

# FOREVER BEGINNING

Kim Scott's new novel is set in the here and now because, as he tells **Stephen Romei**, indigenous identity is not remote but contemporary

*Our home was a massacre place. People called it taboo. They said it is haunted and you will get sick if you go there. Others just bragged: we shot you and poisoned the waterholes so you never come back.*

**S**o opens *Taboo*, Kim Scott's fifth novel and the first since he won the 2011 Miles Franklin Literary Award for *That Deadman Dance*, a book Tom Keneally described as "an insider's view of Australia before it was Australia".

That simple first paragraph says a lot about *Taboo*. "They", we assume, are Aboriginal Australians. "Others" are white Australians.

The story unfolds in the here and now, unlike *That Deadman Dance*, set in early-19th-century Western Australia, or one of its predecessors, *Benang*, which focuses on the decades of forced removal of indigenous children, the people we now know as the Stolen Generations. *Benang* was joint winner of the Miles Franklin in 2000.

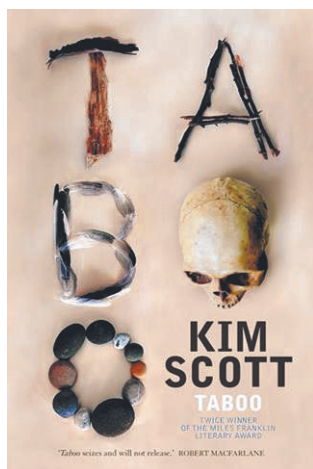
"Being Aboriginal is contemporary," Scott says in a telephone interview from his home in Coolbellup, South Fremantle. "Healing is a contemporary preoccupation, through truth and justice ... and land, giving back land."

"Identity is not remote, or about posturing. In my part of Australia, Aboriginal people are everywhere. There's a community that intermingles. So the relationship, or potential relationship, between Aboriginal Australia and the modern nation-state is sort of in this novel."

This is a novel where the descendants of the original inhabitants and the descendants of the people who took their land live in awkward, almost respectful familiarity. They are in Scott's Western Australia. They are uncomfortable about dwelling on the past and with saying or hearing certain words.

"Our people gave up on that Payback stuff a long time ago," we are told by an unnamed occasional narrator, "because we always knew death is only one part of a story that is forever beginning ..."

We soon meet the man who owns and lives on the farmland that is at the heart of the story:



Dan Horton, who two months ago lost his wife of 50 years. He and Janet fostered indigenous children on the station. Now, one of them wants to pay a visit, as part of a group of Noongar people, including elders, who are returning to their homeland, to this place made taboo by death.

The ceremonial aspect of their visit is the opening of a Peace Park in town. When Dan tells his brother Malcolm about this and uses the word massacre, Malcolm says, "I wish they wouldn't use that word. Massacre."

The brothers seem like decent men. They want to welcome the indigenous people. What happened was "a long time ago" and "here Dan and Malcolm agreed — there was no evidence of any more than a few Aborigines being killed".

They do remember, as boys, finding a skull "on their property". Soon after, in this telling, although the event it marks came before the skull, we see the grave of a Horton ancestor, William, 1848-81. Carved into the timber cross is "Killed

by natives". "That's what this place is known for these days, I'm afraid," Dan says to one of the Noongar visitors, Gerald Coolman, who is just out of jail. "Nothing about all the Noongars killed then," Gerald replies, without hostility.

We learn why this 19th-century Horton, part of five or six generations who have occupied the land, was killed, what he did to warrant such a lethal response. His relatives and friends responded, with Winchesters and poison. But, our narrator intervenes, "we will not dwell on the skull, the bones and bodies and bullets".

This contested history is why some Noongar people believe the land is taboo, not to be visited. "It is a place for ghosts, not for living people," says one, Wilfred. Later another, Nita, reminds her friends that "there's good white people too, you know that ..."

With Gerald is his twin brother Gerrard, and Scott has a bit of fun with the two Gerrys. He is also playful with animal metaphors. At a funeral

## I GREW UP IN ALBANY IN THE 1960S. IT WAS AN APARTHEID SITUATION

KIM SCOTT

## Premier who never was settles the score

**Troy Bramston**

**Setting the Record Straight:  
A Political Memoir**

By Carl Scully  
IngramSpark, 468pp

In 2009 an embattled Nathan Rees warned that, should he not be NSW premier by the end of that day, his successor would be nothing but "a puppet of Eddie Obeid and Joe Tripodi". This marked a decisive moment in the disintegration and degeneration of NSW Labor.

Rees, who had succeeded Morris Iemma 12 months earlier, indeed did not see out that day as premier. His speech had an electrifying impact that continues to resonate.

Kristina Keneally, handpicked by Obeid,

Tripodi and Ian Macdonald to replace Rees, tried to reassure voters that she was "nobody's puppet" and "nobody's girl".

Former minister Carl Scully, in this self-published memoir, *Setting the Record Straight*, pulls back the scab on these unhappy events and the pus oozes out.

This is an important book that deserves a wide audience because he is prepared to tell the truth about the decrepit state of NSW Labor in the post-Bob Carr era. Its publication is timely ahead of next weekend's Labor state conference.

