

SALT RIVER ROAD

MOLLY SCHMIDT

ABOUT THE BOOK

A poignant exploration of healing and resilience, small-town racism and the power of human connection.

In the aftermath of their mother's death, the lives of the five Tetley siblings fall apart. Rose is abandoned by her beloved brother Frank, while their father, Eddie, is undone by his grief. When Noongar Elders Patsy and Herbert encounter Rose marching away from the mess, they take her home in a storm of red gravel dust that stirs up memories Eddie Tetley would rather forget.

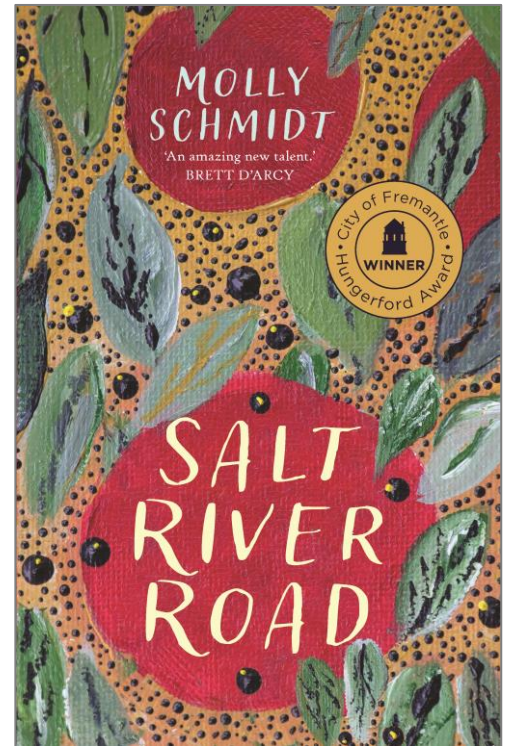
Soon Rose finds herself welcomed into a home where she has the chance to discover the true power of belonging. With the help of Patsy and Herbert, she will find a way to begin to heal not only her family's pain but wounds hidden for a generation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Molly Schmidt is writer and journalist from the coastal town of Albany (Kinjarling), in the Great Southern region of Western Australia. She grew up roaming paddocks and climbing paperbark trees on Menang Noongar country. While writing *Salt River Road*, she collaborated with Noongar Elders from the Great Southern, with the goal of producing a novel that actively pursues reconciliation between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people. *Salt River Road* was the winner of the 2022 City of Fremantle Hungerford Award. Molly works as a radio producer and journalist for the ABC, where her passion for storytelling is put to good use.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the author has chosen to include an author note describing her novel's genesis? What difference does this additional information make to your experience of reading the novel?
2. What are the key themes of this novel?
3. How does its structure (with the prologue and epilogue titled 'Ngank', and the verse contained within) contribute to the delivery of this story?
4. Are the voices in the Rose and Frank poems doing something different to the chapters in prose?
5. How does *Salt River Road* portray the impact of a long illness and subsequent death of a parent?
6. Do you think that Eddie is to blame for the way his family falls apart?
7. What difference does it make to the story that Rose and Frank are very close in age? Why do you think their mother's death drives them apart?
8. Which character do you identify with, and why?
9. How does the relationship between Eddie and Frank change over the course of this novel?
10. How is indirect or overt racism evident in this novel, set in a south-west country town in the late 1970s? In your view, has anything changed since then?
11. What do the characters of Aunt Patsy and Uncle Herbert teach us?
12. What difference does it make that the author has included Noongar language in her novel?
13. Should all writers consult with the Traditional Custodians of the land they are writing on?



14. What aspects of the author's consulting process could make a difference to our fiction if Molly-Schmidt's process was to be applied more broadly?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Is it true that this novel was a long time coming? How did it become the novel we have before us?

