Inheritance

Hannie Rayson

Insight Text Guide
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Insight Publications
Contents

Character map iv

Introduction 1

Context & background 2

Genre, style & structure 7

Scene-by-scene analysis 13

Characters & relationships 32

Themes & issues 45

Questions & answers 54

References & reading 58
### Character Map

**Farley Hamilton**  
Husband of Dibs. Father of William and Julia. Rumoured to be Nugget's father. Senile, prejudiced, bad-tempered, miserly, vulnerable.

**Dibs Hamilton**  

**Girlie Delaney**  
Daughter of Norm. Married to Lucky Joe. Prejudiced, bitter, resilient, loyal.

**William Hamilton**  
Son of Farley and Dibs. Lives in city with partner, Kevin. Despised by Farley. Well-educated, amusing, self-righteous, conservative.

**Julia Hamilton**  

**Nugget Hamilton**  
‘Adopted’ Aboriginal son of Farley and Dibs. Strong relationship with Farley. Loyal, tolerant, stoic.

**Norm Myrtle**  
Father of twins, Dibs and Girlie. Commits suicide. Has close relationship with Girlie through love of pigeons. Life of the party, depressive, hard-working.

**Lofty Blake**  
Minor character. Friend of Lucky Joe.

**Lyle Delaney**  

**Felix Hamilton-Gray**  
Son of Julia. University student, cynical, vulnerable.

**Ashleigh Delaney**  
Older daughter of Lyle and Maureen. Prejudiced, frustrated, resentful.

**Brianna Delaney**  
Younger daughter of Lyle and Maureen. Has close relationship with Lyle through love of pigeons. Loyal, sympathetic, tolerant.

**Maureen Delaney**  
Wife of Lyle. Mother of Ashleigh and Brianna. Elected as local MP. Prejudiced, outspoken, bitter, frustrated.

**Lucky Joe Delaney**  

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**Character from the past**  
Wormie McCallum. Stockman.

**Character from the past**  
Young Dibs, Norm’s daughter.

**Character from the past**  

**Character from the past**  

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**Character from the past**  
Young Girlie, Norm’s daughter.

**Character from the past**  
Young Dibs, Norm’s daughter.
INTRODUCTION

Since graduating from the Victorian College of the Arts, Hannie Rayson has become one of Australia’s most influential playwrights. Hotel Sorrento (1990), one of her early plays, has been made into a successful film, while Life After George (2000) followed its acclaimed Melbourne production with a short season in London’s famous West End theatre district.

Inheritance, like Rayson’s other plays, examines individuals and families under pressure as they cope with dramatic change. In the two-and-a-half years it took to write Inheritance, Rayson visited the Mallee town of Nyah West and its surroundings ten times. Having lived most of her life in Melbourne, Rayson used her visits to the Mallee to gain an insight into why rural people were so supportive of the controversial conservative politics of Pauline Hanson and One Nation.1 What she discovered was a community struggling to cope with the enduring effects of the rural recession.

In the Mallee, as in all rural communities, farmers have traditionally enjoyed the privileged position of being essential to Australia’s economy because they controlled the nation’s primary resources. For a long time, government policies protected the interests of farmers, but this changed radically with the shift to economic rationalism, which was seen by many farmers as a betrayal. Suddenly, farmers were confronted with debt, mouse plagues, droughts, price collapses, Aboriginal land claims and crippling foreign competition.2 In response, many country people turned their backs on the government, and some saw Pauline Hanson, with her rural origins and plain-speaking appeals to ‘common sense’, as a saviour.

Rayson’s sympathetic response to the plight of country people is evident in her gritty, endearing and vulnerable characters. She does not refrain from exposing bitterness, greed and prejudice; however, nor does Inheritance suggest that country people are any more prejudiced than their city neighbours are, and fictional Rushton can be seen as a microcosm of the larger political landscape. As the Hamiltons and Delaneys battle over the Inheritance of the family farm, larger questions loom about


Aboriginal land rights, the stolen generations, immigration, race and the complex relationship between legal rights and moral rights.

