

The Waterboys By Peter Docker

About the Book

I know my people. I know what is coming. How can the bond between human beings be so flimsy? We're in never-traversed-before territory, Djenga and Countrymen alike. Countrymen know their Country. But never before with us on it. Us, the inevitable tide that cannot be turned. The tide of history. How can this tide flow out from our estuary of existence and wipe out Countrymen rights? Whilst upholding our rights? Djenga. European. Tides come in. Tides go out. (p. 111)



In Docker's futuristic reimagining of Australia, the country is in crisis. The ozone layer is dangerously depleted, and water supply is being managed by the officers of the Water Board of the Coalition of the Eastern States of Australia – a military-style corporation whose shareholders 'own' the nation's water.

This is a country at war with itself: a war which began in the moment of the arrival of Europeans in Western Australia when Captain Charles Fremantle chose to throw off the mantle of Empire and join the Nyoongar people who met him off the boat at the Darbal Yaran. In the east, on the other hand, from the moment of arrival whitefullas have practised the imperialist whitefulla imperative of destruction and annihilation.

The division in the country – east and west – is set mostly, but not always along racial lines.

Conway is a Djenga (whitefulla) whose heart and spiritual connections lie with the blackfullas. He is hated by the whitefullas but they need Conway's abilities as a dreamer and water diviner to survive. Conway lives the existence of a guerilla in a civil war. He suffers from a post-traumatic stress disorder, as many fighters do.

This is a book that explores brotherhood at the most intimate level. Conway's spiritual brother is Mularabone, a Countryman and soldier; his blood brother is Jack – an imperialist through and through.

The Waterboys is a work of speculative fiction, a post-apocalyptic novel that asks what if relations with Indigenous people had begun differently? Would we be now better equipped to survive? Thus it is a dreaming, a book of possibility. The only way to go forward, says the novel, is first to go back: *The possibilities of yesterdays are endless. It's the tomorrows that are the most hammered down (p. 96). If we free ourselves from the shackles of the past which have bound us so we behave this way, then we will inhabit the present and the future*

differently, because the past is the future. Is now. All woven together. (p. 87)

This is a book that contains many layers of dreaming: actual dreaming, prescient dreaming, meditative dreaming (in the sense of deep thinking towards a larger understanding), totemic dreaming (tapping into the spiritual presence of the ancient land we inhabit). The book itself can be read as a dreaming towards reimagining the way we see ourselves, all together, as Australians, and as a people:

'Don't you see? This is the chance. It's got to stop. Let's stop it here. You and I. Let's make a stand. The soul of our people is burning. I see you reading your Bible, Mister Conway. You are not like the bosun: you really read it, search for it. I see you searching. That's why it is you and I who stand here, spewed up by history into this precise moment. We rape and pillage and steal and kill without mercy and build an empire and become wealthy and become heroes and all the time it is our spirit we have sold to the lowest bidder.' (p. 231)

The Waterboys is radical because it invites readers to open their eyes: to see their own lives differently, and to begin a different way of inhabiting the country that we share – Djenga and Countrymen alike. It does this by invoking the vast metaphor of dreaming as one of the most powerful tools for change there can be.

About the Author

Peter Docker was born in Wiilman Country at Narrogin, Western Australia, of mainly Irish heritage. He grew up on a station in Wudjari Country at Coomalbidgup, near Esperance. He has worked as a dairy hand, hay carter, wheat bogger, window washer, bank teller, lift driver, barman, concierge, seller of adult products, sorter of mail, an infantry officer in the army reserve, singer in a rock band, and has been a professional actor for twenty years. He lives with his family in Broome (Nyamba Yawuru Buru) in Western Australia. Peter Docker has had short stories published in Australian literary journals and has written for stage and radio. His first novel, *Someone Else's Country*, was published by Fremantle Press in 2005.

The Waterboys is a novel that could not have been written by anyone else. It represents a singular confluence of time, place and – above all – authorial disposition and experience. In an epigraph, Peter Docker says:

Once, I rested by the Swan River, the Darbal Yaragan. I lay down near the river mouth on the north side. I was not quite awake. Not quite asleep. This dream rose like mist off the water, and settled on me.

I wrestled with the dream until I could write it down in this form.

In conversation elsewhere, he has spoken about the period after he began writing the book, when he was required to spend sometime in the eastern states. Though he kept working on the story that was to become *The Waterboys*, Docker eventually discarded the material produced during his time away. He found that he needed to be on the site / in sight of the Darbal Yaragan in order to tell this story which, quite literally, came to him as in a dream.

The experience of Captain Charles Fremantle, as reimagined in this story, is in many ways a metaphor for Peter Docker's own relationship with Indigenous people, south and north, in Australia's West. Like Fremantle, in his own life and in his imagination, Peter Docker has 'thrown off the mantle of Empire'. His eyes have been opened to Country, and to the Indigenous relationship with Country in a way that makes it impossible for him to close them again.

The state of black–white relations in Australia is, as Docker depicts it, in many ways akin to a long, slow, brutal civil war based on subjugation and destruction of one race by another. With this physical destruction comes the destruction of ancient culture and knowledge. This annihilation is destroying the lifeforce of all inhabitants of this country, black and white together.

