say about attitudes to domestic violence then, and have attitudes changed since?
14. ‘Don’t worry about him. He won’t be doing anything. Those who have been hurt most can be hardest on others going through the same.’ (p 131) Loretta hints that Archie’s childhood may not have been the happiest, and in fact, most of the children in this novel have had hard lives. What does this novel say about the effect of childhood trauma such as that suffered by Sonny? Can it be overcome? How are parents in this novel presented? The preacher’s abuse of his family is also shocking. Has Della any chance of escaping her background?
15. This novel is a tribute to the resilience of children. It warmly and vividly describes childhood games and scrapes – finding lost golf balls, selling papers – and celebrates the way in which Ren and Sonny make a positive out of the negatives of their circumstances. Tony Birch’s own childhood in the slums of Fitzroy and the Yarra River informs his stories of these battlers. Humour is also one of the strongest threads in both the pranks of these boys, and in the river men’s stories. [Listen to the interview listed below under Further Reading.]
16. Many practices of the times are very quaint in retrospect. eg The ‘emus’ salvaging old betting tickets in case they are winners, which is Uncle Rory’s primary occupation, and the unwritten rules attached to it (p 145). What other occupations or practices in this novel seem particularly curious to us now?
17. Ren and Sonny meet a surveyor and find out about the planned freeway. ‘Sonny stuck his head between his knees and took a deep breath. ‘This is our place. We can’t let them do it.’ (p 68) The sabotage (p 151) perpetrated by Sonny, is another person’s environmental activism. Sonny, of course, wouldn’t recognise the word ‘environmentalist’ but he and Ren are actually inspired by their love of the river to challenge the construction workers. Discuss.
18. Uncle Rory tells the boys Tex’s sad story as an Aboriginal boxer (pp 162–3); a story which hints at both racism and bureaucratic mismanagement. Are the old river men victims of society?

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19. ‘Remember what Rory said? We shouldn’t give up without a fight. That’s exactly what we done. Give up already.’(p 174) How does this quote relate to the central themes of this novel?

20. ‘It means plenty. You find yourself down at the bottom of the river, for some it’s time to give in to her. But other times, young fellas like you two, you got to fight your way back. Show the river you got courage and is ready to live. She needs to see that. Or she’ll take you. That’s the most important story of all.’ (p 294) What do these final lines in the novel suggest to us? How might Sonny and Ren live their lives in future?

FURTHER READING

Tony Birch, *Fathers’ Day* (Hunter Publishers, 2009)

Tony Birch, *Shadowboxing* (Scribe, 2006)

Tony Birch, *Blood* (UQP, 2011)

Tony Birch, *The Promise* (UQP, 2014)

‘Author Tony Birch Draws on Childhood Hardships to Create Fiction’ Conversations with Richard Fidler ABC Radio, 10 July 2013 www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2013/07/10/3799794.htm

‘Interview with Tony Birch – Hannah Parkes’ beautifulandnecessary.com/2013/12/10/interview-with-tony-birch-hannah-parkes/