The Secret River

Kate Grenville
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CHARACTER MAP

Dick Thornhill
William and Sal's son; has a friendly relationship with the Aboriginal people, which his parents find difficult to accept.

Sal Thornhill
Married to William; mother of his children; strong and loving; follows William to New South Wales but longs to return home to London.

William Thornhill
Married to Sal; father of Dick and five other children; convicted of theft and transported to New South Wales; works his way to a pardon and claims land; fights local Aboriginal people to protect his land.

Thomas Blackwood
Fellow emancipist settler; former Thames waterman; employs Thornhill on the Hawkesbury; friendly with the Aboriginal people.

Smasher Sullivan
Fellow emancipist settler; has a violent relationship with the Aboriginal people; initiates massacre at Blackwood’s place.

Sagitty Birtles
Fellow emancipist settler; poisons Aborigines at Darkey Creek; speared during an Aboriginal attack.

Long Jack
Aboriginal man who is the only survivor of the massacre at Blackwood's; continues to live on Thornhill's Point after massacre.

become estranged
married
eventually share land
troubled relationship
struggle to communicate
similar attitudes towards Aboriginal people
troubled relationship
OVERVIEW

About the author

Kate Grenville was born in Sydney in 1950 and currently lives there with her family. She is an honorary associate in the English department at the University of Sydney, and holds degrees from universities both in Australia and overseas. She has also worked as a teacher of creative writing, a journalist and a film editor. She is most recognised for her works of fiction, although she has also published non-fiction and often writes newspaper columns and semi-academic articles.

Works

Grenville’s first book, Bearded Ladies (1984), was a collection of short stories. This was followed by seven novels: Lilian’s Story (1985) and Dreamhouse (1986), which were both made into films; Joan Makes History (1988); Dark Places (1994); The Idea of Perfection (1999); The Secret River (2005); and The Lieutenant (2008). Many of these novels explore women’s roles in society and in history. Some are based on true stories of contemporary or historical characters who have fascinated Grenville. In Lilian’s Story, for example, Grenville takes her inspiration from the life of Bea Miles, a well-known Sydney eccentric in the 1940s and 1950s.

As well as novels and short stories, Grenville has written four non-fiction books about the writing process. Two of these, The Writing Book (1990) and Writing from Start to Finish (2001) are practical writing guides, and make use of Grenville’s experience and knowledge as a writing teacher. Making Stories (1993), written with Sue Woolfe, discusses the work of a range of other Australian authors. These books demonstrate Grenville’s interest in analysing the processes involved in creating fiction, an interest which also motivates Searching for the Secret River (2006), a writing memoir describing her experiences of researching and writing The Secret River. As well as publishing such works, she often participates in panels at writers’ festivals and academic conferences, discussing the role and responsibilities of the writer.
Reception
Grenville’s work is well respected both nationally and internationally. She won several awards for her early works, including the Australian/Vogel National Literary Award for *Lilian’s Story* and the Orange Prize for Fiction (UK) for *The Idea of Perfection*. *The Secret River* was shortlisted for numerous awards including the Man Booker Prize and the Miles Franklin Literary Award, and won several of these including the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and the Community Relations Commission Award in the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Awards. Despite winning many awards, however, *The Secret River* is also a controversial novel, generating much public debate about the rights and responsibilities of novelists working in the genre of historical fiction.

The controversy surrounding *The Secret River* did not dampen Grenville’s enthusiasm for fictionalising Australian history, and her next novel, *The Lieutenant*, was another work of historical fiction. Set slightly before *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant* is based on the story of William Dawes and, like *The Secret River*, re-imagines colonial settlement and frontier contact between settlers and Aboriginal people.

Synopsis
*The Secret River* follows William Thornhill from his childhood in the slums of London in the late 1700s to New South Wales in the early 1800s. In his youth Thornhill works hard as a lighterman and marries his childhood sweetheart Sal. To support his young family he resorts to stealing timber, a crime for which he is convicted and sentenced to transportation. Once in New South Wales, Thornhill, with Sal’s help, gains a pardon and claims a hundred acres of land on the Hawkesbury River where he struggles to provide for and protect his family. Initially Thornhill intends to work as a waterman and earn enough money to return home to London. But Thornhill falls in love with the land and wants to stay, although Sal finds colonial life hard and still dreams of England.

In learning to cope with the unfamiliar colonial landscape, the Thornhills also become entangled in conflicts between settlers and the Aboriginal inhabitants of the area. As these conflicts escalate, the
Thornhills are forced to negotiate their relationships not only with the local Aboriginal people, but also with their English settler-neighbours, most of whom are emancipists like the Thornhills. Thornhill must decide whether to defend his land with violence towards Aboriginal people, as his neighbour Smasher Sullivan does, or with a more compassionate approach of compromise, like his neighbour Thomas Blackwood. Eventually the conflicts reach the point where the settlers band together in an attempt to exterminate the Aboriginal people. This attempt is successful enough to allow the settlers to continue to inhabit the land without fear of attack, and Thornhill becomes a relatively wealthy landowner. He builds a large house and furnishes it with comforts from home to console Sal about the fact that their lives have become so connected to New South Wales that they will never return to England.

Character summaries

**William Thornhill**
Central character, born in 1777 in London. One of eight children; at age twenty-one, marries his childhood sweetheart Sal Middleton, with whom he has six children. Works in London as an apprentice waterman, then is transported for theft; receives a pardon and works as a waterman in New South Wales.

