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Apocryphal stories in Kate Grenville's Searching for the Secret River

Abstract

In researching The Secret River (SR) Kate Grenville mobilised apocryphal stories in two ways: by employing and discarding a family apocryphal story; and by creating an alternative history of the Hawkesbury River settlement that is potentially apocryphal. Analysing SR as apocryphal oral family history and as national collective memory further clarifies its cultural and literary context. Grenville deliberately revives a hidden story of Australian settlement in which Indigenous people are massacred, for the purpose of writing against the historical canon - her reconciliatory gesture as a privileged beneficiary of her ancestor's presumed dispossession of Indigenous people. Whether or not SR finds its place in Australian collective memory, its reception exposes points of tension between historical fiction writers and historians.

This paper focuses on the way Searching for the Secret River (SFSR) explicates the contradictions and anxieties embodied in Grenville's fictional text, rather than on the text itself, and her shaping of apocryphal narratives in particular times. Recent contretemps over the credibility of Australian historical fiction make an investigation of apocryphal stories timely. The Secret River, a literary transformation of historically unreliable, archetypal stories speculates about an alternative hidden history and has been economically successful; it bears the hallmarks of apocryphal stories.

Kate Grenville's impulse to write her nineteenth-century settler novel *The Secret River* (2005) came from a slim apocryphal story passed through three generations of her mother's paternal family. Her companion book, *Searching for the Secret River* (2006a), explains how this story resisted her attempts to turn it into fiction. Hereafter these two books will predominantly be referred to as *SR* and *SFSR*. In the process of writing *SR*, Grenville replaced the first apocryphal story with another, a metatext in which she attempts to reconcile her beneficiary privilege as the descendent of a Hawkesbury River settler with the presumed dispossession of Indigenous landowners by her settler-ancestor Solomon Wiseman. The absence of direct accounts of the settlement at Wiseman's Landing where he 'took up' land may result in her novel becoming itself an apocryphal story and therefore part of local collective memory.

Apocryphal stories create discourse and have the potential for endless interpretation. They share common characteristics: irreducible and enduring elements (often embedded in archetypal conflict); resistance to historical verification; popular acceptance resulting in their establishment in collective memory; revivals after periods of dormancy; subjection to political and economic manipulation; implicit speculation; and literary transformations. These characteristics frame analysis of Grenville's two selected texts and

explicate the pitfalls of materialising apocryphal narratives in historical fiction in late twentieth and early twenty-first century Australia.

SFSR functions in at least three ways. In a 2006 review Delia Falconer argues that Grenville's text 'falls somewhere between an extended festival paper ... and an in-depth discussion of the drafting process' and notes that Grenville submitted an earlier version as a doctoral thesis (Falconer 2006). In a 2007 paper, I used French theorist Gerard Genette's functions of preface, as outlined in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997), to discuss the way *SFSR* acts as a delayed or later preface for *SR* (Lynch 2007). Nigel Krauth (2002) and Jeri Kroll (2004) had already suggested that exegeses accompanying creative writing theses resemble traditional prefaces. Analysing *SR* as apocryphal oral family history and in national collective memory further clarifies its cultural and literary context. This paper focuses on the ways *SFSR* explicates the contradictions and anxieties embodied in Grenville's fictional text, rather than on the text itself, and her shaping of apocryphal narratives in particular times. Recent contretemps over the credibility of Australian historical fiction make an investigation of apocryphal stories timely.

Etymologically, the word apocrypha derives from a Greek word, *apokryphos*, from *apokrupto* - 'to hide away'; and ecclesiastical Latin, *apocrypha (scripta)* - 'hidden (writings)' (*Australian Oxford Dictionary* 1997). Apocryphal stories cluster around two meanings: those which fall outside accepted canonical stories accepted by the Judea-Christian tradition and, by extension, texts offering alternatives to canonical literature and history; and stories of doubtful authenticity. This paper argues that Grenville mobilises apocryphal stories in two of these ways, employing and discarding a family apocryphal story and creating an alternative history of the Hawkesbury River settlement that is potentially apocryphal. Both these modes involve oral family history.

Meaning 1: Apocryphal Stories as Unauthentic

Colloquial use of the word 'apocryphal' embraces perennial stories bordering on myths that refuse historical verification. These stories manifest in every culture and lend themselves to creative writing. They have their genesis in oral narratives that, while often unreliable, thrive on renovation and distortion, for example, unauthentic stories invented by Parson Weems about George Washington hacking down a cherry tree. Such stories remain in collective memory as long as people renew them by retelling and rewriting them.

Apocryphal stories should be distinguished from myth - the terms are often used interchangeably because of their common features. Both derive from archetypal dramas (Jung in Campbell 1984). Distinctions between mythical and apocryphal stories crystallise around their relationship with history and fiction, apocryphal stories being more closely aligned with history. The Arthurian romances, for instance, despite some allusion to medieval magic, play out in a generalised English setting during the Middle Ages, and valorise heroic traditions. Myth frequently springs from de-historicised stories closely linked to place and generally incorporating ritual. Apocryphal stories, however, utilise everyday tools and historical events. Their heroes and anti-heroes are believable - capable of great deeds, but grounded in their humanity and their temporality. The historically unverifiable story of Lady Godiva in which a naked woman makes her stand against high taxes, without losing her modesty, is considered to be apocryphal because of its competent plot and feasible denouement. Grenville's *SR* is apocryphal in this way.

