

**BENANG**  
*from the Heart*

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## Preface – Kim Scott

If it's twenty-five years since *Benang* was first published, it must be even longer ago that its narrator first introduced himself to me with: 'I may well be the first-born-successfully-white-man in the family line ...' The clumsiness of the sentence was part of its perverse attraction, as I remember, and I was confident that no one else would be foolish or brave enough to take such a position. My notes from visits to the state archive were littered with two acronyms: FWMB and LFBA. It was in almost every local history, published or not: the First White Man Born, and the Last Full Blood Aborigine.

I'd also come across A.O. Neville's Australia's *Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* — a piece of work I cited incorrectly in *Benang* as *Australia's Coloured Minority: **Their** Place in **Our** Community*.<sup>1</sup> A mistake, but it shows how I felt reading it. The book has a photograph with the caption:

*THREE GENERATIONS* (Reading from Right to Left)

1. Half-blood — (Irish-Australian father; full-blood Aboriginal mother)
2. Quadroon Daughter — (Father Australian born of Scottish parent; Mother no. 1)
3. Octaroon Grandson — (Father Australian of Irish descent; Mother No. 2)

The three individuals stand with their backs to one another, and the third in line is a wingnut-eared, fair-skinned boy with a toothy grin

... with whom, unfortunately, I could identify. He was, to a certain way of thinking, surely a success. A.O. Neville's ace in the pack; the successful result of a program to isolate from community, breed out Aboriginality, fill with shame ...

To uplift and elevate.

There was in fact no place for Australia's coloured minority.

Oh dear.

I thought of adjusting the image; could I replace this face with, instead of my own, *MAD* magazine's Alfred E. Neuman? It was indeed a desperate time.

Instead, I pinned the picture from Neville's book beside a family photo of people similarly grown fair-skinned over the generations, but clinging to one another, and to the dark matriarch at their very midst. I kept the images by my desk.

Neville's words informed the first image, I wanted words for the other. More than words, I was looking for a voice. I had a literary education of sorts, and was beginning the process of recovering my ancestral, Noongar language.

*Benang* means tomorrow.

Twenty-five or more years ago, the dismantling of the monstrous fiction of Terra Nullius had begun, Native Title was begrudgingly accepted, and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was still ringing its truths to an increasingly, insistently deaf world. At the same time, fraud and hoax and theft of Aboriginal identity was rampant. A woman from a pioneering family submitted paintings to Aboriginal art competitions that she signed as elder Eddie Burrup; a white man posing as an Aboriginal woman won Aboriginal literature awards; and an arguably confused soul known as Colin Johnson / Mudrooroo was lionised by the academy for his polemic as a self-proclaimed Noongar writer who was more than willing to prescribe what was proper Aboriginal writing.

I was working at Curtin University's Centre for Aboriginal Studies, on secondment from the WA Education Department. The tailwind initiated by various Whitlam government reforms had helped me through secondary schooling and a BA DipEd (literature and history) at university, after which I spent eight years teaching at various government secondary schools around Western Australia. I was around the age my Noongar father was when he died at thirty-nine, and had children of my own.

My education had to that point given me very few words to nurture my stubborn stump of pride in being 'of Aboriginal descent'; which was the best my father and community could articulate. Noongars I knew still didn't have all the words but would tap their chests. 'You feel it, here? Speak it from the heart.'

At the Centre for Aboriginal Studies we were also attempting to heal, rebuild, recover ... I *tried* to write from the heart, but it didn't come out right. The words ran dry, and the language most readily available to me — the language of the archives, the language of our shared history, of public discourse — was ruthless in its logic and its preferred positioning of someone like myself, and indeed of all Aborigines.

As I recall I was also under the influence of Mick Dodson's wonderful 1994 Wentworth Lecture, 'The End in the Beginning: Re(de)finding Aboriginality' and its subtle, decolonising ambitions.<sup>2</sup> I think I re-read Conrad's *Nostromo*, probably thinking of Georg Lukacs' notion of characters in an historical novel as representing social forces. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* would have also, of course, been on my mind. I was fretting about novels, identity, historiography.