The author tells me that the party had to atone for allowing "criminals" to effectively appoint three premiers following Carr's retirement in 2005. Scully is referring to sub-faction kingmakers Obeid from the right and Macdonald from the left. Appointing the premier, one

observer tells me, was like the mafia lounging around in the back of a greasy pizza parlour in New York, dividing the spoils among the made men (and women).

Scully is unfair to Iemma, who was elevated to the premiership with the support of Carr and the imprimatur of Mark Arbib, then NSW Labor secretary. His Sussex Street successor, Karl Bitar, played a decisive role in smoothing a path for Rees to become premier in 2008. Rees was ousted because he sacked Tripodi and Macdonald from cabinet. Without Obeid, Keneally would never have become premier. She returned Macdonald to the cabinet.

It is true, however, that Iemma was not hungry enough for the job and Rees never adequately filled it. Iemma, despite Scully labelling him "the master mumbler", did win re-election in 2007. This should not be discounted.

Keneally, however, in 2011 presided over the worst election result for Labor in more than a century. These disastrous years are now underscored by former ministers occupying jail cells. Others may soon join them.

Scully is not an impartial observer of these events. He had long aspired to become premier. His sights were set on succeeding Carr after the latter's stellar electoral success, winning two landslides in 1999 and 2003. But Scully was blindsided when Carr announced his retirement in 2005.

"I immediately felt an enormous surge of electricity through my body," Scully writes about the moment he heard the news. "My time had now come. I felt overwhelmed with emotion and excitement. I was ready. I was going to be premier." Flanked by his family, he held a press conference and announced he was run-

COLIN MURTY





**Author Kim Scott: 'Identity is not remote, or about posturing'**

"That sounds racist in itself, but it's an attempt to hang on to that quality in hostile circumstances." He adds, after a pause, that his writing has been an attempt "to add words to those few words of my father's articulating identity and significance".

Unlike Tilly, he has long known who he is and where he is from. He is one of the Noongar people and "it's a source of pride for me".

Yet he does not see *Taboo* as semi-autobiographical, unlike *Benang*, in which he traced his family line. The new novel is more about contemporary identity and how that is partly hostile to the legacy of history.

"I know a number of people who — how do I put this? — are attempting to reconnect or strengthen their sense of Aboriginal identity. They get very mixed up, in my humble opinion, confused because of the paucity of information available to them. It's a trap they are put into because of our societal situation.

"I have Tilly go through this experience, and that's part of why she's damaged, like a lot of people who are at the interface of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds.

"Yet I also think people can be healed, perhaps even transformed, by connection to places of their heritage. Land, language and people: a communal connection, and it's one that applies to the old farmer as well."

Tilly, it soon emerges, has a direct connection with the Hortons, including with Dan's absent son, Doug, who is tall, strong and bald. He works in the city as a parole officer, so knows lots of indigenous people. For Tilly, he steps out of "nightmare memories". It would be unfair to reveal more, but this is the darkest part of the novel and in some sense its inevitable centre.

There's a moving moment where Tilly awakes at dawn after a night camped outdoors, "the sun bright on her face". "Tilly felt unusually refreshed, but for that dark star within; that constant, central shrinking; that memory and shame she must fight to extinguish."

Scott is professor of writing at Curtin University. He is a founding member of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, which aims to reclaim and preserve Noongar heritage through language, storytelling, illustration, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories" in four children's books.

This language is central to *Taboo* yet it appears in print not once. When people use it, they are said to be speaking in the "old language" or "old people's tongue" and their words are presented in indirect speech. When a woman asks one of the Gerrys how he is, "In the old language, he told her he was well." When she replies, "You talking language, now. Proper blackfella, unna", we read: "He agreed with her, again using the old people's tongue."

Later, an older man, Wilfred, remarks, "Words, see. It's language brings things properly alive. Got power of their own, words."

"That's dead right," Scott says about the absence of Noongar language on the page. "I was thinking what it would mean to put our language in a book that I hope speaks outside of our country. Would I just be posturing or feigning authenticity?"

"That's part of the reason I use phrases like 'ancient tongue' and 'the old language'. I think some of what I'm working on applies outside of our country, and I want to make sure people realise that as well, and not give them overly literary references."

This brings us to another question: the power of words. When I mention a recent interview in which the award-winning Melbourne author Tony Birch, who is of part-Aboriginal descent, said he was thinking of abandoning writing to take up direct activism, in his case on climate change, Scott is understanding.

"I have a lot of sympathy for that position, to tell you the truth. Being an indigenous writer you do wonder a bit about who you're writing for and what it is doing, what it is achieving.

"I do think about such things a lot ... I do like to be useful. But I do deeply value the intimacy that's made available to one in novels. The sharing of a sensibility ... several hours together, a shared interior world ... that can make a lot of change to how people think and what they do.

"That's what writing needs to do, and it does require a certain way of writing that might be in decline. So, yes, I have a lot of sympathy with what Tony's saying."

The day we speak, Scott is home in bed. "Just man flu," he says. He will travel a lot to promote the book, which is dedicated to his two adult sons. Details are available on his publisher's website ([panmacmillan.com.au/picador](http://panmacmillan.com.au/picador)).