Whatever it is we are doing now isn't working, Docker says. So what should we do instead?

From the Author

When *The Waterboys* is taken in the context of my body of work, including *Someone Else's Country*, there is a possibility for me to comment on my meta-motivation for what I choose to write about.

In the documentary film made with Archie Roach and Pat Dodson*, the late great Pete Postlethwaite said that in Australia 'Terra nullius has become a state of mind' (amongst white Australians). Originally, terra nullius was a lie perpetrated by the British Government so that they could 'legally' steal the land and resources. But now it goes deeper. It is this state of mind, I believe that has held us back, and hindered any chance we have to 'find the love' for our Indigenous Australians. And to find our true identity as 'Australians', which cannot be achieved without the total inclusion of Aboriginal people and thought systems. It is this terra nullius state of mind that I seek to tear down, and expose for the terrible lie that it is.

In the big picture (which is also related to *The Waterboys*) the dysfunctional relationship is one that Westerners have with Indigenous Peoples all around the world – Australia, South America, the US, Canada – exactly mirrors the dysfunctional relationship that we have with our small blue planet.

How difficult is it for us to accept that we are destroying our only home with our financial and social systems? About as difficult as it is for us to accept our bloody past and present relationships with Traditional Owners.

* *The documentary is called Liyarn Nyarn – which means a 'coming together of spirit' in the Yawuru Ngan-ga of Broome*

Discussion Questions

1. Conway, the novel's protagonist, is a white man who has moved beyond the fact of his own colour to ask more important questions: *I can read Mitch's thought from here: Who do you think you are? What colour are you? Whose side are you on? I look around me, the only white face in this tight mob of desert fullas. I've spent my life asking these questions, and reading it in others around me.* (p. 56) What do you think are the more important questions?
2. In what ways is Docker's Australia at war? What is the nature of this war?
3. How might Conway be seen to be suffering from a post-traumatic stress disorder? How does this manifest in him? What is the origin of this for him?
4. Identify different kinds of dreaming in *The Waterboys*. What are the different functions of these different kinds of dreams? What is the correlation between literal and figurative events and experiences in *The Waterboys*?
5. Brothers and brotherhood are an important motif in this novel. What are some of the brotherly pairings in the novel? What is Docker saying about the importance of bonds between men? What are the possibilities of strength and destruction in these relationships?
6. What is the importance of women and men's relationships with women as explored in *The Waterboys*?
7. In what ways do the men in the novel accord women respect? Where women are portrayed as victims (such as the child Nayia-Nayia, or Conway's mother), what does Docker hope to achieve through the violence of these depictions?
8. Is this the same kind of violence, or a different kind, to that displayed and exhibited by the men through the course of the novel?
9. What do you make of Conway's revelation in regard to the final moments of The Sarge and his own part in The Sarge's death (see 'Shared Dream Memory' at p. 264)? Does this revelation throw a different light on our understanding of Conway's character? Why is this a revelation that is held until late in the novel?
10. What kind of Australia do the characters Conway and Mularabone inhabit? How does their Australia echo aspects of crisis we see about us in Australia today?
11. What is the power / point of fiction set in the future?
12. Discuss Conway's grog dreaming and the way it manifests itself. What comment do you think the author might be making about the place of alcohol in Australia both in the past and present?
13. What is Greer the guardian of?
14. In 'Forty: Two Brothers' (p. 345), Greer shows Conway and Mularabone images of the east coast of Australia (and St Kilda in particular) that is dry, with little pockets of green. What is the point of showing them this?
15. What does Conway hope to reveal to his brother Jack by flying out across the river to show him the sunken man-o'-wars from Stirling's fleet? What does the author mean about history when he says *the whole problem of writing history down is exactly this. Who writes it down? Many current events fly so in the face of contemporary beliefs that they must be filtered to be written down in an acceptable form. In many instances this filtration process turns the actual events into fairytales, or worse, completely subverts the original events. Djenga seem*

to be good at this nursery version of history. (p. 290) The author returns many times to the idea of 'history' in the course of the novel. You may wish also to discuss the scene with Mrs Dance and the tree ('Ghost of History: Cavorting with Savages', p. 182) and the novel's refrain that history 'spews' its characters up at different points in time.

16. Which Western Australian 'founding fathers' make their appearance in *The Waterboys*? How does their depiction vary from other history accounts you may have read? Why has Peter Docker presented them this way? What is Docker doing when he describes Conway's 'Blood Dust 'Dream: River of Blood' (p. 205)?
17. Is it possible to say that *The Waterboys* is as valid (or as important) as any account of Australian history that you have read?
18. What do you make of the novel's ending, and the destruction by Conway (using his brother-spear, Mularabone) of the fidgety little bastard in Jack's eye (see 'Forty-one: Make More Spear, p. 353)? What does the fidgety little bastard represent?
19. At the novel's end, what is the reader meant to feel about what might happen next? Why has the author chosen to end his story here and in this way?
20. Have a look at *The Rabbits*, the picture book written by John Marsden and illustrated by Shaun Tan (Lothian, 2000). This is a book in a very different genre that is having a similar kind of conversation to the one Docker has here – and which is accessible also to children. What is the importance of books like these in the Australian cultural and political landscape?