My slippery narrator's clumsy phrase, 'first-born-successfully-white-man', slyly referenced the project of colonisation, and suggested genocide along with the denial of prior occupation. Most of all I liked that it sparked and popped and hummed with perverse energy. It was enticing, felt a little dangerous, seemed an exciting bunch of words to tangle with.

I was something of an anomaly in those long-ago times: university educated, teaching, a Noongar would-be-writer thinking about ancestors and community, and wondering, ‘What is required of me?’

The archives and its variations on FWMB and LFBA made me shouty and depressed. And I’m not a shouty person. Any training I had was literary: poetry, the novel, various ‘ways of reading’. I had some relative privilege, a minor skillset. It seemed ethical, perhaps strategic, and certainly brave (I was frightened) to ‘take on’ the language of the archives. Start as the FWMB, and then write my way out of its trap. I thought of advice I’d received from a tent boxer I knew: feign a weakness, see how they come at you. Be brave.

There’s a scene late in *Benang* that remains with me after all these years — of Noongar women looking down a corridor of words, glimpsing and thus once again evading the Travelling Inspector of Aborigines. I too wanted to slip the constraining language of our shared history, to speak from between and despite its insistent sentences. To say, ‘We are still here, tomorrow’.

Twenty-five years ago I was trying to find a voice other than that I encountered in the archive, the language of our shared history. I was, not necessarily consciously, trying to dismantle some of the historical infrastructure of identity and belonging, and hoping to regenerate and transform those very things, and our relationships. I was trying to be brave and loose, and to play. I was, in a perhaps selfish way, writing fiction.

The recently deceased novelist Milan Kundera once said ‘the novel has no place’ in the world because this is ‘a world of answers rather than questions’ and people prefer to ‘judge rather than to understand, to answer rather than ask’.

I complete this preface on 15 October 2023, the day after the referendum to acknowledge Aboriginal people in the constitution and to ensure a voice from Aboriginal Australia. It was rejected. How long

must we wait to justly graft a polity to that of the peoples who first created human society on this ancient continent?

A voice from the heart is always difficult. The need remains. We are still here, *Benang*.

Kim Scott

October 2023

1. A.O. Neville, 'Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community', Sydney: Currawong Publishing Co, 1947.
2. Michael Dodson, The Wentworth Lecture: 'The End in the Beginning: Re(de)finding Aboriginality', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1994, No. 1, pp. 2-13, [columbia.edu/itc/polisci/juviler/pdfs/dodson.pdf](http://columbia.edu/itc/polisci/juviler/pdfs/dodson.pdf)

## from the heart

I know I make people uncomfortable, and embarrass even those who come to hear me sing. I regret that, but not how all the talk and nervous laughter fades as I rise from the ground and, hovering in the campfire smoke, slowly turn to consider this small circle of which I am the centre.

We feel it then, share the silence.

Of course, nothing can stop a persistent and desperate cynic from occasionally shouting, 'Look, rotisserie!' or, 'Spit roast!' But no cynicism remains once I begin to sing.

Sing? Perhaps that is not the right word, because it is not really *singing*. And it is not really *me* who sings, for although I touch the earth only once in my performance — leaving a single footprint in white sand and ash — through me we hear the rhythm of many feet pounding the earth, and the strong pulse of countless hearts beating. Together, we listen to the creak and rustle of various plants in various winds, the countless beatings of different wings, the many strange and musical calls of animals who have come from this place right here. And, deep in the chill night, ending the song, the curlew's cry.

Death bird, my people say.

Obviously, however, I am alive. Am bringing life.

People smile at me, say:

'You can always tell.'

'You can't hide who you are.'

‘You feel it, here?’  
And, tapping their fists on my chest,  
‘Speak it from the heart.’

