



# THE WHITE GIRL

by Tony Birch

Published 2019 | ISBN 9780 7022 6038 4 | 272pp | AU \$ 29.95



## THE STORY

*'He would begin with auditing of the Aboriginal children under his guardianship, with a view to deciding the best outcome for their future welfare.'* (p. 26)

This powerful novel describes the experiences of Aboriginal people, often known as the 'Stolen Generations'. It opens in 1963, with sixty-three year old Odette Brown living in a slowly decaying rural town, Deane, with her twelve-year-old granddaughter Cecily Anne (Sissy). Odette visits the abandoned local mission site each week, to pay tribute to the graves of friends and the loving memories of her father Ruben and husband Daniel, both of whom died in an accident at the nearby mine. Odette's daughter, Lila, fell pregnant at fifteen. When Odette discovered her daughter's secret, Lila refused to divulge the identity of the father of the baby. When Sissy turned one, Lila ran away leaving Sissy in her grandmother's care. Lila's infrequent letters give few hints to her whereabouts, but Odette has never given up hope of finding her. Odette is also experiencing health issues and as her symptoms get worse she finally goes to see Doctor Singer, a Jewish holocaust survivor, who diagnoses her tumours. Nearby, lives her friend the midwife Millie Khan, married to Yusuf Khan, and the daughter of legendary stockman Morgan Carter. Henry Lamb, a kind but damaged junkyard owner, is also Odette's neighbour and friend.

Some years earlier Odette acted as a nanny to the Kane family, before their mother died, mysteriously walking away from the family homestead. Now, the eldest of two siblings, Aaron Kane, who has been badly treated by his violent father, Joseph Kane, is out to cause trouble, despite his brother George's efforts to restrain him. They begin to persecute Henry Lamb, and then Sissy Brown. Odette is limited in the legal options available to her to protect her granddaughter. The local police officer, Bill Shea has allowed the district to fall into benign neglect. His own ineptness, as a result of drunkenness, ensures that Shea will not intervene. The aggressively officious Sergeant Lowe, the new 'Guardian' of local Aboriginal people, is determined to record and pursue every child of mixed heritage in the area. Odette realises that she must escape the town with Sissy. Bill Shea proves an unlikely ally, as does the junkyard owner, Henry Lamb. The big city, where the pair escape to, proves daunting and if not for a chance meeting with Jack Haines on a railway platform, Odette and Sissy's future would be perilous. Jack and his wife, Alma, welcome Odette and Sissy into their home like 'family'. The epilogue contains a moving journey back to country, with the suggestion that as a teacher, Sissy may improve the lot of her people.

This novel is a compelling account of the injustices inflicted upon Aboriginal people, which continue to resonate into the present day. It is a calm and compassionate fictional re-enactment of the many testimonies that have been offered to a series of inquiries into the 'Stolen Generations'. It is also a 'silent scream' against inhumanity and injustice, and an indictment of the fact that Australians have condoned such behaviour, imbued with regret that they continue to do so. 'Sorry?' Perhaps this word has been used to far little effect.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tony Birch is the author of *Ghost River*, which won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Indigenous Writing and *Blood*, which was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award. He is also the author of *Shadowboxing* and three short story collections, *Father's Day*, *The Promise* and *Common People*. In 2017 he was awarded the Patrick White Literary Award. Tony is a frequent contributor to ABC local and national radio and a regular guest at writers' festivals. He lives in Melbourne and is a Senior Research Fellow at Victoria University.

### QUESTIONS

1. *The White Girl* details the scandalous treatment of the 'Stolen Generations' – Aboriginal people who were removed from or separated from their country and families, and forced to live in missions and institutions. Odette's youth was spent in a mission where, 'Although the men's dormitory was no more than fifty yards away Odette was not permitted to speak to her father, except on Sunday mornings after Mass.' (p. 17) Such separation, even within institutions, was based on a wilful disregard for Aboriginal people's right to access the same conditions as white people. The novel contains several 'case studies' of the impact this had on Aboriginal lives:

**Sissy Brown:** 'With no parents to speak for her, Sissy was in danger of being removed from her grandmother's care.' (p. 4) This dilemma lies at the heart of the novel; although Odette has been her devoted guardian, Sissy's legal guardian was the 'state' and she was very fortunate to avoid 'removal'.

**Lila Brown:** 'Reuniting with family, if only through memory, could be heartbreaking. As tragic as it was, some of those who'd lost family found it more bearable to forget.' (p. 153) Often abused mothers who lose their children become immune to emotion. Lila's rape and later decision to abandon Sissy was something she never recovered from.