**Sarah (‘Sal’) Thornhill**
Born in London, similar age to William Thornhill; an only child. Marries William and travels with him to New South Wales, assigned as his master while he serves his time.

**Richard and Mary Middleton**
Sal’s father and mother. Richard takes William on as an apprentice on the Thames; dies about three years after William and Sal’s marriage. Mary dies shortly after her husband.

**Ma and Pa Thornhill**
William’s mother and father. His mother dies when William is thirteen. Pa Thornhill works at various unskilled jobs, often taking the young William with him to help; he dies shortly after his wife.
Robert (‘Rob’) Thornhill
An older brother of William. Has an unidentified mental impairment as a result of fever when young; drowns during the timber theft for which William is transported.

Mary and Lizzie Thornhill
William’s older sisters. Mary takes on sewing to help support the family; Lizzie looks after her younger siblings and is a childhood friend to Sal.

James, Matty, John and Luke Thornhill
William’s other brothers.

‘Collarbone’ and Dan Oldfield
Childhood friends of William. Dan later works for the Thornhills in New South Wales with another convict, Ned.

Matthias Prime Lucas and Mr Yates
William’s employer and foreman in London. Both testify against William at his court trial.

Mr Knapp
William’s trial lawyer.

William (‘Willie’) Thornhill
William and Sal’s first child, born in London around 1800.

Richard (‘Dick’) Thornhill
William and Sal’s second child, born in 1805 during William’s transportation. Has a strong relationship with the Aboriginal people.

James (‘Bub’) Thornhill
William and Sal’s third child, born in 1808. An unhealthy baby who survives despite expectations that he will die in infancy.

Johnny Thornhill
William and Sal’s fourth child, born around 1811. Healthier than Bub, clever and interested in figuring out how things work.
Mary Thornhill
William and Sal’s fifth child, born around 1813. Named after Sal’s mother.

Sarah (‘Dolly’) Thornhill
William and Sal’s youngest child, born around 1824.

Alexander King
Thornhill’s first employer in Sydney Cove.

Thomas Blackwood
Fellow emancipist (former convict) and ex-Thames waterman; employs Thornhill on the Hawkesbury; friendly with the local Aboriginal people.

Scabby Bill
Aboriginal man who lives in Sydney. Dances in exchange for alcohol; scarred from smallpox.

‘Smasher’ Sullivan
Emancipist. Antagonistic and violent towards the Aboriginal people; single, but keeps an Aboriginal woman as a slave; organises the massacre at Blackwood’s.

‘Sagitty’ Birtles
Emancipist with similar temperament/sympathies to Smasher. Poisons an entire Aboriginal group at Darkey Creek; later killed by a spear during an Aboriginal attack on his land.

George Twist
Settler, neighbour to Sagitty; participates in massacre.

‘Spider’ Webb
Emancipist, married to Sophia Webb. Abandons his land after racial conflict in 1814; participates in massacre.

‘Parson’ Loveday
Emancipist; participates in the massacre.
Mrs Herring
Settler; widow who has a peaceful relationship with Aboriginal inhabitants. Sometimes provides medical aid to the settlers, including Sal.

Devine
Irish settler, participates in massacre; builds Cobham Hall for Thornhill.

Whisker Harry
Old Aboriginal man. During the massacre he spears Smasher, but is then killed by Thornhill. (Name given by Thornhill.)

Long Bob, later Long Jack
Aboriginal man; friendly with Dick; shot during massacre at Blackwood’s. Survives but is impaired; subsequently lives on Thornhill’s Point. (Names given by Thornhill.)

Black Dick
Aboriginal man; killed in massacre. (Name given by Thornhill.)

Meg and Polly
Aboriginal women Sal tries to trade with. (Names given by Sal.)

Captain McCallum
Government official; organises unsuccessful attack on Aboriginal people at Darkey Creek.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Historical and social setting

*The Secret River* is set in London at the end of the eighteenth century, and in New South Wales at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Thornhill’s Dickensian London childhood is one of poverty, and of the struggle to survive in an overcrowded city where disease is rife, life expectations are short and social support non-existent. When Grenville describes the young William’s childhood friends as ‘all thieves, any time they got the chance’ (p.16), she refers not just to the boys, but also to the society in general. Stealing was often a way of life, out of necessity rather than greed: as the young William believes, ‘there could be no sin in thieving if it meant a full belly’ (p.16).

Although the London section is not the central focus of *The Secret River*, it puts William’s colonial life into context, and helps to explain the challenges he faces in a foreign landscape and environment. Once in New South Wales, William’s life is still a struggle for survival, but instead of fighting against poverty and hunger, he must learn to survive in a colony with unfamiliar physical conditions and social conventions. Whereas in London his family had no space to call their own, in New South Wales the Thornhills find themselves inhabiting a wide, empty land – although, as they quickly discover, the land is not empty at all, but already inhabited by Aboriginal people.

Colonial settlers and the history wars

The Thornhill family’s experience in New South Wales is part of the broader experience of European colonisation and settlement of Australia. Grenville describes wanting *The Secret River* to tell not just Thornhill’s story, but also ‘the larger one of what happened when white met black on the edge of settlement across the country’ (Grenville 2006, p.120). Although the Thornhills are not among the first settlers, their story on the Hawkesbury River occurs during the very early frontier contact between European settlers and Aboriginal inhabitants of the land. Because the range of existing documents from this period has limitations, writers