

Kim Scott, *That Deadman Dance* (Picador, 2010)

There are many stories to be told which lie between the boundaries of Australia's original landscape of Indigenous families living with the land and the occupation of their land by the British Whiteman. Most end too quickly; they begin with fear and finish with annihilation. Those stories suffer in both length and happiness. In Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* we get a different kind of story. This one is set in King George Town, Western Australia. It's a point of contact and a place of hope.

The story belongs to Bobby Wabalanginy. We see him as a baby and as a man, and we can track his lifetime in stages of his position to the sea: beside the sea, amidst the sea, becoming the sea, the sea. We stand with him barefoot in the sand as he speaks Noongar and English in the same sentence, and we follow him trekking with English boots through the bush. He is on boats, entertaining while still finding his wobbly legs. He is reading and writing. He is dancing in prison. So much of the joy in this book must be accredited to Bobby Wabalanginy – the boy whose name is half white, half black. Scott paints the clearest image of purity through Bobby Wabalanginy that his zeal becomes contagious. He is one of those rare characters in fiction who live with you long after you have finished the book.

It is pleasing to Bobby Wabalanginy to grow up in King George Town – living with his own people, fishing with them, whaling with white men, playing with white children – and because of his ease and good humour, we are pleased with it too. The bulk of this story is one of possibility, and in his friend Dr Cross we see this too. Cross is the leader of this early contact, and he effortlessly encourages fairness and respect among neighbours of both races. He takes the orphaned Bobby Wabalanginy and shows him tenderness and reverence and, upon his dying, asks to be buried next to his good friend Wunyeran – Bobby Wabalanginy's uncle. There is also optimism in the escaped sailor Jak Tar, who loves and marries Binyan, Bobby Wabalanginy's sister. There are decent Europeans in this book and there are Aborigines who love them.

But we know how the story ends so let us not get carried away with geniality and affection. Men come and men go, and they change the paths of history. Dr Cross's successor, Chaine, is not so open-minded; he is one of the many conflicts leading to the obvious crisis. Another is the depiction of Manek and Manik, as it is made clear that Bobby Wabalanginy's happiness is not their happiness. The melding of a black and white world is their dejection and ultimate ruin.

Scott writes about his ancestry – the Noongar – in what is today Albany, Western Australia, and it is an impressive tale. The whaling scenes are vivid accounts of equal majesty and guts, and the boat and foot expeditions are gruelling. I longed for a map at the front of the book to refer to with each new sea voyage and each journey inland. There is a fair bit of back and forth to various bays through the years; it can become so confusing that you might give up trying to position yourself, and positioning oneself can be very important while interacting with a novel.

The book is narrated in various fashions. There is omniscient mingling with third person limited and first person narrative. I wanted to cling to one voice and stay with that voice, and sometimes felt a jolt when I had to change. The same goes for inconsistencies in the style of narration. Tenses change as quickly as the language.

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The straightforwardness in the writing of one paragraph can lead directly into a more grandiose, thoughtful style, such as in this description of Chaine's desire for black labour:

They will build a stand for the try-pot; they will make a garden, then tend and weed it. They will spread pitch on the boats the Yankees left them. They shepherd sheep, make fences to keep sheep in and kangaroos out. But those *yongar* leap clear over the fence. Chaine gives Bobby a rifle, and Bobby comes back with a kangaroo and puts it in the fire. He sings the skin first, then buries it in the ashes.

Now – though the precise boundary of now remains unclear – trees bloom, and a few late salmon can still be seen in the waves. The crests flutter torn by the wind to look like Missus Chaine's lace, and you see the fish silhouetted clear and separate from one another. The wave breaks and Bobby thinks to run along the beach, forever and forever beside the breaking waves, the rolling miles and miles of spit and bubbles maybe all the way back to King George Town. (293)

This change from staccato to flow is part maddening and part enviable. As if it is a metaphor for the cultures living side by side, but never quite coming together. Also frustrating is the chronological flip-flopping in the telling of this tale. We begin with Bobby as a small boy, move back in time to him as a baby, then continue on with him as an adolescent and later as a young man. I don't necessarily understand Scott's intention in the bulky flashback – the story could possibly have held together more tightly with a linear chronological structure – but I have to trust in Scott's instincts. Just as with the style of narration. Just as with the voices. He is just too compelling a storyteller to second-guess.

I am not surprised that *That Deadman Dance* won the Miles Franklin award for 2011. The story is a captivating account of our nation's history told with great imagination, studiously researched and passionately felt. Though the end predictably illustrates a bleaker future for the Noongar than Dr Cross envisaged, the final sentiment is mixed with tragedy and, still, certain jubilation. It is the perfect ending to an affecting book.

Heather Taylor Johnson