A STUDY GUIDE BY MARGUERITE O’HARA

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William Thornhill is driven by an oppressed, impoverished past and a desperate need to provide a safe home for his beloved family in a strange, foreboding land. The Secret River is an epic tragedy in which a good man is compelled by desperation, fear, ambition and love for his family to participate in a crime against humanity. It allows an audience, two hundred years later, to have a personal insight into the troubled heart of this nation’s foundation story.

There are two eighty minute episodes that tell the story of one of the ultimately tragic wars between colonists and the country’s original inhabitants. The ongoing effects resulting from these early conflicts over land still resonate today, more than 200 years on from this story. Who owns the land and who has the right to use it, develop it and protect it?

A brief preview of the series can be viewed at: http://abc.net.au/tv/programs/secret-river/

Advice to teachers

Both the novel and this miniseries contain some quite graphic scenes of violence, including a depiction of a flogging and scenes of the violence inflicted on people during the conflict between the settlers and the Aboriginals. Teachers are advised to preview the material (particularly Episode 2) before showing it to middle school students, even though it might seem to fit well into middle school Australian History. The mini-series is challenging viewing in that it is an authentic presentation of sometimes difficult issues, and part 2 in particular has some scenes of violence (including sexual violence). The characters also use language that would have been common amongst the lower classes in Britain at the time.

See, they reckon all this belongs to them. And every man jack of ‘em shares it. Give and take. It’s just their way. Then we come along, and we just take it ... if we’re not gonna give, then they’re going to take it back
- Thomas Blackwood

1. INTRODUCTION

The Secret River is a miniseries based on Kate Grenville’s meticulously researched, Booker-nominated bestselling novel of the same title. The Secret River tells the deeply personal story of William and Sal Thornhill, early convict colonists in New South Wales. The Secret River dramatises the British colonisation of Australia in microcosm, with the dispossession of Indigenous Australians made comprehensible and ultimately heart-breaking as William Thornhill’s claim over a piece of land he titles ‘Thornhill’s Point’ on the beautiful and remote Hawkesbury River brings his family and neighbours into a fight for survival with the traditional custodians of the land they have settled on.
The novel from which this series is adapted has been set as a text for study in many schools throughout Australia, mostly at senior levels, as well as in tertiary institutions. It continues to be a popular novel for reading and discussion in book groups. The Secret River has been continuously in print since it was first released in 2005. It is available in numerous formats, including as an audio book and an eBook.

For senior secondary and tertiary students of Australian History and Literature, the series has a lot to offer, providing a picture of what society may have been like in the early days of white settlement, and some of the bloody conflicts which arose between the settlers and the Aboriginal population on the Australian mainland. Experts estimate the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders at 700,000 at the time of first British settlement in 1788. It fell to its low of around 93,000 people in 1900, a decrease of almost 87%. Source: http://creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/people/aboriginal-population-in-australia#. Source: The combination of introduced diseases, loss of land and direct violence is believed to have reduced the Aboriginal population in this dramatic way. Many massacres are well documented.

The novel generated a lot of critical debate when it was first published about the rights and responsibilities of novelists working in the genre of historical fiction. In deciding to imaginatively re-create what life may have been like for the early settlers based on a range of records, some historians and critics questioned Grenville’s approach. Some of the questions asked were, ‘How can we ever know how people thought and behaved in the past, when the evidence is drawn mostly from official records and a few letters and personal accounts? Can we ever hope to understand the contextual complexities of another time, place and people?’

However, it is worth considering that when we read novels set in different cultures and at different times, we can often empathise with the characters, despite never having experienced their lives and the choices open to them. Were these early white settlers so different to us in their expectations and attitudes and behaviours that it is impossible for us to imagine how they thought and behaved?

In 2005 Kate Grenville said, I’m not a person who likes conflict or public debate, but I feel very passionately that this book is probably as close as we are going to get to what it was actually like. This is a story that absolutely needs to be told. We are ready for it, perhaps for the first time.

The details of the extent and nature of the racial conflicts between early white settlers and Aboriginal Australians are still strongly contested by historians. Others maintain that we in the 2000s can not accurately re-imagine the attitudes, behaviours and lives of people who first came to Australia, often as convicts, dirt poor, uneducated, untravelled and unaware of anything much outside the lives they led in Britain. They were the lowest members of a class bound society, reviled by all and with little opportunity to change their status.

Grenville has always said that The Secret River is a work of fiction inspired by real events and people. It is dedicated to ‘the Aboriginal people of Australia, past, present and future’. Grenville said she wanted to base the novel at every point on whatever historical veracity I could find. She explains on her website that she did an enormous amount of research. This book isn’t history, but it’s solidly based on history. Most of the events in this book ‘really happened’ and much of the dialogue is what people really said or wrote.

See http://kategrenville.com/The_Secret_River for further information from Grenville about her sense of the importance of historical fiction.

*As Grenville does in her novel with direct speech, I have italicised her words in this guide when she is speaking about how she worked.