But it is far, far easier for me to sing than write, because this language troubles me, makes me feel as if I am walking across the earth which surrounds salt lakes, that thin-crust ed earth upon which it is best to tread warily, skim lightly ...

Quickly.

The first thing is the first thing is that we always knew it was not the best way, but that there was no real choice and we had to keep moving if only to get past the bad smell of it all ...

And it is thus — with a bad smell — that I should introduce myself; even if such an aroma suggests my words originate from some other part of my anatomy than the heart.

Sadly, I can begin only so far back as my great-great-grandparents, for it is they — Fanny, Sandy One Mason, and their boy, Sandy Two — who limp by the government water tank, trying not to breathe at all rather than have this stench invade their nostrils.

Phew! Phew!

Something dead. Sandy One cursed the bastard who’d dumped a carcass by the edge of town. A dead kangaroo, he thought.

Well ... No. In fact, it was the body of a child. A boy. My family may not have even realised this, although I see Fanny — discreetly, indecently — sniff the air.

The poor boy had been only a few years old. His name? His name was ... I’m tempted to give him my own name, but his was that of a famous man, an explorer, a pioneer, a politician, and although I intend to write a history, it is not one at such an exalted level.

However, it is true that the explorer — a Premier Man — had travelled this very way, some years before. Before the gold rushes, and even before the telegraph line which sprang up in his footprints. A very strange thing



it was, that telegraph line; such thin wire, trembling with unseen unheard voices, looping from pole to pole across the country.

I admit I am not absolutely sure of the boy's name, or even why the body was left there. I merely happened upon the incident in my fitful attempts to supplement Grandad's research and my Uncles' memories. Kylie Bay's Board of Health had written to the Aborigines Department asking for funds for the disposal of the body of said child which, having been deposited within the town area by *blacks*, posed a hazard to the town's health.

I feel a certain kinship with the boy, but my kinship with Fanny and the two Sandies becomes all the stronger with the realisation that, when I began this project, I too breathed in the scent of something discarded, something cast away and let drift and only now washed up. It was the smell of anxiety, of anger and betrayal. Of course, it may equally have been the rank odour of my grandfather, his puke and shit. Or perhaps some olfactory nerve was triggered by the thought of a boy, left limp and lifeless and more like me than I care to admit.

But I anticipate myself. I do not wish this to be a story of me — other than in the healing — but of before me. I wish to write nothing more than a simple family history, the most local of histories. And to make certain things clear.

As reluctant as I am to face it, I may be the successful end of a long line of failures. Or is it the other way round?

So ... So, by way of introduction, here I come:

The first white man born.

## the first white man born

*As I see it, what we have to do is uplift and elevate these  
people to our own plane ...*

A O Neville

As the first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line I awoke to a terrible pressure, particularly upon my nose and forehead, and thought I was blind. In fact, the truth was there was nothing to see, except — right in front of my eyes — a whiteness which was surface only, with no depth, and very little variation.

Eventually, I realised my face was pressed hard against a ceiling.

I pushed out my hands and shot rapidly away from it. Thus, I fell. Still groggy from the collision with the floor, and once more floating toward the ceiling, I kicked out and managed to hook my feet in the wrought-iron bedstead. It was an awkward and clumsy process but I succeeded in securing the bedsheet (which must have fallen from the ceiling), and inserting myself beneath it. And there I lay, secure but trembling, staring at my hands which gripped the sheet so tightly.

I couldn't stay trapped like that. Summoning my courage and tentatively experimenting, I discovered that I merely had a *propensity* for elevation. I would rise in the air only when I relaxed, let my mind go blank.

I felt so weak but, obviously, it was not from the effort of supporting my body's weight.

Hovering before a mirror, I saw a stranger. It was hard to focus, but this much was clear; he was thin, and wore some sort of napkin around his

loins. Dark blue veins ran beneath his creamy skin, and his nipples and lips were sharply defined.

The image shifted, and changed shape as I have seen clouds do around granite peaks above the sea. But it was terrible to see the shapes, the selves I took.

