



Book Club Book of the Month May 2020

Shadow Lines, Stephen Kinnane (Fremantle Press)

Summary

The reissuing by Fremantle Press of Stephen Kinnane's award winning *Shadow Lines* is indeed a cause for celebration. Both a deeply researched archival investigation into the assimilationist policies of the Western Australian government post the 1905 Act, and a biography of Kinnane's maternal grandparents, Mirriwoong woman Jessie Argyle and Englishman Edward Smith, the narrative breaks through the bureaucratic language associated with the actions of Protector of Aborigines A.O. Neville, in particular, to explore the rich and vivid human story underneath. By turns tragic, poignant, gripping and disturbing, *Shadow Lines* is at its heart a beautifully told love story, detailing by way of interview and familial memory the trials of Kinnane's grandmother to escape the restrictions aimed at thwarting her attempts to be free, and of Kinnane's grandfather, who patiently worked to be with the woman he loved. Richly characterised and lyrically drawn, *Shadow Lines* is one of the great works of Western Australian literature.

About the Author

Stephen Kinnane is a Mirriwoong man and a longstanding writer and researcher, lecturing and working in the area of cultural heritage. Stephen wrote and produced the 1996 documentary *The Coolbaroo Club*, which detailed the formation of the Coolbaroo League and the regular dances held in the Perth area, a topic also explored in *Shadow Lines*. In 1992 Stephen Kinnane collaborated with Lauren Marsh and Alice Nannup to produce *When the Pelican Laughed* (Fremantle Press). *Shadow Lines* won the West Australian Premier's Book Award for Non-Fiction in 2003 and the Stanner Award in 2004.

Questions for discussion

- 1) Discuss the story at the heart of *Shadow Lines* in the light of what you know about similar Western Australian state government assimilationist policies subsequent to the 1905 Act, and how these have been reflected in texts such as Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999), or Anna Haebich's *For Their Own Good* (1988).
- 2) In its lyricism, as applied to descriptions of people and landscape, alongside the passages relating to Kinnane's archival research, and the scenes associated with his own and others' familial memories, *Shadow Lines* might be reasonably construed a work of creative non-fiction – incorporating in other words the techniques of fiction writing, such as the utilisation of vivid imagery and deep characterisation. Why do you think the author has taken this approach, and what is its overall effect on you as a reader?
- 3) There are many heroes in this story. Who are they, in your opinion, and what motivates them? Who are the key antagonists?
- 4) Jessie Argyle and Edward Smith are very different personalities, with very different histories. Based on Kinnane's characterisation of these differences and histories, but also his recognition of the complexity of lives behind official narratives, discuss the love story that forms the heart of *Shadow Lines*. What were the official and unofficial obstacles that impeded their extended courtship? What motivated their significant determination and subtle acts of resistance?
- 5) *Shadow Lines* is a work of literature that explores the human face behind what Kinnane calls the 'inflexible boundaries that are laid down by narrow definitions of race, nationalism and religion'. In this context, what is the purpose of the text's four-part structure in terms of Homelands, Borderlands, Borderlines and Shadow Lines?
- 6) Kinnane goes on to say that 'our stories are sometimes connected in ways that we can't even fathom, until the diversity of our stories is made clear to us ...' Do your own family stories reflect this diversity and complexity?
- 7) There is the 'official' story of A.O. Neville's files, that he routinely uses to discredit those who challenge their deeper meaning, and what Noongar writer Kim Scott calls the 'true history' as reflected in lived experience. Broadly speaking, how does Kinnane work to undermine the 'rewriting' of his grandmother's story by official government sources?
- 8) It becomes clear through the course of *Shadow Lines* that there were often petty financial reasons (often associated with departmental 'empire building') behind a lot of the bureaucracy associated with stolen generations policy, as implemented. Discuss the effects of this in the context of the stated ideological functions of the assimilationist policies.
- 9) Kinnane is at pains to point out the symbolic differences in terms of the way that Aboriginal people and many Europeans view the land, and its resources. Discuss the symbolic difference as applied to the description of Noongar understandings of the 'Christmas tree', and

that of the Moore River superintendent who decorated his house with its flowers.

- 10) Kinnane writes of the East Kimberley region - 'when my grandmother was taken from her country, this part of the world was in flux. It is still in flux today.' What is your perception of the changes that have taken place in the Kimberley region, but also more widely across Australia, in the twenty years since this book was written? What are the challenges that this degree of 'flux' places upon contemporary Aboriginal health, sovereignty and subjectivity? In the context of Kinnane's point that '...it is the fate of all our histories to be scrutinised by later generations', how might our generations be judged by future generations?
- 11) Among many other things, *Shadow Lines* is also a telling and vivid description of Perth through the twentieth century. Discuss some of the changes, as witnessed by Edward Smith of his new and developing 'Wandsworth-by-the-sea'. What was it that made him fall in love with the place?
- 12) It isn't uncommon to experience nostalgia when thinking back over Perth's history, and the effects of architectural and infrastructural changes upon peoples' lived experiences (such as explored in Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*.) In the context of the kind of Perth that someone like Jessie Argyle experienced, why does the nostalgia that Kinnane explores with regard to the North Perth and East Perth areas seem particularly poignant?
- 13) Looking at the key texts that explore a similar terrain in terms of the effects of the Stolen Generations policies upon Western Australia's Aboriginal peoples (such as those at the bottom of this page), one thing worthy of mention is that each of them have been published by small, independent publishers whose remit is broadly to capture the stories that are key to our specific culture. In the hypothetical absence of publishers such as Magabala Books, Fremantle Press, and UWA Publishing, what do you think our understanding of our history and place would be like?

If you liked this book you may also like...

Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence, Doris Pilkington (UQP)

Benang, Kim Scott (Fremantle Press)

A Stolen Life, Antonio Buti (Fremantle Press)

For Their Own Good, Anna Haebich (UWA Publishing)