For students watching this miniseries as part of a study of early colonial life in Australia, they need to be able to imaginatively enter into ‘another country’ where people did things differently, a place that was not filled with buildings and services, roads and hospitals. They need to consider the isolation, the lack of any modern technologies such as electricity, telephones, radios, vehicles only powered by manpower, animals like snakes and kangaroos, totally new and alien to these people who were mostly from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

There will be, for some students of literature and media, an interest in evaluating the success of the adaptation of the novel to the small screen. What is gained, what is lost and to what degree will a miniseries such as this increase the public interest in Australian history? How might it show us a landscape and lives lived in the past? Can it recreate an authentic looking and sounding place in the early 1800s where settlers had to establish themselves?
About Kate Grenville’s 2005 novel, *The Secret River*

The novel from which this miniseries has been adapted was published to widespread acclaim. It was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and The Miles Franklin Award in 2006 and, amongst other awards, won the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize, the NSW Premier’s Literary Award and The Literary Fiction Book of the Year in 2006.

*The Secret River* has been widely set as a text for study in many schools since 2005. *The Lieutenant*, Kate Grenville’s novel published in 2008, the second of her books exploring the contact between white settlers and Indigenous Australians, is currently set for study in the 2015 VCE English Context study ‘Encountering Conflict’. The third of these ‘colonial’ novels, *Sarah Thornhill*, was published in 2011 and is about the youngest daughter of Will and Sal Thornhill of *The Secret River*.

In several Australian states, *The Secret River* is a recommended text in Senior English studies. Part of the novel’s continuing popularity may be because it is a really powerful love story as well as an historical novel whose concerns about land ownership and the ongoing results of colonisation remain relevant today. Grenville’s evocations of the landscape are wonderfully rich and vivid.

Grenville followed up *The Secret River* with a non-fiction book titled *Searching for the Secret River* in which she describes both the research she undertook into the history behind the book and her writing process. She chronicles how she changed from her original plan of writing a non-fiction book about her great-great-great-grandfather, Solomon Wiseman, to writing a fictional work. This is a fascinating companion piece to the novel, allowing us to see where Grenville has taken historical information from, and how she has used it to create a dramatic story.

*The Secret River* has also been adapted for the stage by Andrew Bovell and performed by the Sydney Theatre Company in 2013. Interestingly, Trevor Jamieson who plays Greybeard and Rory Potter who plays young Willie Thornhill in this miniseries played the roles of Greybeard and Dickie in the 2013 stage production.


The miniseries has been adapted for television by Jan Sardi and Mac Gudgeon. With a novel of the length and complexity of *The Secret River* it is not possible to completely cover everything that happens in the novel in a two part miniseries; for instance, the first section of the novel re-creates Sal and Will’s life in London before they came to Australia. However, the television drama begins when the young Thornhill family has arrived at Sydney Cove, Will as a transported convict and Sal as a free settler with their two sons, the youngest born on the 12 month voyage out.
The secret river of the title is the Hawkesbury River, located to the west and north of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. It was first explored by white settlers in 1789 and named by Governor Arthur Phillip just a year after the First Fleet arrived in Botany Bay with its cargo of convicts.

The names and details on maps are increasingly contested by some people. Whose map and place names are being used and for what purpose? To what extent do maps imply ownership? European style maps of the Hawkesbury convey some sense of the geography of the region, of the surrounding terrain and the distance of the settlements from Sydney. If you enter ‘maps of the Hawkesbury River’ into a search engine you will be presented with a number of different styles of maps, each with a specific purpose such as tourism, boating, fishing, terrain, walking tracks, main roads, oyster farms, points of natural beauty etc. For Aboriginal maps of the Hawkesbury area, see: http://historyofaboriginalsydney.edu.au/west/1800s. Many of the place names in the region are of British origin such as ‘Wiseman’s Ferry’, the name of Grenville’s family member Solomon Wiseman who settled in the region in the 1800s. However, the national parks encircling this town have names that suggest the rich Indigenous heritage of the region – Dharug to the north and east, Yengo to the northwest, Cattai to the west, and Marramarra to the south.

It now takes approximately one hour to drive up the Pacific Highway from Sydney to the Hawkesbury River region, but in the early 1800s it would have been a much longer and more difficult journey, part of which involved navigating up or down the coast of NSW between the Hawkesbury River settlements and the main settlement of Sydney Cove.

The land adjacent to the Hawkesbury River was occupied for many thousands of years by the Darkinjung, Dharug, Eora, and Kuringgai Aboriginal peoples. They used the river as an important source of food and a place for trade.

The Aboriginal name for the river was published as Deerubun in 1870. The two main Aboriginal tribes inhabiting the area were the Wannungine of the coastal area on the lower reaches (below Mangrove Creek) and the Darkinung people, whose lands were extensive on the lower Hawkesbury to Mangrove Creek, upper Hawkesbury, inland Hunter and lower Blue Mountains.

The Dharug tribe are the traditional custodians of the land on the south bank of the Hawkesbury River. The river, known to the Dharug as Deerubun, and its nearby lagoons were a focal point for bands, clans or family groups to collect food such as fish, eels, shellfish and water birds. Yams and other plants growing on the fertile riverbanks

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<th>KEY CAST</th>
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<td>Will Thornhill</td>
<td>Oliver Jackson-Cohen</td>
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<td>Sal Thornhill</td>
<td>Sarah Snook</td>
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<tr>
<td>Willie (13 years)</td>
<td>Rory Potter</td>
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<td>Dickie (7 years)</td>
<td>Finn Scicluna-O’Prey</td>
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<td>Thomas Blackwood</td>
<td>Lachy Hulme</td>
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<td>Smasher Sullivan</td>
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<td>Sagitty</td>
<td>Samuel Johnson</td>
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<td>Greybeard</td>
<td>Trevor Jamieson</td>
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<td>Long Bob</td>
<td>Angus Pilakui</td>
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<td>Mrs Herring</td>
<td>Genevieve Lemon</td>
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<td>Dan</td>
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<td>Dom Phelan</td>
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<td>Alexander King</td>
<td>Huw Higginson</td>
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<td>Lord Loveday</td>
<td>Rhys Muldoon</td>
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<td>Dickie (24 years)</td>
<td>Thomas Blackburne</td>
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were gathered depending on the season. The surrounding bushlands were places where the Dharug hunted and trapped animals. The area has a rich culture and heritage associated with it.