In considering questions about our rights and responsibilities as individuals and as citizens, we are also urged to think about our inheritance – in a broad sense – in terms of what we take from the past, and what we pass on to future generations. Is inheritance a curse or a blessing? How are we shaped by our cultural, political and genetic inheritance? Do some inherited cultural traditions deliberately exclude newcomers? In this short play about a twentieth-century Australian family, Rayson explores some of the issues which have preoccupied the nation since white settlement, and which are still largely unresolved as we move into the twenty-first century.

CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

Economic factors

Q Why were farmers like Lyle Delaney in such desperate financial trouble in the late 1990s?

There are several reasons for this. To begin with, during the 1980s and 1990s rural Australia experienced a series of catastrophic events, which precipitated what came to be called the ‘rural recession’ and adversely affected almost everyone who lived in a country town. Many farmers had been unwise, thinking that the good times of the previous decade would continue. Most had borrowed heavily, failing to keep money in reserve in the event of disasters such as those that occurred in the 1980s, including:

- natural disasters – in 1999, the NSW Parliament cited the 1982–1983 drought as the worst ever experienced
- economic factors such as
  - the steady rise in interest rates during the 1980s
  - the collapse in the ‘floor price’ of wool
  - the decline in lamb sales in the face of competition from beef
  - the removal of the ‘guaranteed’ minimum price for wheat.

During the 1980s, interest rates and inflation were already at record highs. Moreover, the harmful effects of these factors were exacerbated by a taxation system that encouraged businesses (including farms) to have a high level of borrowings.
Deregulation
When the Hawke Government deregulated the banking industry, the banks were able to lend a higher proportion of a valuation. This led to increased competition between the banks and it became easier to borrow money. The banks lent larger sums of money than had previously been possible without taking into account the borrower’s ability to repay the loan. Farmers were placed in a difficult position, needing to borrow large sums of money to keep their farms productive and having to pay high interest rates on the money they borrowed. Spiralling debt rapidly became a vicious circle from which there was no escape.³

Psychological strains
‘Believing that they were a financial drain on the family, some children approached school counsellors to find out how they could be adopted or fostered out. The severe psychological strain on children sometimes led to suicide attempts. They would hear their parents arguing about the fact they may lose the farm which meant that they would also lose their homes. They would hear their fathers, particularly, talking about burning the place, burning the bank, shooting the bank manager or shooting themselves.’⁴

Many farm families felt a sense of helplessness and anger about their financial situation – in *Inheritance*, the Delaney family certainly falls into this category. Rural communities believed that they had lost control of their lives; their self-esteem and confidence evaporated. Country people also felt neglected, harbouring a sense of betrayal by authorities.⁵ Maureen Delaney’s appeals to the anger and despair of the locals strike a deep chord (p.61), just as Pauline Hanson’s did in the 1996 federal election (see below under ‘The rise of Pauline Hanson and One Nation’).

Banks and economic rationalism
As well as making it clear that farmers like Lyle Delaney were partly responsible for their own financial mismanagement, Rayson invites her audience to consider the moral responsibility of institutions such

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⁴ *Rural poverty in South Australia*, p.18.
⁵ *Rural poverty in South Australia*, p.22.
as banks. In particular, banks have been criticised for being too willing to lend money to those who cannot afford to repay, eventually seizing their properties and leaving them homeless and destitute – which is what happens to the Delaneys in *Inheritance*. This brand of economic rationalism is driven by the relentless demands of the market. Banks make large profits for shareholders. According to the underlying assumptions of economic rationalism, this is ‘good for the economy’ since it creates strong employment and investor and consumer confidence. However, critics of economic rationalism argue that such practices exhibit a callous disregard for individuals, like Lyle Delaney, who get into financial difficulties.

**Political background**

An understanding of the following political factors will give you greater insight into the background of the play, even though they are not directly responsible for the problems experienced by farming communities.

**Eddie Mabo**

Edward Koiki Mabo was born in 1936 on the island of Mer, one of the Murray Islands, which are located at the eastern extremity of Torres Strait. In June 1992, six months after his death, Mabo achieved national prominence as the successful principal plaintiff in the landmark High Court ruling on native land title. The High Court ruling gave, for the first time, legal recognition to the fact that indigenous land ownership existed in Australia before European settlement.⁶