Even so it seems almost harsh to ask him the question most authors don't want to be asked, whether he can win a literary award, in this case a third Miles Franklin, which would put him equal with Peter Carey and David Ireland. Only Thea Astley and Tim Winton have won four.

"I'd like to!" he says. "But I do my very best not to think about it. It's lovely to have won it ... I know there is a great deal of luck involved."

An aspect of that luck is who else happens to be in the running. Scott is first cab off the rank in what will be a memorable second half of the year when it comes to new novels by Miles Franklin winners. Carey has one, as do dual winners Tom Keneally and Alex Miller and one-time (for now) recipients Michelle de Kretser, Sofie Laguna, Steven Carroll, Roger McDonald and the incumbent AS Patric. And Richard Flanagan, a Miles Franklin virgin despite five shortlistings, will publish his first novel since winning another rather well-known award, the Man Booker Prize.

When I tell Scott it's like Phar Lap racing Phar Lap, he says, "Yes ... Oh well, oh well. The winner will be deeply deserving."

*Taboo*, by Kim Scott, is published on Tuesday by Picador Australia (304pp, \$32.99).

there is a "crowd of men in dark clothes, some with ties so tight they kept turning their heads like discomforted and wary tortoises".

That is funny on one level, and wary is the perfect word on another. When I tell Scott the image made me laugh, he is relieved. "That's great. I'm glad you saw humour through that. It's a hard thing to do." When I tell him I think the novel is remarkable, he says, "Good." In some ways he is a taciturn man.

The person at the funeral who thinks of the men as tortoises is the main character: the late-teenage Tilly Coolman, still a schoolgirl. She is extraordinary. She is at the funeral because it's for a grandfather she did not know.

She joins the group heading to the taboo land at the urging of Gerald, cousin to her father Jim. But Tilly did not meet Jim, who is in jail, until recently. Nor did she know of her mixed heritage. Her white mother, Ellen, brought her up alone. On learning the truth, she "thought it

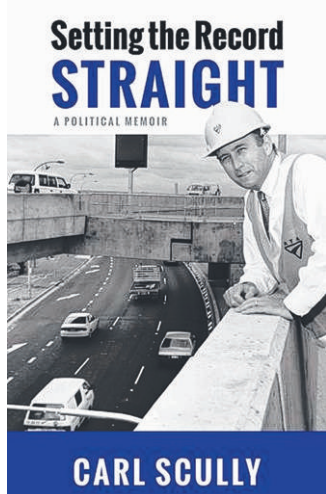
made her really Australian, and then she wondered what else it made her, not ever having met many Aboriginal people".

There are parallels here with 60-year-old Scott's life. His mother was non-Aboriginal, his father Aboriginal. "My father was the only surviving child. His mother died when he was 10, so he was brought up all over the place.

"He had that sort of disconnection. His mother was born in so-called taboo country, eastern Albany. I grew up in Albany in the 1960s. It was an apartheid situation."

Scott remembers his father's "impoverished sense of heritage and who we were". He has since met relatives who were told, as children, they were from Fiji, to explain the colour of their skin. They were "educated in shame about who they were".

He recalls a talk, hardly a speech, in which his father told him that being of Aboriginal descent was "the best part of you".



He never saw it coming. He had even established a "transition to government" committee in his office to prepare for his elevation to premier. Some of his policy manifesto is outlined in this book.

There was another crushing blow the following year when Iemma sacked Scully for allegedly misleading parliament. His political career was over. His ambition lay unrealised. A cloud hung over his time as a minister. Scully turned to writing as catharsis. It is how he starts the book, recalling his career ending in "the cold, harsh reality of political life".

Scully sketches his pre-parliamentary life on the north shore and in western Sydney. There are insights into party politics, seeking preselection, speaking in parliament, dealing with the media and being a minister.

Many of his former ministerial colleagues

will not be happy with how they are characterised as he surveys his time in the transport, roads, housing and police portfolios. He lashes Carr and treasurer Michael Egan for preferring to retire debt and install tolls rather than invest in infrastructure. He slams another treasurer, Michael Costa, for scuttling several projects that are now being built by the Coalition government.

Scully's reflections are timely given the infrastructure building under way in NSW. There are endless stories about battles with other ministers, bureaucrats and activists about roads, rail projects, tunnels, bridges and bypasses. Political considerations often intervened. He writes that the decision to build the \$1 billion desalination plant was made by a focus group rather than proper cabinet processes.

There is wistful air of what might have been.

The book brims with Scully's characteristic self-confidence. Not becoming premier and being sacked as a minister left him bitter and with scores to settle. It sours the narrative, despite the kernel of truth that is woven throughout, and the likelihood that he would have been a capable premier.

There is value here for students, observers and practitioners of politics. There are not many books about state politics published in Australia. The prose is not polished and there are typos, but it is a useful addition to the genre. Above all, it serves as a reminder of how brutal politics can be and how power, when unrivalled, corrupts.

*Troy Bramston is a senior writer at The Australian. His latest book is Paul Keating: The Big Picture Leader.*