In 1789 two expeditions explored the Hawkesbury to the northwest of Sydney and the Nepean River to the southwest. The Hawkesbury River was named by Governor Phillip in June 1789, after Charles Jenkinson, 1st Earl of Liverpool, who at that time was titled Baron Hawkesbury.

The Hawkesbury River was one of the major transportation routes for transporting food grown in the local area to Sydney during the 1800s. Boats would wait in the protection of Broken Bay and Pittwater, until favourable weather allowed them to make the ocean journey to Sydney Heads.

The Hawkesbury was crucial to the survival of the British colony in New South Wales. In the early 1800s, with the settlement at Sydney Cove struggling to feed an ever-growing number of convicts, soldiers and freehold landowners, the Hawkesbury became the colony’s breadbasket and there was work for boatmen like Thomas Blackwood and Will Thornhill transporting produce and building materials to and from Sydney on barges.

But the clearing of land for agriculture came at a cost - and that cost was largely borne by the Dharug people, many of whom died at the hands of white settlers. Most of those who survived the British invasion were forcibly displaced. Free settlers and emancipated convicts took up the land and cleared and fenced it for agriculture.
4. SUGGESTED APPROACHES TO TEACHING THE SECRET RIVER MINISERIES

There are several different areas for discussion teachers could use as ways of exploring this miniseries with students, using the sets of questions in this guide. Not all sets of questions will be suitable for all students. For some, Sets A and B on Themes and Characters may be enough, while other students may like to explore the questions about the adaptation process and making literature from history. One hundred and seventy+ minutes is rather a daunting amount of viewing time so it may work best to screen the program in two time blocks of 85 minutes, discussing the material presented in Part 1 before moving on to the powerful intensity of Part 2.

A Exploring themes
Themes explored in this two - part miniseries include:
1 Colonial settlement of Australia
2 Class and race
3 Conflict with the original Aboriginal inhabitants
4 A sense of belonging, dispossession and land rights

B Exploring characters
C The adaptation process
D Making literature from history

After watching Episode 1 and reading through the synopsis provided in this guide, students could begin to respond to the questions about two of the themes explored in the series;
1 Colonial Settlement of Australia and
2 Class and Race

They could also begin to fill out their impressions of the various characters introduced in this first episode using Table 2.

It is probably best to leave discussion of the questions about C. The adaptation process and D. Making literature from history until after students have watched the second episode. They will make more sense to students after they have watched both parts of the miniseries.
Synopsis – Episode 1

In 1803 Will Thornhill - Thames waterman turned convict - begins his life sentence in the penal colony of New South Wales. Assigned to his wife Sal, he obtains a job working as an oarsman on Sydney Harbour. Sal establishes a rum stall, eking out a living selling what is the only true currency of the colony.

About six years later Will is pardoned. As ‘emancipists’, he and Sal can now ply their trade freely and work towards the return to London, which Sal in particular hankers for.

Opportunity comes knocking in the form of Thomas Blackwood, an ex-convict himself. Recognising Thornhill’s skills as a boatman, he tempts him with the idea of using those skills to ‘make his pile’ running a transport boat on the Hawkesbury River up north of the settlement of Sydney. The idea captivates Thornhill.

Will accompanies Blackwood on his regular run up the Hawkesbury, where the wild beauty of the landscape enchants him. It’s not just the freedom he feels but the sense that this is a place where a man like him, so used to life on the bottom rung of the social ladder, could be master of his own fate. When he sees an untouched point of land jutting out into the river ‘like a man’s thumb’, seemingly there for the taking, he knows what he wants for his future. He fears a return to London will only subject him once again to the ‘convict stain’ of his impoverished past. Convincing Sal that the wilderness of New South Wales holds more promise than London is not easy but Will persuades her to put her dream on hold and the family sails north to ‘take up land’ on the Hawkesbury River.

Isolated in her new home, Sal is only too aware of the dangers that confront them, especially amidst talk and newspaper reports of ‘outrages and depredations’ on settlers by the ‘blacks’. She has agreed to give Will five years to make their pile, but immediately begins counting down the days in notches on a tree stump.

While the family sets about making their new life in true pioneering fashion, clearing, planting and building a small hut, it soon becomes apparent that owning this land, which Will has now named ‘Thornhill’s Point’, is not as easy as he first thought. His attempts to cajole the local Aboriginals into moving on are awkward. There is a simmering hostility between Will and Gumang (Greybeard), the elder of the clan. It’s clear they do not understand each other.

He can’t quite understand Blackwood’s ‘give and take’ philosophy of living side by side with the Aboriginais But, he is just as uncomfortable with the racist bitterness of other neighbours along the river, like the malevolent Smasher Sullivan. He nevertheless wishes they would go away, but the Aboriginais hover at the edge of the Thornhill’s camp, and of Will’s unsettled consciousness.