**Aboriginal land rights**

When Europeans arrived on the Australian continent, they stepped from their ships onto land which was owned under complex indigenous laws and land systems. However, it has taken white Australia and its legal system more than two hundred years to acknowledge this fact. Despite the dislocation which has occurred since 1788, traditional Aboriginal laws and customs governing land ownership have continued to survive in much of Australia to varying degrees and in various forms. Even where families move away from their ‘country’, their connections can survive their absence. Nugget Hamilton, the ‘adopted’ Aboriginal son of Dibs and Farley Hamilton, symbolises all dispossessed Aborigines. Felix Hamilton-

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Gray recognises this when he asserts that Nugget should inherit the farm because: ‘His people have already been dispossessed once’. (p.91)

The land rights struggle
Indigenous people have been fighting for their land since 1788. In the late 1960s, when the Gurindji walked off Wave Hill cattle station over their appalling work conditions, they drew national attention to the struggle. The Racial Discrimination Act, 1975, and the Woodward Royal Commission report laid the basis for Commonwealth land rights legislation in the Northern Territory in 1975. Land rights legislation in some of the states followed. Although these statutes granted some land rights to many Aboriginal people, Australian law still did not recognise prior Aboriginal ownership of Australian land. It was not until 1992, in the historic Mabo decision, that Australian law acknowledged the legal force and validity of Indigenous land claims.

The stolen generations
From the end of the nineteenth century to the late twentieth century – the dates are uncertain – Australian governments, as a practice and as a policy, removed part-Aboriginal children from their mothers, parents, families and communities, often by force. Some of these children were taken at birth, some at two years of age, some in their childhood years. The babies and children were sent either to special-purpose institutions or to foster homes. In some cases, mothers or families knew where their children had been taken and were able to maintain some continuing connection with them. In other cases, they had no idea of their children’s whereabouts. In some cases the children were treated well in the institutions and the foster homes, although even here, it would appear, frequently with condescension. In other cases, physical mistreatment, sexual exploitation and other extreme forms of humiliation were common.

In Inheritance, Nugget symbolises the stolen generations. While in some respects he is treated well – just as some Aboriginal children were in similar circumstances – vestiges of colonial condescension and paternalism remain. He is sent to Longerenong Agricultural College while the legitimate white heir, William, attends an elite city boarding school. Dibs assumes, as many of her colonial predecessors did, that she and Farley are fulfilling their ‘Christian’ duty in offering Nugget ‘advantages’

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which his Aboriginal family cannot provide. Yet despite her knowledge of
his parentage, Dibs asserts that Nugget is ‘not family’ (p.77). Moreover,
he is expected to be ‘grateful’ (p.76) for the favours bestowed on him by
his white benefactors. Ultimately, Nugget (whose nickname appals Felix
with its racist connotations) is little more than an unpaid labourer on a
farm he will not inherit.

The rise of Pauline Hanson and One Nation
Pauline Hanson was a member of the Liberal Party, and from 1994 to
1996 she was a local councillor in the Queensland city of Ipswich. She
was endorsed as the Liberal candidate for the electorate of Oxley for the
March 1996 federal election. However, comments that Hanson made to
The Queensland Times, in which she advocated the abolition of special
government assistance for Aboriginal people, led to her disendorsement
by the party during the campaign. As a result, Hanson campaigned for
and won the seat of Oxley as an independent.

In September 1996, Hanson made her maiden speech to the House
of Representatives, which instantly made headlines and the television
news bulletins across Australia. She expressed her concern that Australia
was ‘in danger of being swamped by Asians’, and generally decried many
aspects of what she labelled as ‘political correctness’.

As a result of her maiden speech, Hanson became a very controversial
figure, with the Australian population divided on whether she was honest
and plainspoken (a view more likely to be held in regional areas), a
dangerous racist, or a misinformed yokel. Hanson’s critics derided what
they saw as her inarticulate style – the very trait that her supporters
took to be evidence of her credentials as a speaker ‘for the people’.
Subsequently, Hanson and her supporters established the One Nation
political party, which included the following statement as part of its
immigration policy:

Inappropriately high levels of immigration combined with the policy
of multiculturalism has led to a serious breakdown in the social
cohesion of Australia.

Rejection of the ‘outsider’ is evident in the attitudes of several characters
in Inheritance.

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8 These and the following comments about Pauline Hanson are sourced from the online
article Pauline Hanson, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pauline_Hanson

9 Cited by Sarah Peckham, Pauline Hanson & One Nation, Action for Aboriginal Rights,