I stood motionless against a setting sun; posture perfect, brow noble, features fine.

Saw myself slumped, grinning, furrow-browed, with a bottle in my hand.

Was Tonto to my grandfather's Lone Ranger. Guran to some Phantom. There appeared a footballer, boxer, country and western singer.

A tiny figure, sprawled on the ground in some desert landscape, dying.

And then I saw myself poised with a boomerang, saw myself throwing it out to where the sky bends, saw it arcing back again but now it was my tiny, cartwheeling mirror image which was returning, growing, merging with other crowding, jostling selves into one shimmering, ascending me.

I closed my eyes, and when the crown of my head gently nudged the ceiling I must have looked like some elaborate light shade. Perhaps that was what my grandfather meant when he said I was brightest and most useful in an uplifted state.

It was easy enough to come down again. I kept my eyes closed, and let the voice in my skull run through what I now realise was the thinnest of narratives, my father's few words. Thus, it was anger which returned me to earth. Well, to the floor at least.

I dressed myself carefully, opened the door.

I wanted to be bold, but walking felt very peculiar. Had I ever known how? I held my shoulders back, placed each foot precisely and, flicking my toes and flapping my arms, desperately tried to propel myself forward. It was very difficult to maintain balance, and although perhaps it should have been laughable I was, in fact, desperate and tearful because — more than anything else — I wished to appear as normal as possible.

I mastered a way of walking, and my light tread — despite being little more than a series of soft touchdowns — sounded the floorboards like a drum.

It must have been morning, because I was blinded by light as I opened the last door.

Blinking, I saw my grandfather's back, and we were both looking out over a view of ocean, island, headland reaching in from the right of the window frame. The old man turned his pale and lined face to me.

'You're back,' he said.

He stroked my jaw with the back of his hand, ran his finger along a scar there.

'My son. You look so much better. You still don't remember, do you?'

His face shone with relief. Or was it the reflection of success?

Oh, I remembered all right, and I get better all the time. But I kept quiet. You might call it my *native* cunning.

In the window's frame I saw the ocean pulse against the tip of the island. It blossomed, disappeared. Again. Again.

My heart was beating calmly, my own pulse lulled me.

I was between the sheets of my bed, and my grandfather's eyes, in that face so close to my own, were brimming.

He moved his lips, trying to speak, then reached out and patted the back of my hand. He was fighting back tears. I stayed mute, did nothing.

'You'll be all right,' he slurred. 'We'll get you back on track. Everything that's mine is yours, you know that.'

Oh.

I let him hear my voice.

'Thanks. Thanks, Dad.'

I knew that would get to him. He smiled, and a tear ran down his cheek. It was like one of his beloved bedside scenes.

I had come back from the dead. Obviously, I was not in the best of health; I was pale, my memory was poor, and it was as my grandfather's child that I sensed an opportunity. The old man wouldn't last long. Well, I've been raised to this, I thought. *It is survival of the fittest, and let the fittest do their best.*

## raised to this ...

When I was seven years old my father gave me to his own father to raise.

My grandfather owned and managed a gentlemen's boarding house. He and my father shook hands at the rear of the building to finalise the transaction.

Hands parted, and I followed my grandfather between walls of corrugated iron, teetering crates, empty glass bottles. Struggling with my plastic bags of clothing and breathing the air of unwashed laundry and indifferent cooking, I followed him up rickety and creaking stairs until eventually we emerged from gloom and into a wash of light. Before us an array of tables, set with cloth, cutlery and condiments, patiently awaited the arrival of those who would be served.

Grandad thought this would be a good place for me to start.

A doorway to my right led to a room with a desk, filing cabinet, television and bed. My grandfather introduced me to his business partner, Auntie ... I can't remember the name. There was a succession of them over the years. She sat up in bed, wearing a thin dressing-gown, and with receipts, money, accounting books and magazines scattered across the bedclothes. The desk was beside the bed and supported a worn typewriter, a box of chocolates, and an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts and chocolate wrappers. The solemn visage of the Queen observed a crucified Christ pinned to the opposite wall. Auntie looked at me from between the two of them, and gave a very quick smile.