When Sal develops a life-threatening fever, the fragility of this small family in a vast wilderness is all the more apparent and Will prays desperately for her recovery. But as soon as she does recover, he redoubles his efforts to stay on ‘his’ land, make it prosperous, and to convince Sal that this, and not London, is their true home. Episode 1 concludes with Will leaving his family on a trading trip to Sydney, charging 12 year old Willie with protecting his mother and two younger siblings. Just beyond their camp is a vast and mysterious landscape, and the unknown intentions of both their black and white neighbours.
5. STUDENT ACTIVITIES

A. Exploring Themes

Themes introduced in Episode 1

**Theme 1 – Colonial Settlement**

What did the first white settlers bring with them to Australia? Beside each of the headings in Table 1 (on page 10), write down what you think these early arrivals brought with them, many of which are shown in *The Secret River*.

**Theme 2 – Class and Race**

*London’s foreign as a fish Sal... I won’t be dragging my stinking past round like some dead dog. No, I won’t – Will Thornhill*

- What was the background of many of the earliest settlers who came to NSW on the first and subsequent fleets?
- What does the setting up of a penal colony in far away New South Wales suggest about the British Government’s belief in their own right to populate distant lands with their criminals?
- In what ways were Indigenous peoples of Australia and in many other parts of the world regarded as an impediment to the extension of empires?
- How educated would many of these early arrivals have been – convicts, their jailers and the military? Would many of them have been able to read and write?
- What are some of the words and terms Will and other white settlers use to talk about the Aboriginal people? How do these words suggest they are regarded as less than human?
- Can we assume anything from what we see in this episode about how the Aboriginal people regarded the white settlers?
- Which of the people in the story seem to be prepared to take a less hostile and more practical approach to living with others?
- What advice does Blackwood give to Will Thornhill about ‘taking up’ or ‘taking’ land on which the Aboriginal people live?
- How does Will’s desire to be free of ‘the convict stain’ influence his longing to make a new life in a new land? How does his convict past continue to haunt him and affect his treatment of the convict servants assigned to him?
- In what ways does the desire to ‘be someone’ affect how Sal adapts to life in NSW?
- How are the indignities heaped on people on the ‘lower rungs of the ladder’ in class based societies shown to leave lasting bitterness and even rage?
- How does the desire for land ownership, fenced and titled, continue to be apparent in Australia today?
- Does this story suggest why people develop and hold views about racial superiority and inferiority?

B. Exploring Characters

Some characters are loosely based on historical figures and some of their dialogue is taken from their own mouths – Kate Grenville

*The Secret River* is a character driven narrative. It is about a man and a woman and their love for each other and their
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<td>1</td>
<td>What were their backgrounds? Where were they from? What skills did they bring?</td>
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<td>What were their probable beliefs about themselves and their place in the world</td>
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<td>Religious beliefs and practices</td>
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desire for their children to have a better life. It is also about others whose character and decisions are different to those of the central protagonists. It is about people trying to improve their lot in life and about how their ambitions conflict with another group of people – the Aboriginals who have been living on the land for thousands of years before the arrival of the white man.

While Will Thornhill is not a first person narrator in the usual sense of that term, the story is, in most respects, Thornhill's. It is basically his and to some extent Sal's understanding of the world that we are given. One way in which characters reveal themselves is through speech – what they say and how they speak. For instance, when he is advising Will how best to secure a pardon, Thomas Blackwood says – *for a quart he'll send a letter up the line vouching your good character and citing your service to church and community. Gammon what would discharge the devil himself.* The voice and attitudes of many of the characters are revealed through the way they speak and can sometimes take a bit of working out. In the novel, people’s speech is printed in italics. Other ways we understand and assess people is through their actions and how they relate to other people.

Make brief notes about your impressions of each member of the Thornhill family and other main characters as they are depicted in this miniseries. After watching Episode 2 you may need to return to this table and add to it in the light of what we see in Episode 2.

If you have also read Kate Grenville’s novel, indicate in column 3 how well you think the actors playing these roles in the television series represented the people we meet in the novel. In what ways does a concern for veracity between text and miniseries matter to many viewers? How can one form enrich the other? See Table 2 on page 12.

Because the Aboriginal characters in this series do not speak in a language that we can understand, it is more difficult to attribute individual characteristics to them as individuals.

Long Bob, alone at the end of the series says, ‘my place’ to Will in a poignant echo of how the other Aboriginals mimicked Will’s assertions of land ownership earlier.

Several of the Aboriginal characters are central to the story in different ways – Thomas Blackwood’s partner is an Indigenous woman, young Dickie Thornhill develops a friendship with Bunda, an Aboriginal boy and the group he is part of, Mrs Herring gets advice from some of the Aboriginal women when treating Sal’s illness and Will’s encounters with Gumang/Greybeard leave an audience in no doubt about his place in the Hawkesbury world. Generally these characters are presented as tolerant, dignified and able to laugh at situations that seem absurd.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>CHARACTER</th>
<th>IMPRESSIONS</th>
<th>SIMILARITY TO DESCRIPTION IN NOVEL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Will Thornhill</td>
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<td>Sal Thornhill</td>
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<td>Willie Thornhill</td>
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<td>Dickie Thornhill</td>
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<td>Thomas Blackwood</td>
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<td>Smasher Sullivan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs Herring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greybeard – the leader of</td>
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<td>the Aboriginal group</td>
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<td>Sagitty</td>
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Synopsis – Episode 2

While Will is away in Sydney, Sal and the children survive a scare with a snake, and encounter an Aboriginal family who set up camp on the other side of the point. This concerns Will on his return, but Sal assures him everything is OK, ‘They’re just like us’.