**Delores Reed:** Her two girls were taken to a home where she tracked them down and took a job as a servant in order to be close to them. When they were 'removed' again with no warning she took her own life.

**Jimmy Brown:** 'Each time he ran off he was hauled back to the Home, where the beatings became more severe. In the eyes of the institution, Jimmy had to be broken. In his own mind, he'd decided that he couldn't let that happen. The last time Jimmy Brown ran off he'd tried jumping a ride from a passing goods train. He fell under the train and was killed.' (p. 156)

**Wanda Harrison:** 'Odette could see Wanda was desperate to tell her story. It was the way of many Aboriginal people. They kept their silence and their secrets until they found somebody they could confide in.' (p. 198) Wanda was brought up in a home and then to work in a hotel, and tried later desperately to find her people, to no avail.

Choose any one of these stories and discuss how they relate to what you read in other fiction and non-fiction texts [See **Further Reading**].

University of Queensland Press – Book Club Notes

## THE WHITE GIRL

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2. *'For years the Aboriginal people living on the mission were barred from entering town, except on Saturday mornings between eight and noon when they were permitted to shop at the company store in the main street. While crossing the Line remained an offence, technically at least, the law was generally ignored.'* (p. 7) Without the visible barrier of a wall, such lines were still enforceable, and life in missions and Aboriginal communities was strictly controlled by the state (for example, the community of Cherbourg, which was kept separate from neighbouring Murgon in Queensland. Leah Purcell's and Scott Rankin's play *Box the Pony* (1997) was about this division.) Aboriginal lives are still controlled to this day in some areas (for example, via the Northern Territory intervention and in the many remote communities which are still effectively ostracised). Have things improved for Aboriginal people, and in what way?

3. Many people of mixed heritage have been forced to pretend their heritage is other than Aboriginal (for example, Sally Morgan's memoir *My Place* (1987) was about this subject). Sissy has to pose as a 'white girl' with her Aboriginal servant, in order to travel with her grandmother without a travel pass. Odette also learns that she has to deny associations with other Aboriginal people in order to obtain exemption from the Act: *'Gee, he said, 'you people out here, I think time has passed your mob by. This is a certificate of exemption. It means that I can go anywhere I like, when I like. Even across the border. With some rules, of course,' he offered as a cautionary note.'* (p. 158) How damaging is such subterfuge when Aboriginal people are already suffering from feelings of displacement?

4. *'The first children of the mission had been buried in nameless unmarked graves, struck down by previously unknown illnesses – whooping cough, measles and fever.'* (p. 18) This quote isolates two issues – the fact that fatal diseases were introduced and not dealt with adequately, and that deceased inmates weren't treated with respect. How did people like Reverend Holman at the mission in Quarrytown justify their cruelty to those in their care?

5. Aboriginal cultural beliefs were threatened by assimilation policies, but Odette maintains strong beliefs, for example, regarding the importance of birds (p. 33), and the power of the spirits: *'Ghosts are what white people put in storybooks and picture shows. They do it to scare people about the dead. The church does the same. It's about making people afraid. I'm sure they know nothing about the good of a person's spirit and how it comes forward after death.'* (p. 34) Which of Odette's beliefs did you find most powerful?

6. The Mabo case identified that recognition of 'ownership' had been denied to Aboriginal people. The novel contains several examples of colonial appropriation of Aboriginal property, for example, in the naming of places such as Dean and Quarrytown, rather than in Indigenous terminology. Property can also be intellectual, and the woman who owns a gift shop in Gatlin (pp. 37–38) in purchasing Odette's 'native' artwork on cards, presents another form of exploitation, since Odette's work is not attributed to her. What other examples of misuse of Aboriginal property did you observe in this novel?

University of Queensland Press – Book Club Notes

## THE WHITE GIRL

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7. *‘Although it had been raining heavily for more than a week, the river, or what was left of it, could no longer quench its own thirst. Over the years its life-force had been stolen by farmers irrigating upstream, their phantom pipelines and open channels criss-crossing the land with little more than a nod and handout to the corrupt politicians who benefited from the theft. After so much neglect, there was little left of the river to give.’* (p 5) This novel is largely set in 1960, so this description is salutary given current concerns about water usage and climate change in Australia. Have we been wilfully blind to the gradual deterioration of our waterways due to human intervention?

8. *‘The offer to head the Deane Police Station, with the responsibility of managing its citizens, had been an attractive one. In his new role he was simultaneously appointed as Guardian to the Aboriginal population of the district. He found the title both enticing and apt. In the years immediately after the war he’d been posted to occupied Europe, serving with the military police. Lowe had dealt with people in situations of great desperation and enjoyed the power he had over those he was responsible for. A person could live or die as an outcome of his actions.’* (p. 25) How often do people such as Lowe gravitate to positions of power in order to demonstrate the sort of petty megalomania, which he does in this novel? (Compare, for example, the controversy over Sergeant Chris Hurley’s role in the 2004 death in custody of Aboriginal man, Cameron Doomadgee, on Palm Island.)