I was led to an old verandah enclosed with glass louvres. My room. There was a bunk-bed with a desk beneath it, and three walls lined with the books I was to read in the long weekend and holiday hours before me. How familiar I became with them, their smell, the way words can blur, and shift, and welcome you among them.

In that room I always woke with dawn light on my face. One step brought me up against the louvres, and a view of the shabby, flaking backs of other tall buildings. Below, in the middle of a small concrete enclosure, a tiny, stubborn rug of buffalo grass defied the cars which nosed up to it. A tap hung over a little drainwell.

‘We all have to make our way in this world,’ Grandad said, ‘on your own. I want to give you an even chance. You will never get that with your father.’

Grandfather — Ernest Solomon Scat — told me that my father had agreed it was for the best.

At first, adjusting to the new circumstances, I had an unfortunate run of bed-wetting, but once cured of that — with an ingenious system my grandfather designed whereby an electric shock was administered to my penis each time the sheets became wet — I was off to the very best of boarding schools.

I suppose it was effective enough.

In the school holidays Grandad trained me in all the tasks required to run a boarding house, and ensured I did extra studies. He made up a timetable. I served our gentlemen guests, and cleaned up after them, and made their beds, and washed their dishes, their clothes, their sheets ... Except when it was a necessary part of my duties I tried to avoid the boarders, many of whom were alcoholics.

I accepted the books Grandad had mailed from this or that book club; classics, instructive manuals of one kind or another, best-sellers ... I read them all.

There was nothing else to do. Like many isolated youths, reading was a great comfort to me.

I knew Ern was a reader, but it was only in the later years of his life that I became aware of his interest in local and family histories, and realised he had always kept notes, worked to a plan, documented his activities and research.

Grandad was very insistent that I achieve well at school, and I was still very young when I brought home a report which indicated that I was not achieving to my potential, was somewhat lazy. Grandfather said nothing as he stood beside me reading it but, having accomplished that, he suddenly struck me to the ground and delivered a kick which sent me sliding across the floor. It was a startling violence, and as I lay there curled up in shock he told me I was to stay in the room and study for the duration of the school holiday. I was relieved to be left alone.

It was many years later that I crept through Aunty's bedroom/office so as not to wake her, and into the dining room. White plastic tablecloths, stainless steel, grubby lace curtains and grey light. The old fellow, Uncle Will — who I dimly remembered from a time before I came to live with my grandfather — was the only one in the room. Grandfather had told me I was not to call this man uncle.

The old fellow motioned me over to where he sat very straight, eyes twinkling, and with his damp hair combed back along his scalp.

'How those girlfriends of yours?' he asked.

His comment caused me some anxiety. I had been sneaking out in the evenings to see a girl. She had an adopted sister, and the two of them were remarkably close and supportive of one another. One or the other of them had said, 'But just imagine, what if we were twins.'

'But,' I said, 'you look nothing like each other, and ...'

They laughed a little, were patient with my dim-wittedness.

'But just imagine, Harley, if we were twins.'

We did more than imagine. Perhaps I was merely following in the steps of my grandfather and father. It was the stuff of male fantasy, but

I have come to believe — despite how I strutted and flattered myself at the time — that there was far greater intention, passion, and — yes — even love implicated in our intimacies than the three of us knew. And I remain exceedingly grateful, because since then ...

Well, all of this will become clear.

Uncle Will said, ‘She looking for her family, is she?’

I did not reply. Will was smiling, but he seemed nervous.

I was at what Grandad referred to as *a most dangerous age*, and can’t say what caused him to become so lax over those long summer holidays. Perhaps he was preoccupied with his latest business partner, who I recall only as another new ‘Aunty so-and-so’, or it may have been that Uncle Will covered up for me. Whatever the case, had he known the extent to which I had freed myself from the timetable set for me, my grandfather would have said I was like *an oarless boat adrift on a wide sea*.