Soon Will’s six-year-old son Dickie befriends a local Aboriginal boy.

When Will has two convicts assigned to him as labourers, any nagging doubts he may have had about his new life soon give way to feelings of superiority and belonging. For the first time in his life, there is someone under him. Sal doesn’t mind being called ‘Mrs Thornhill’ either. For her it’s a novelty, but for Will being called ‘Mr Thornhill’ represents much more – final proof that he is now a gentleman, and has risen above the ‘convict stain’.

Now more Aboriginals begin to arrive and set up camp along the riverbank nearby. They seem to ignore the Thornhill family, but Will cannot ignore them. He marches into their camp and confronts the tribal leader Greybeard with his claim to own all the land on ‘Thornhill’s Point’. The Aboriginals do not understand what Will is saying.

Will sails up a remote branch of the river to seek the advice of the reclusive Thomas Blackwood. ‘Give a little if you take a little,’ says Blackwood.

Will returns home to see scores more Aboriginals arriving on ‘his’ point of land, by canoe, and on foot. Something is going on. Will is overcome with fear of losing his hard-won property.

That night, the bush comes alive with the sound of chanting. It builds to a crescendo as Will and his family cower in their hut. Will creeps over to the camp to witness what he finds both the terrifying and enthralling spectacle of a corroboree. Yet in the morning, all is deathly quiet as many of the Aboriginals disperse. An uneasy peace settles over Thornhill’s Point.

Two longboats full of redcoats (soldiers) ominously pass through Thornhill’s Point on their way to a ‘disturbance’ upriver. Following the Governor’s proclamation that farmers and settlers are entitled to defend their families, a warrant is issued against the ‘native raiders’. Blackwood passes on to Will what he has heard – that the Aboriginals, fed up with the insensitivity of the settlers, are now determined to ‘drive the snake out of the hole’.

Suddenly, Thornhill himself is under attack. A group of warriors raid his cornfield. His neighbours, the Webbs, are burned out. Smasher Sullivan and other hardliners urge swift retaliation. At a nearby Aboriginal camp, Will makes the gruesome discovery of a whole Aboriginal family poisoned by rat powder. But his compassion for the native victims is soon overwhelmed by rage when a raiding party led by Greybeard sets his own cornfield alight.

Sal’s only concern now is for the safety of her young children. She wants to get out while they still can; she is going to pack so they can leave. But Will refuses. He will not be defeated by this intimidation.

Their impasse is interrupted by the arrival of Smasher, pleading for Thornhill’s help. Another neighbour, Sagitty, has been speared and they are in need of Thornhill’s boat to row him upriver to the physician. On the way, Sagitty dies, and Smasher urges the group of terrified, angry locals, to exact revenge. But they can only do so if Thornhill is prepared to transport them in his boat. ‘Get rid of the blacks, and she’ll stay,’ urges one of his convict servants…

And thus Will Thornhill finds himself drawn along by a tide of brutal events. Under pressure from his friends and neighbours, he participates in the massacre of his Aboriginal neighbours. Afterwards, he cannot admit to Sal what he has done, and he never speaks of this atrocity again.

Years later, even though he has achieved all he wanted, with a grand homestead on Thornhill’s Point and untold wealth as a colonial gentleman, William Thornhill lives life in the dark shadow of unspoken guilt.
In particular he experiences a heart-rending distance from his youngest son, Dickie, who as a young man now refuses to come to the family home, but instead lives with the infirm Blackwood and a community of Aboriginals in a camp upriver, a life symbolic of what his father has rejected, but also of the future this new country might one day attain.

Theme 3 – Conflict with the original inhabitants

- Considering the assumptions and backgrounds of the British colonists, in what ways was it likely that they would come into conflict with the original inhabitants, the Aboriginal groups living in the area?
- How did the fundamental differences in their attitudes towards land use and ownership lead to violent conflicts between settlers and Aboriginals? Outline how each group regarded land use and ownership.
- What was likely to be the outcome of any clashes that developed between the two groups? In what ways were the white people’s available resources for subduing and getting rid of the Aboriginals able to offer them an advantage?
- What were some of the more dangerous substances and weapons introduced to the Aboriginal people by the white settlers and used against them by individuals like Smasher Sullivan?
- How did introduced diseases affect the local inhabitants?
- In what ways were natural resources freely available to each of the two groups?
- How were the populations of native animals affected by the arrival of different animals that also arrived on boats?
- In what way did the language barrier compound the problems between the British settlers and the Indigenous Australians?
- How did the children manage to work around this stumbling block to understanding and co-operation?
- Given the fairly obvious presence of people living in Australia when the British arrived, how could the myth of ‘Terra Nullius’ have been maintained and enforced for so long – 200 years?
- Grenville and the filmmakers chose not to put into words or translate or subtitle what the Aboriginal people say during their contact and conflict with the white settlers. Why do you think this decision was made and was it a wise one?
- What are the assumptions about rights made explicit in the proclamation document printed here that the settlers see as giving them the right to take matters into their own hands?

