NORTHERN BEACHES

BOOK CLUB

KIM SCOTT

REGIONAL WINNER 2011 COMMONWEALTH WRITERS’ PRIZE
SHORTLISTED MILES FRANKLIN LITERARY AWARD 2011
SHORTLISTED INDIE BOOK AWARD 2011

THAT DEADMAN DANCE

‘An outstanding writer who makes the Australian novel speak in ways it hasn’t spoken before.’
THE AUSTRALIAN

PICADOR

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That Deadman Dance
Kim Scott
Fiction
400 Pages; pub 2010

Big-hearted, moving and richly rewarding, THAT DEADMAN DANCE is set in the first decades of the 19th century in the area around what is now Albany, Western Australia. In playful, musical prose, the book explores the early contact between the Aboriginal Noongar people and the first European settlers. The novel's hero is a young Noongar man named Bobby Wabalanginy. Clever, resourceful and eager to please, Bobby befriends the new arrivals, joining them hunting whales, tilling the land, exploring the hinterland and establishing the fledgling colony. He is even welcomed into a prosperous local white family where he falls for the daughter, Christine, a beautiful young woman who sees no harm in a liaison with a native. But slowly - by design and by accident - things begin to change. Not everyone is happy with how the colony is developing. Stock mysteriously start to disappear; crops are destroyed; there are "accidents" and injuries on both sides. As the Europeans impose ever stricter rules and regulations in order to keep the peace, Bobby's Elders decide they must respond in kind. A friend to everyone, Bobby is forced to take sides: he must choose between the old world and the new, his ancestors and his new friends. Inexorably, he is drawn into a series of events that will forever change not just the colony but the future of Australia...

REVIEWS

Publishers Weekly
Australian novelist Scott's (Benang) complex Commonwealth-winning (South East Asia/Pacific Region) third novel begins in 1833 with Bobby Wabalanginy, part of the Aboriginal Noongar people, befriending early white English settlers who've arrived in southern Australia to establish the port of King George Town. Among his white associates are the military surgeon Dr. Joseph Cross, the merchant Geordie Chaine, and Chaine's young daughter, Christine, who Bobby perhaps likes too much. Characterized by Dr. Cross as "animated and theatrical," Bobby maintains an upbeat attitude that will serve him well once race relations sour. Until he dies, Cross is a mentor to Bobby, and then the Chaines fill the position. Short, titled chapters group into four parts demarcated by sweeps of nonlinear time, from two years to four. Always piquant and lyrical, with some Aboriginal dialect words translated and some not, Scott is at his most picturesque when Bobby assists the whalers, bringing boom times to "blackfellas" and "whitefellas" alike. The historical interaction between these two cultures in a changing 19th-century Australia is given full play in Scott's ambitious, elegiac storytelling (the author's mother is white and his father Aboriginal).
That Deadman Dance
Kim Scott

DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. ‘Menak had seen ships come and go since he was a child, had seen his father dance with the very earliest visitors. Not that he really remembered the incident, more the dance and song that lived on.’ (p 12) Such a description challenges the view that Captain James Cook ‘discovered’ Australia on the Endeavour in 1770. It seems that Aboriginal people had been observing new arrivals and making them part of their own cultural history for a long time prior to that. Discuss.

2. Aboriginal adoption of and re-invention of introduced languages is covered in Penny van Toorn’s Writing Never Appears Naked: Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia (Canberra, ACT, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2000) which you may choose to read as background. The loss of so many Aboriginal languages is complicated by the way in which they also appropriated and re-invented the English language to suit their own communication purposes. Bobby’s inventiveness in creating ‘songs’ and dance in a mixture of English and Noongar language, is a stunning example of this practice. Discuss.

3. The history of many places in Australia includes an early period of reliance on Aboriginal people’s knowledge and then a rejection of their claims to ownership of the places gradually ‘settled’ by white people. Those interested in understanding more about the Noongar people (as background to this novel) might visit the website of the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council http://www.noongar.org.au/ or to read Tiffany Shellam’s Shaking Hands on the Fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal World at King George’s Sound (University of Western Australia Press, Crawley, 2009) which offers insights into the history of colonial contact with local inhabitants in this region, or John Mulvaney & Neville Green’s Commandant of Solitude: the Journals of Captain Collet Barker 1828-1831 (MUP, Melbourne, 1992) which is a first person account of such encounters.

4. The whaling industry is said to be Australia’s oldest industry, and finally ceased in Albany WA in 1978. The contribution made by Noongar people to the early whaling industry is often underestimated (as is Aboriginal contribution to the cattle industry elsewhere). Read more about the industry (perhaps referring to texts listed in Kim Scott’s Author’s Note) and discuss your findings.

5. ‘Firelight reflected in a whale’s eye; himself dissolving there. Be the whale.’ (p 245) or ‘He’d come from the ocean that same way, and been borne by the wind like a bird. Now he was earth and stone.’ (p 178) What do Bobby’s words mean?
DISCUSSION STARTERS (CONTINUED)

6. Chaine, Killam and Skelly each gradually improve their prospects in the settlement. This was typical of such early colonies, where a hierarchy of power was maneuvered which often placed the formerly desperate, criminal or impoverished in positions superior to the original inhabitants, in an extremely unequal balance of power. Discuss.

7. Environmental degradation is another topic suggested by the novel. What did Aboriginal people do to cultivate the land for food?

8. Influenza pandemics are said to have reduced the Noongar population from 6500 in 1851 to around 1500 people in SW Western Australia in the mid-1860s. Discuss in relation to other such incidences throughout Australia.

9. ‘Bobby sang, and it happened just as in the song: the boats left the shore and home receded, but the singer was on the boat, not on the shore like in the old songs, not on a hill and watching others leave, not scanning the seascape for a first or last sight of whale spout or tilting sail. Singing, Bobby thought of the marks he’d made when he was on lookout: his pen on paper, his chalk on slate, his roze a wail and the like, but there was no getting those marks into song, though sometimes he wrote letters in the sand, to show whaling men he knew their schooling and way of being civilised, too.’ (p 317) This is a gloriously complex passage about the interplay between oral and written languages which exist in Bobby’s head. It explains how he is both ‘inside’ the song and yet ‘outside’ it as well. Discuss.

10. ‘Bobby wrote and made it happen again and again in seasons to come, starting just here, now.’ (p 5) Having read the novel, read the Prologue again. Bobby is writing in his shelter and watching for whales when Kongk Chaine joins him. How does this scene relate to the rest of the novel?

11. There is a magnificent lament to the passing of Wunyeran and of the many other spirits who died: ‘His footprints disappeared ... The lapping and chuckling ocean ripples.’ (p 134) Read this passage and discuss what it conveys to you.

12. ‘Bobby wondered if he could explain what his people were saying. Could he? Sheltered like an insect among the fallen bodies of ancestors, he huddled in the eye sockets of a mountainous skull and became part of its vision, was one of its thoughts. Moving across the body, journeying with the old people, he drank from some transformed, still-bleeding wound.’ (p 52) The novel ends with the moment when Bobby has told his story and is confronted by the mute crowd of people gathered together in Chaine’s new house. He has delivered an eloquent defence of his people’s qualities and beliefs. Was there ever any hope that his words would be heard?