But, at that *most dangerous age*, I in fact had an oar — or something very like it — secreted away in my trousers. In return for accounts of my exploits Uncle Will had made himself a wonderful accomplice, and when I let him know — after all, I was isolated, I was proud, and I had to tell someone — that the girlfriends and I were ...

Please forgive my coyness, but how can I summarise all this, having now started?

Uncle Will, with a knowing smile, said, ‘No wonder you look so tired.’

I asked for his help!

And it was in the subsequent search for the biological family of one of my girlfriends that so much trouble began, and led me to reconsider who I am.

Raised to carry on one heritage, and ignore another, I found myself wishing to reverse that upbringing, not only for the sake of my own children, but also for my ancestors, and for their children in turn. And therefore, inevitably, most especially, for myself.



## funerals

How lonely I was at my father's funeral. Gravel rolled from beneath my feet as I skidded and stumbled toward the grave. I remember thinking that there should be more bodies, there were not enough bodies. Why just the one? There should be more.

I was full of self-pity. Is that normal for a murderer at his victim's funeral?

A small crowd circled the grave, heads down. The breeze plucked an orange flower from a tree and, setting its tiny propellers spinning, carried it toward where I saw the distant blue ocean, and an island with the sea blossoming white against its edge. A few faces I recognised floated before me. Glittering, brittle stars fractured my vision.

How is it possible for me to say how I feel, how I felt? I can say that the chain on my wrist was heavy and uncomfortable. I can say that I remember trying to place it over my shirt sleeve to protect my skin. I can say that I felt the shame of it, and that I wanted to ignore the man at its other end, but if he pulled me one way then of course that was where I must go. And my grandfather was there, at my other side. Showing his support, you think?

When the first of the real aunties reached for me, those two men pushed and pulled me away from them.

And so it is very curious — oh yes, it is curious, it is paradoxical, it is strange, it seems all wrong in every way for me to say it, but ... that chain may have helped pull me back from the edge of our grave.

Driving back to the remand centre the road dipped suddenly where there had once been a creek, and my stomach lurched. At the time there was only that gut feeling, but now, initially, I might explain it by way of dusty archives.

The Inspector for Aborigines and Fisheries' diary describes the pool where that creek once joined the river: *Acres and acres of mullet*, he said, *their tails sticking out of the water*. He wrote of how the dew saturated both banks, and how the fish seemed to move from the river into the milky mist which lay over it. The river, said the inspector, was very full, and rushed to and from this pool in its bend on the way to the harbour. The inspector also wrote that he was after *a gin* who, with a bunch of *very fair children*, had been reported as camping and hunting along the river. It was the nineteen twenties, long decades before I was born. It may well have been my family, generations back, out of their territory, running to escape.

That river still feeds into the harbour, but how little I knew of my ancestors' tongue then, how that river had dried up. But not completely.

The Nyoongar name for that harbour is Merrytch. Meaning dew, or dewdrop. But the word is similar to a word for penis, and also very similar to the word for mullet. Mullet, penis, dewdrop; they share the same root-word.

There are no more acres of mullet there. But there is still dew, and the sea still breaks over the island I saw from the cemetery. The river still flows, although it now floods the shallow harbour with pesticides. And what of my penis, its dewdrop?

I appreciate your concern, and that you remain with this shifty, snaking narrative. I am grateful; more grateful than you know, believe me.

As I was saying, the remand centre. There was a court case, certain charges were withdrawn, and I was acquitted of the death of my father and once again handed over to my grandfather's care.

We moved to the quiet and tiny coastal town of Wirlup Haven. Uncle Will helped us make the place comfortable.

Grandad had his plans. What he would bequeath me. The house I would renovate with him, the local and family histories we would write. Your forefathers, he said ...

I was still ill. It is difficult to appreciate the way a cultural and spiritual uplift can affect one. And then he had his first stroke.