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Review of *Taboo*, by Kim Scott, Picador-Australia, 2017

Rashida Murphy

Taboo starts with two humans and a skeleton in out-of-control semi-trailer freewheeling down a street, spilling wheat, before cresting to a stop in ‘massacre place.’ It is a powerful beginning tempered with a warning from its author – ‘this is no fairy tale, it is drawn from real life.’ In his Afterword, Scott concedes that his fiction touches on ‘real events, people and landscape.’ As a work of fiction, it is incomparable; as a work of fiction based loosely on real life, it is devastating. Storytelling, particularly in the hands of someone as accomplished as Kim Scott, will always be a political act, and this story is no exception.

West Australian writers often feature landscape as a character in their fiction: Tim Winton, Craig Silvey and Scott himself in earlier works. The landscape in *Taboo* is more than a ‘character’ though; it is particular, intense and deeply intuitive, holding and excluding its inhabitants alternately. Whether he’s describing the old woman concealed within bougainvillea, or the way people become fragments in ‘scattered shards of sunlight,’ Scott’s landscape moves, speaks and encourages the reader to see differently. Trees conceal scars, bristle when a bus approaches and toss their noisy leaves when a thunderstorm threatens. Wind, rain and evening shadows exhale, shred and roar. And yet this is not an alien landscape, not deliberately positioned as either malign or benign. This is landscape as part of the universe, just as we are, in all our flawed, occasionally heroic and mostly despairing lives.

And it is on those flawed lives that Scott’s eye lingers. The young woman who emerges from the runaway truck, Tilly, brave and resilient, perhaps, or filled with secret harm, is the pivot around whom the stories turn. Is she the wrong girl, the girl who must not be touched or given, or is she the product of her environment and displacement? Her white mother and Aboriginal father are both dead and she has returned to that place, the massacre place where her ancestors, her foster father and his son, would claim her. She must resist these claims. The rag tag band of hopefuls who journey towards reconciliation at the opening of a Peace Park, hold her in their midst, sensing the disquiet, but unable to heal. That disquiet is also part of the

landscape itself, frizzing with discontent; weeds, stones, gullies, rocks erupting, punching and lunging about in 'an enormous space. The big old sky above.' (P13).

Landscape becomes language in Scott's unerring hands. In what appears to be a deliberate and enticing device, the people in this story speak the 'old language,' which is mostly referred to as such: 'Gerald spoke its name in the old language.' (P 50).

Parrots, eagles and cockatoos all speak, as do earth and sky and bolts of lightning. The old people, and the young who watch them, speak in circular ways, familiar to those who come from oral storytelling traditions. And they speak 'now and in the future, the drunks and addicts, the old people and their carers and all those otherwise lost but wanting to help ...' (P 94). Scott's people describe generational despair and sit within their losses. Their tears rise and meet the sea. They understand what it means to be Noongar, 'proper Noongar things, not museum made-up stuff.' (P 95). Their grief manifests itself in language that recognises they could have done things differently. Breath and feeling and fire sing them to language.

The novel ends as it begins, reminding the reader of the circularity of stories, how beginnings and endings are shaped by intent and weighed by landscape. It is a story of dispossession, abuse, colonialism, addiction and racism. Scott's prose is lyrical as well as melancholy. He reminds us of the importance of bearing witness with unflinching precision. The men and women who walk through these pages are startlingly aware of their failings and equally forgiving of those failings in others. There are no quick fixes and the story vacillates between despair and hope. Yet this is not a grim story. The lucidity of its prose lifts it beyond the despair in its pages and reminds us that there are no perfect words and no easy resolutions to the trials of our First Nations people. Matilda-Tilly, girl-woman, both descendant and ancestress, haunted me in the way that fully realised figures in fiction and memoir often do; reminding me of Amanda Curtin's Meggie in *Elemental* and the young Sally Morgan in *My Place*.

This book needs to be read, reviewed, discussed and recommended widely. My life is richer for it.