While it is hereby acknowledged that the black population of the colony appears to have manifested a spirit of animosity and hostility towards the British inhabitants, in the Hawkesbury region in particular, the killing of natives is strictly forbidden and will be punished with the utmost severity of the law.

However, on occasion of any native coming armed, or in a hostile manner to property belonging to a British subject, said subject is not required to suffer his property to be invaded or his existence endangered and may pursue and inflict such punishment as the circumstances merit.

Proclamation of the NSW corps.
Theme 4 – A sense of belonging – dispossession and land rights

It’s theirs Will. Always has been. That’s why they come and go. They been doin’ it forever – Sal Thornhill

• In what ways is ‘a sense of belonging’ expressed by Will and Sal Thornhill?
• What are the main differences in each one’s sense of what ‘home’ means?
• How is Will Thornhill in particular concerned to create a sense of belonging and even ownership in the Hawkesbury region? What are some of the factors in his past that make this desire for a place to call ‘home’ so poignant?
• Do any of the Thornhills seem to have much empathetic awareness of the Aboriginal people’s sense of place and belonging, something often referred to today as ‘country’?
• Which other characters in the story show some sense of the need to acknowledge the rights of the original inhabitants?
• How does being dispossessed of your place and land disrupt and even destroy lives?
• Does Will and Sal’s experience as ‘migrants’ in a new land have any parallels in our contemporary experience?
• What are some of the factors in our 20th and 21st century lives that allow us to be more mobile and inclined to move on from our place of birth or family home?
• How long did it take for white Australians to accept that the Indigenous Australians had rights over land that had been progressively taken from them by white settlers as their own?
• Is there evidence that this business of land use and ownership is not fully resolved in Australia today?
C. Understanding the adaptation process

- What skills are needed to adapt a novel or other piece of written work to film or television?
- Why do you think some authors are reluctant to have their stories re-created in a different medium such as film?
- Outline the difference between ‘a faithful’ adaptation of a text and a comprehensive translation to the screen?
- What kind of detail is important to ensure that the story looks authentic in the sense of what it was probably like in this part of the world in the early 1800s? (Consider light and hygiene for a start)
- Who are the members of a film crew essentially responsible for getting the look of the period and place right?
- What can a written text offer that is difficult to replicate in a filmed story?
- What can a filmed version offer an audience that may be more difficult to convey in words alone?
- How do filmmakers directing characters offer viewers complex insights into their characters’ thought processes? How can characters in a ‘naturalistic’ drama reveal their thoughts to an audience?
- How does a novelist provide insights into characters?
- How does a playwright such as Shakespeare or Arthur Miller reveal the internal workings of a person’s thought processes?
- If it is the case that we know about characters through:
  a) What they do (actions and behaviours)
  b) What they say
  c) How others respond to them and regard them and
  d) How they look and present themselves in the world they inhabit...
  What assessments would you make of two of the main characters in this miniseries? E.g. Will and Blackwood, Sal and Smasher Sullivan, Dickie and Mrs Herring?
- And what about the Aboriginal people? How are they represented and what do we learn of their world and how they have responded to the strangers? Have we any business to be imagining how they felt? In choosing generally not to ‘voice’ the Aboriginal characters, Grenville keeps the perspective focussed on the colonists’ viewpoints. And yet, we do get something of the Aboriginal viewpoint in both the novel and the miniseries. Where might such insights come from in how we understand how they responded to the white strangers moving on to their land?

D. Making literature from history

Putting flesh on the bones of history – Kate Grenville

- How do we know about the past?
- What do we know about the past?
- What sort of records would have been available to Kate Grenville about this early period of the 19th century in Australia?
- How can an author imagine and represent the past, especially when official written records are sometimes incomplete and unverified?

Kate Grenville spent 5 years working on this novel and undertook an enormous amount of research to create as clear and accurate a picture as possible of the world of London and the colony of NSW in the late 18th and early part of the 19th century.

On her website at: http://kategrenville.com/The_Secret_River she writes about the challenges of uncovering and
re-creating the past and finding the truths about the nature of the contact between the groups. She says:

*It was all very well to know about my ancestor’s business dealings (great-great-great-grandfather Solomon Wiseman) but what had gone on exactly upon that hundred acres on the Hawkesbury? In those days (about 1810) the river was the very limit of settlement – the frontier. Perhaps he’d been granted the land, or perhaps he’d just selected it and worried about the paperwork later. He’d sailed up the river, he’d pushed the boat in among the mangroves, he’d struggled through them to dry land – and then what?*

How had the local Aboriginal people taken the entry of this man and his family onto their traditional land? What had it been like, that very first day – what had happened when the Aboriginal people came out of the bush towards the Europeans? What had they done, and what did my ancestor do? Had it been friendly (as of course I hoped) or distrustful, even violent?