Absolutely. I was a teenager, about the same age as Rose Tetley in *Salt River Road*, when I first wrote the names 'Rose' and 'Frank' on a piece of lined paper in my lever arch 'story file'. I was in the back of the car, as we drove the long and familiar stretch of Albany Highway between Albany and Perth. I watched the paddocks blur out of the window and wondered what happened in the tiny farming community – Tenterden – that we had passed through in a matter of moments. The book began as a work of therapy, as I processed losing my own dad to cancer as a nine-year-old, through fictional characters. Rose and Frank and the world of the Tetleys lived in my desk drawer for me to return to over more than a decade. *Salt River Road* began to grow into a novel and not just a work of therapy when I returned to it with fresh eyes after working for some time as a journalist. Through my work, I had the privilege of hearing and sharing stories from Perth's Traditional Custodians, the Whadjuk Noongar people, and I became acutely aware how often both media and literature overlook these people and their stories. I realised I had omitted First Nations characters from my own novel, and decided to go back the Country the book is set upon and ask the Traditional Custodians of that land how they would like to be included. What ensued was two years of study and collaboration and consultation with Menang and Goreng Noongar Elders, who guided me as I wove Noongar characters and a whole new narrative into the threads of *Salt River Road*, making it the book it is today.

What is something you learned from the consultation process that you will apply to your work going forward?

That you cannot go into a consultation process with any perceived ideas about how the questions you ask may be answered. If you are honest in your work, you can't be attached to getting a certain outcome. If the Elders I spoke with told me they didn't want me to include Noongar characters in *Salt River Road*, I wouldn't have. That would have entirely changed the book in ways I cannot even imagine, but it would have been true to what I set out to do, which was to honour the Traditional Custodians of the land my book was based upon. I will always ask questions and be prepared to change my direction so that I am always headed towards an inclusivity that is determined by the people I am seeking to include.

Did anything you learned from this process change the shape or direction of your work?

Very early on, it was established that the majority of the Elders I spoke with preferred that a non-Indigenous writer didn't write from the perspective of Indigenous characters (something that I did not feel comfortable doing anyway). We discussed the difference in writing inclusively (writing a book that has Noongar characters within it) and writing from within the minds of those characters. There were many other findings that changed the shape of *Salt River Road*, as it was truly guided by what I learned from the Elders. They shared memories of working hard to clear the land that is now the Great Southern agricultural region, and many of them shared reflection that First Nations people are very rarely acknowledged for this back-breaking work. I made sure to reference this history within the book. There are many examples, but a poignant one is that Menang and Goreng Noongar Elder Aunty Averil Dean shared language with me that entirely shaped the ending of *Salt River Road*. She told me that the word for 'mum' in her language is 'ngank', and the word for 'sun' is also 'ngank'. The word for 'thumb' is a similar word, 'nganka'. You'll have to read to the end of the book to find out why this was so important!

What else did you take away from the time you spent on Country with Indigenous Elders?

The knowledge the Elders shared with me is vast and precious and very hard to summarise, but a huge take away from my whole project has been it is *worth* asking questions. It is so important for First Nations people to tell their own stories, and non-Indigenous writers cannot take that opportunity from them. It's a difficult walk to

walk, to find a way to be inclusive, and not step on toes. But what I learnt was to embrace that I did not have the answers, so I better start asking questions. I learnt to be incredibly grateful for the time the Noongar Elders were sharing with me, and the energy it required for them to consider my questions. I learnt that the culture of Australia's First Nations People is as varied as it is vast, and what I learnt from the Menang and Goreng Noongar people is specific to their country and culture, so any writer or artist wishing to be inclusive and 'get it right' would need to speak with the Elders and Traditional Custodians of that Country. I will always ask questions, and I will forever cherish relationships with First Nations people who are busy, tired, sought after, spread thin and yet had time to share stories, tea and cake with me.

What's next for Molly Schmidt?

At the time of writing this, I am still reeling that this book exists. I am continuing my work as a journalist at the ABC, which partially satisfies my hunger for storytelling, while I work on what the next book will look like. I am also continuing to work closely with some of the Elders I consulted with, who have their own stories they wish to tell, and I am so very keen to assist them.



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