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This is the author's radio script of this article.

Sorry. Gail Jones. Vintage, 2007.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writer's Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 10 August 2007.

Gail Jones concludes her novel *Sorry* with a note about the 'dense and complicated meanings' of this word in Australia – the refusal of John Howard to utter the word, the history of National Sorry Day, the meaning of 'sorry business' for Aboriginal people. This note invites an allegorical reading, but the novel itself demands a far more complex and subtle response.

Perdita is the unwanted daughter of an English couple who fell almost accidentally into a late marriage. Her father, Nicholas, an anthropologist, having brought his reluctant wife, Stella, to a station near Broome so he could study the Natives – 'knowledge of how the black buggers thought would be useful in their management and control', he believes – Perdita is born in 1930 in a shack in outback Western Australia and grows up with the local aborigines and the station owner's deaf-mute son as her only friends.

The narrative alternates between the first and third person as Perdita tries to fathom her parents' inner lives: 'Parents are recessed within us, in memory, in feeling, in ways we sometimes know best at faltering, precarious moments. ... We are puzzle-headed when we think of them. We are always subordinate' (14). Her father is a failed scholar, privately living with the knowledge that he will never make his mark. Her mother has made a god of Shakespeare, believing he is 'all wise, incomparable, the encompasser of every human range. ... Even as a child Perdita knows this to be false.' But Shakespeare is not held up to anti-canonical scorn in the novel. His words resonate throughout, to be agreed with or refuted: he is not a false god but a unique

medium for the expression of emotional extremes. It was not his fault that ‘Stella was doomed ... to emotional aggrandisement and the lunatic exaggeration of the otherwise everyday. Her redescription of life in Shakespearean terms meant that she was always strung in a poignant register; she was always unbearably, ponderously, *poetic*’ (113). The shack fills with miscellaneous books, ordered from Sydney. Perdita says of her parents, ‘Derangement of many forms finds it home within books. ... when they came together, appalled to be in each other’s unmediated company, they could retreat, singly and sequestered, each into his or her own reading’ (30). World War Two, distant and menacing, is an insistent reference point for Perdita’s young life. Her parents follow the war in the newspapers, not for a moment thinking to shield their young daughter from the horrors described, displaying grainy photographs of devastation and violence on the walls of their home.

Into this ramshackle, barely sane household comes the clever teenager Mary, removed from her mother as a child and now provided to the household as a servant, as was the destiny of so many of the stolen generation. Nicholas has no compunction in raping the girl whenever he wishes, and this occasions the hinge of the plot – the mysterious, unspeakable event which transforms Perdita’s unconventional but bearable life into one of lonely outcast.

Gail Jones’ last novel, *Dreams of Speaking*, was interesting and intelligent. *Sorry* is on an altogether higher level. It is a brilliant evocation of childhood, loss, language, humanity and inhumanity. It is poetic without being precious, and totally engrossing without any sacrifice of intellectual profundity.