*My search was frustrating...there was no information that I could find about my relatives relationships with the Dharug people around him, not even a passing reference.*

*This could mean that nothing happened...or that he found a way to co-exist with them.*

*Or it could mean that things happened – but things that it was in no-one’s interest to record.*

*The Secret River* is historical fiction; it is not non-fiction, biography or documentary as it offers an account of people’s lives that is partly drawn from historical records but also where briefly mentioned events are re-imagined and characters and encounters created. Historical records are often used by writers and filmmakers to ensure as far as possible that the world being portrayed in the novel or on screen is believable, that it looks and sounds authentic and believable. Here are some examples:

- War stories are very often the subject of feature films. Think about Peter Weir’s 1981 film *Gallipoli*, starring a young Mel Gibson or *Breaker Morant*, directed by Bruce Beresford in 1980 or *The Water Diviner*, Russell Crowe’s 2015 contribution to this genre. It is said that it is through Weir’s *Gallipoli* that many people have framed their view of the World War 1 Gallipoli campaign. What are some of the common factors shared by these films in the ways they present a dramatic story?
- Shakespeare often used records of family feuds, past wars and battles and political stories to create his plays many years after the historical events. And today, these Shakespearian stories are being re-told in new contexts and times, e.g. *Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear*. How do Shakespeare’s plays still retain such contemporary relevance and interest?
- These films all tell stories from the past through characters and incidents based on historical events but dramatised for the purposes of telling a good story. Why is it that a drama based on an actual event can often be more popular than a documentary film about the same event? In a word, what is it about a story that is so appealing? Do we identify with heroes and their challenges, with people who overcome obstacles? Do we long to know more about many figures from the past who we suspect had similar dreams and aspirations to our own?
- Actor Natasha Wanganeen who plays a small role as Smasher’s sex slave, ‘black velvet’, as he describes her, has said that while she found her part confronting, she did it ‘to honour my ancestors’. In what ways do you think the actors playing the parts of the British settlers might have a sense of honouring their ancestors? To what extent were you able to empathise with Will and Sal Thornhill, or any of the other settlers in the story? What is the difference between empathising and understanding and endorsing?
• Many of the scenes were shot around Lake Tyers in Victoria for reasons the producer explains in the next part of this guide. Several of the scenes of the Thornhills establishing their claim to the land on Thornhill’s Point are reminiscent of the paintings of early Australian artists like Frederick McCubbin of the Heidelberg school and of contemporary Australian artist William Robinson.

How do the filmmakers manage to make the landscapes beautiful, mysterious, menacing and even secretive at the same time?

Characters and Conflict

_They’re just passing through on their way somewhere – Sal_

_It’s no different to shooting a dog – Smasher_

_Now this is the point. Now all of this, that’s mine, right? It’s mine now. You can have all the rest but this is my place now...My place, you understand – Will to Gumang (Greybeard)_

_My Place – Gumang (Greybeard)_

_You won’t never be welcome, but they might just leave you alone. Simple as that – Blackwood_

Events and responses cause changes in how we might see the characters in this series. Returning to the characters in relation to the impressions you recorded earlier in Table 2, respond to the following questions:

• How is Will Thornhill persuaded to go up river to Blackwood’s place by some of the other settlers? What part does fear and desperation play in his becoming entangled in the massacre? How are his attitudes changing and why?
• How is Sal affected by the growing unrest on the Hawkesbury? What is the focus of her concern? Why does she forcefully reject the stated threats and behaviour of Smasher and Sagitty in particular?
• How do the Thornhill sons, Willie and Dickie, react to what is developing between their family and their Aboriginal neighbours?
• In what ways is the real extent of Smasher’s depravity and evil shown in the second episode? Which character represents the decent side of the settlers?
• How can life never be the same now for Will? How is his isolation, despite his material success, shown in the final scenes of the series?
• Is being sorry ever enough or is it important for people who have wronged others to make reparations?
• Why do you think Grenville dedicated her novel to the ‘Aboriginal people of Australia: past, present and future’?
6. THE FILMMAKERS’ VIEWS ABOUT THE CHALLENGES AND HIGHLIGHTS OF MAKING THIS SERIES

Stephen Luby, the film’s producer explains why he thought it was important to make this series into a television drama:

The moment I finished reading the novel, I felt an urgency to find a way to get this story ‘out there’ to as many Australians as possible. I wanted others to experience the insight and empathy that it had evoked in me. An illumination not of historical facts and social issues, but into the profound feelings and pressures faced by all the ‘players’, both Indigenous and white, in the early days of European settlement of this country, and which still echoes amongst us all today.

So much of the debate about black/white relations in this country has been about polarization: not just of colour and race, but of past and present, guilt and national pride, the ‘black arm band view of history’ versus a jingoistic account of the heroism of our pioneers, whether they be convicts, explorers or pastoralists.

But ‘The Secret River’ short-circuited all that and gave an account more profound than any I had yet encountered. This was because it led to an understanding of our past, not judgments about it. And this understanding promoted a willingness to face difficult truths about Australia that I - we - would otherwise shy away from. And it did so because in the characters of Will Thornhill – impoverished cockney, convict, emancipist, and eventually landed squire; and free-settler Sal, his big-hearted pioneer wife, the ‘light’ and ‘dark’ of what we might call the ‘Australian spirit’ were expressed in the particular experience of real people in the context of a real relationship in a real time and place.

How were we to create the world of New South Wales circa 1813? How were we to manage our time and budget so as to achieve the production values required by the story, in the locations required, and still finish on schedule?

But just as important as the question of scale, was the question of how to achieve the emotional truth and ethical ethos of the story. This could only be done at the personal level in moments of intimacy between characters...Casting was thus a major key to authenticity.

The Indigenous cast on this film

In paying tribute to the Indigenous cast in this production, Stephen Luby, the producer has said:

Working with our Indigenous cast, and our Indigenous consultant Richard Green has been a particular honour. The story of the dispossession of their forebears is a painful one, and was sometimes physically and emotionally difficult. But they too felt a responsibility to tell the story. As Natasha Wanganeen, who played a particularly confronting role, (Slasher’s ‘sex slave’) said, ‘This is very difficult, but I am doing it to honour my ancestors.’

