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Finding the Secret River:
Mapping a Composite Narrative of *The Secret River* and *Searching for*
the Secret River

By

Anica Boulanger-Mashberg, BPA, BA (Hons)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
University of Tasmania, May 2009

Statement of Originality

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Abstract

This thesis conducts a close reading of Kate Grenville's two recent texts, the historical novel *The Secret River* and its companion "writing memoir" *Searching for the Secret River*. The first text rewrites an Australian colonial history while the second inscribes a personal, biographical history. I argue for a paired reading of the texts, which broadens the novel's historical concerns, encompassing *Searching for the Secret River*'s contemporary anxieties about place. This reading constructs a composite narrative which is a representation of postcolonial as well as colonial experience. It also enables a decentring of the persistent controversies regarding Grenville's claims for her novel's historical veracity.

The Secret River has featured notoriously in a contemporary Australian debate about the ethical responsibilities of novelists appropriating historical fact. However, a focus on this public and academic debate over disciplinary boundaries has dominated commercial and critical reception of *The Secret River*, obscuring other aspects of the novel. In establishing a composite reading, this thesis examines one such aspect: the narrative's preoccupation with the notion of belonging.

Chapter one maps the composite narrative across the two texts, differentiating, as well as emphasising the connections between, the journeys of each text's central character. The chapter dissects the characters' individual and common experiences of belonging, while tracing several recurrent themes – including the contested power of literacy and orality – through the composite narrative. The characters' relationships to land are considered as expressions of postcolonial anxiety, after Alan Lawson's discussions of settler narrative tropes.

In chapter two I explore the composite narrative's representations of belonging with a temporal rather than a geographical approach, identifying a nostalgia which is present both formally and thematically. The notion of a literary postcolonial belatedness underpins this argument, facilitating an examination of Grenville's relentless rehearsal of not only national but personal histories.

The final chapter broadens the scope of the thesis to include Grenville's earlier historical novel, *Joan Makes History*, as well as two contemporary fictionalisations of Australian history – Lindsay Simpson's *The Curer of Souls* and Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*. A discussion of the presence of a

historiographic self-consciousness in each of these texts contextualises the composite narrative's approach to harnessing historical fact.

The thesis concludes that the paired reading allows a more complex investigation of *The Secret River* than a reading of the novel alone.

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