9. *‘Without citizenship, Odette could not open an independent bank account.’* (pp. 37–38) She was also subject to invasive record keeping done by the authorities, who kept copious files (p. 114 and p. 238). The campaign for Aboriginal rights was gaining momentum in 1960, though, and would lead to events such as the 1965 ‘Freedom Ride’ and the 1967 Referendum. But as this novel makes clear, the authorities were keen to quell such insubordination: *‘They’re bringing in these new police all over the state.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Because some of them working for the government don’t like our people speaking up, calling for citizens’ rights. This isn’t the talk they want to hear. I heard they’ve been hand-picked, and I reckon this new copper is one of them. They want to keep us in our place.’* (p. 60) What did you learn about the background to this campaign from reading this novel?

10. In the novel’s final scene, set in 1980, Sissy returns Odette’s ashes to her country. This is both a literal journey and a symbolic one, for ‘country’ is what Aboriginal people hold closest to their hearts. Odette had been forced to make a terrible decision in order to protect her granddaughter – to live apart from that country and from the burial sites of her people. Is this final journey likely to have appeased Odette’s troubled spirit?

University of Queensland Press – Book Club Notes

## THE WHITE GIRL

by TONY BIRCH

### FURTHER READING

#### Fiction

- Behrendt, Larissa *Home* UQP, 2004.
- Behrendt, Larissa *Legacy* UQP, 2009.
- Coleman, Dylan *Mazin Grace* UQP, 2012.
- Hegarty, Ruth *Is That You, Ruthie?* UQP, 1999.
- Lawson, Sue *Freedom Ride* Black Dog Books, 2015 (YA fiction)
- Lowe, Robert *The Mish* UQP, 2002.
- Morgan, Sally *Sister Girl* Fremantle Press, 2015. (YA fiction)
- Winch, Tara *Swallow the Air* UQP, 2006.

#### Non-Fiction

- Haebich, Anna *The Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800–2000* Fremantle Press, 2000.
- Kidd, Rosalind *The Way We Civilise: Aboriginal Affairs the Untold Story* UQP, 1997.
- Morgan, Sally *My Place* Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987.
- Pilkington, Doris *Follow the Rabbit-proof Fence* UQP, 1996.

#### Plays

- Purcell, Leah and Rankin, Scott *Box the Pony* Hodder, 1997.
- Harrison, Jane *Stolen* Currency Press, 1998.

#### Websites

'Apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples' AIATSIS

<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/apology-australias-indigenous-peoples>

*Australian Together: The Stolen Generations*

<https://australianstogether.org.au/discover/australian-history/stolen-generations>

University of Queensland Press – Book Club Notes

## THE WHITE GIRL

by TONY BIRCH

*Bringing Them Home: Stories of the Stolen Generations*

<https://bth.humanrights.gov.au/>

‘Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence: Essay by Larissa Behrendt’ *Reading Australia*

<https://readingaustralia.com.au/essays/follow-the-rabbit-proof-fence/>

‘Freedom Ride, 1965: Collaborating for Indigenous Rights’ *National Museum of Australia*

[https://indigenoustrights.net.au/civil\\_rights/freedom\\_ride\\_1965](https://indigenoustrights.net.au/civil_rights/freedom_ride_1965)

‘Mabo Case’ *AIATSIS*

<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/mabo-case>

‘Stolen Generations’ *AIATSIS*

<https://aiatsis.gov.au/research/finding-your-family/before-you-start/stolen-generations>

*Stolen Generations’ Testimonies*

<http://www.stolengenerationstestimonies.com/>

‘The 1967 Referendum – Fact sheet 150’ *National Archives of Australia*

<http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/fact-sheets/fs150.aspx>

‘The Stolen Generations’ *RacismNoWay*

<https://www.racismnoway.com.au/teaching-resources/factsheets/the-stolen-generations/>

‘2004 Palm Island death in custody’ *Wikipedia*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004\\_Palm\\_Island\\_death\\_in\\_custody](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004_Palm_Island_death_in_custody)

### Films

*Beneath Clouds* Directed by Ivan Sen. Produced by the New South Wales Film Commission and the Australian Film Finance Corporation. 2002.

*Rabbit-Proof Fence* Directed by Phillip Noyce. Produced by Rumbalara Films, Olsen Levy and Showtime Australia. **2002.**