During the whole process of casting, pre-production, production, post-production and now in preparation for making our story public, I have come very much to rely on Trevor (Trevor Jamieson who plays the part of Greybeard) for an authentic Indigenous perspective on what we are
trying to achieve. The difficulty of the subject matter for both black and white Australians is obvious and we have always wanted to treat it with sensitivity from both points of view. Trevor, along with indigenous consultant Richard Green, has helped enormously on that level.

The spirit that all Indigenous participants to this story, which is a story about their dispossession, and the generosity and the willingness to convey that story and the good humour with which they did it as people gave me a great sense of the sort of collaboration that is possible between all of us in Australia.

The Locations

One of our key challenges was locations. The story is set on the Hawkesbury River, north of Sydney, but it became apparent after some initial location surveys that we couldn’t really shoot in any great detail on the Hawkesbury River because anywhere that was pristine and without obvious human habitation - which we needed to convey the wilderness of the region in 1810 - was also impossible from a logistical perspective to locate cast and crew. Ultimately, we came to Sydney to shoot some wide, panoramic shots to create the very particular and distinct and beautiful feel of the Hawkesbury, but we also had to find somewhere quieter and more remote that matched the landscape and vegetation on the Hawkesbury. There was a time when it looked like we weren’t going to find it, but just by a stroke of good fortune or serendipity we stumbled upon the pristine, beautiful riverscape of Lake Tyers in East Gippsland in Victoria, a five-hour drive east of Melbourne.

» 7. KEY DISCUSSION POINTS ABOUT THE SECRET RIVER

Select one or more of the following discussion points as a prelude to preparing a response to this production in the form of an essay, a report or a visual presentation such as an artwork or a set of images presented in a way that illuminates or comments on the story. Question 2 may involve you in some further research.

1 Co-screenwriter of this production, Mac Gudgeon, called The Secret River a story of miscommunication, a clash between two cultures. ‘The white blindfold version of history is just stupid, because if all those Aboriginals died, and it wasn’t a war, then it was genocide. We’ll never mature as a nation until we face it.’ Co-writer, Jan Sardi agreed: ‘A lot of people still don’t realise what happened to Aboriginal people. They won’t accept it. It was a war that was being fought.’ His hope is that, like Peter Weir’s Gallipoli before it, The Secret River puts history into the public arena and ‘changes people’s consciousness’.

Is it important to acknowledge the blood on white hands in relation to Indigenous Australians, as their treatment is shown in this series? In what ways is it important to acknowledge wrongs as a means of understanding the pain of others, especially people who have been dispossessed for generations? Who does such acknowledgement benefit?

2 A recent Government proposal intends to persuade, (largely through withdrawal of funding), Indigenous Australians living on settlements on their traditional
land to give up what has been described as a ‘life-style choice’ and move into towns and cities. Many of the 274 remote settlements are said to be ‘economically unviable’, dysfunctional and unsustainable. How might such decisions affect the ongoing processes of reconciling with the First Australians?

3 Are Will and Sal Thornhill presented as essentially decent people who are unable to see an alternative to pushing the Aboriginals back, resisting them and eventually being involved in the massacre because they are fearful for their own security? To what degree are the enormous differences in understanding between white settlers and their Aboriginal neighbours shown to be a question of language barriers?

4 Write an extended review (800 words) of this miniseries outlining its strengths and weaknesses (if any). You may choose to focus on just one or two elements of the production, such as performances, production design, musical score or cinematography. If you are seeing this series in relation to the novel, you may like to outline your views about how successful it is as an adaptation.

8. REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Grenville’s website has a wealth of information about the novel and her approach to writing historical fiction

http://kategrenville.com/The_Secret_River

A brief account of the early history of the region


Who arrived on The First Fleet (and those that followed) and why?


The early history of the Hawkesbury River

http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/hawkesbury_river

Aboriginal maps of the Hawkesbury area

http://historyofaboriginalsyrney.edu.au/west/1800s

Timeline of white settlement

http://creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/aboriginal-history-timeline-1770-1899#axzz3ZQgBWQ6i

Timeline of British colonisers’ activities in NSW in the early decades of settlement

Articles about the novel and the theatre adaptation

A 2005 article from the Age newspaper by Jane Sullivan outlining the controversy the novel generated in relation to the so-called ‘History Wars’.

A review of the stage play of The Secret River

A 2009 Age/SMH text talk article about The Secret River by Avril Moore

A 2008 Text Talk article by Roger Stitson about The Secret River

An ABC regional program report about filming The Secret River around Lake Tyers in Victoria
http://abc.net.au/local/photos/2014/07/31/4057704.htm

Please note the ABC (and ATOM) are not responsible for the content of external websites.

Books


Lighting Dark Places: essays on Kate Grenville, edited by Sue Kossew, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010

The Secret River, an adaptation of Grenville’s novel for the stage by Andrew Bovell, Currency Press, 2013
This text includes an excellent introduction by historian Henry Reynolds.

Kim Scott, That Deadman Dance, Picador, 2013
This novel by Indigenous author Kim Scott tells the story of white settlement on the south-west coast of Western Australia between 1826 and 1844. Initially, there are largely peaceful exchanges between Indigenous and settler cultures; later, the two groups come to the brink of war due to the actions of the newcomers.

(Endnotes)
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