Meaning 2: Apocryphal Stories as Alternative Histories

Joseph Urgo applies the word apocryphal to describe several of William Faulkner's novels, vigorously arguing that Faulkner:

employs the term in its etymological and biblical sense: that is to designate a subversive (thus "hidden") narrative form that challenges and refutes traditional, commonly accepted ("canonical") ideas about history and literature, particularly in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) and *The Reivers* (1962). (cited Hamblin 1991: 160-63)

It is my conjecture that Grenville does this too in *SR* where, in some sense, she revives a hidden story of Australian settlement as self-consciously brutal, perpetrating massacres of Indigenous people. At the time of writing, she challenged accepted conservative views about the dispossession of traditional landowners. Only time will tell whether her book becomes a watershed for the way Australians view their history. Grenville's great yarn about settlement is confronting. Let us take a closer look at her apocryphal texts.

Apocryphal Story 1: Solomon Wiseman, murderer

Section A: Hidden Story with Enduring Common Elements

Grenville's initial inspiration for *The Secret River* was an apocryphal oral family tale about her ancestor Solomon Wiseman; like most apocryphal tales it incorporates irreducible elements. The story had been passed down through the generations 'from Granny Davis, through Granny Maunder and Auntie Rose' and through Grenville's mother who 'always used exactly the same phrases each time she told it ...' (*SFSR* 17). Wiseman might have killed his first wife by throwing her down the stairs. If Grenville was keen to establish the genesis of her story it was to this part that she returned. It was 'the best bit of the story ... a dramatic death in the family ... the idea of a ghost ... and most uncomfortable, a murderer for a great-great, great grandfather ...' (*SFSR* 6). And it was this drama rather than the dull primary documents she found about Wiseman's life, that captured her imagination as a storyteller: 'all those petitions and letters about importing this, that and the other weren't especially dramatic' (*SFSR* 81).

Section B: Acceptance in Popular Memory

The Wiseman story belongs to Grenville's family collective memory. Such tales, violent, dramatic, and easily remembered, have visceral pull. They raise questions about the role of apocryphal stories in family memories and identity formation. How should murder be spoken about within a family? No reference has been made in reviews or interviews to negotiations with family members, other than with Grenville's mother who is portrayed as supportive of her daughter's Hawkesbury project and a keen proponent of this first apocryphal tale, habitually retouching key elements in her narrative. How does she feel about the published companion text expanding the tale of a single murder into a massacre?

Section C: Archetypal elements

Apocryphal stories, often based on archetypal dramas, make their tellers and retellers, uncomfortable, tapping into their conflicted collective unconscious. Stories about husbands killing wives - uxoricide - have resonance. While part of her fears that the Wiseman story is true and her ancestor was a bastard, another part of her wishes to engage with him, to understand him. As a novelist she decides to take him on, unwittingly enlarging the reader's sympathy for him and, at the same time, the people he betrays: his wife, dead at the bottom of the stairs, and later the Aboriginal people he evicts and, she hypothesises, possibly murders. The circumstances outlined in the apocryphal story about his wife's death rouse her curiosity *and* undermine her confidence in him. Although there is no space to discuss it here, Grenville is interested in manipulating postcolonial constructions apart from race. Domestic violence is a feminist issue.

Section D: Refuses Historical Verification

The fact that Grenville found no historical evidence to support the apocryphal story doesn't make it untrue. But until it *is* substantiated, it remains apocryphal. Grenville discovers some 'actual' historical documents: Solomon Wiseman's letters, including one in a 'grovelling tone' to his brother-in-law, 'straining after the grand phrase' and with 'elaborate strings of sentences' (*SFSR* 84). She dislikes him: awkward, if he is to be her subject. How will readers engage with her protagonist, if she cannot? After reading more letters, she becomes resigned to fictionalising him: 'I was starting to get a feel for him. Irascible, defensive, unyielding,' and 'Wiseman swam in and out of focus, now a good man, now a bad one. Now an innocent man unjustly accused, now a scoundrel' (*SFSR* 87, 88).

Section E: Speculation

Speculation is a feature of apocryphal stories. Grenville believes in it. In *SFSR* she speculates about *why* Wiseman might have killed his wife, hypothesising that his marriage 'wasn't a love match, but a cold blooded bit of self improvement', or that the new Mrs Wiseman had been an old love with whom he reunited (*SFSR* 67, 176-77). References on Grenville's website explain how she speculates in her most recent novel *The Lieutenant* (2008): 'I speculated about characters, taking what was known about them as a starting-point but imagining beyond what was recorded ... As a novelist I have latitude to speculate, to add, to omit, to guess and even to invent' (2009). Grenville's most controversial speculation relates to the second meaning of apocryphal. It seems that even within her family, no-one minded her speculation about Solomon Wiseman murdering his wife, but his killing of Indigenous people had wider ramifications, resounding in Australia's collective memory, as we shall see.

Section F: Aesthetic/Narrative Manipulation

As a writer incorporating apocryphal tales into a nineteenth-century settler novel I engaged with Grenville's primary and secondary texts with interest. Being privy to her complex negotiations with history and story proved valuable. Authorial ontology directly and subconsciously shapes historical fiction narratives. Creative writers hold onto shards of story, engaging their readers' sympathy for characters that seem to deserve it least. *SR* did not begin as a fiction project, as Grenville explains:

I thought there might be a non-fiction book of some kind in the material - perhaps something like a biography of Wiseman and a portrait of his times. I didn't know what, if anything, I'd find, or whether there would be enough interest for a book. (*SFSR* 14)

A dearth of primary resources and the need for 'more elbow room' provide the catalyst for her shift to fiction.

In the way of most historical novelists, Grenville's attitude to history is entangled with her instinct for making art. A fragment from the past drives the research of her novel: 'my ship was anchored to the past by ropes of story' (*SFSR* 17). She scours Sydney's Mitchell Library records for 'the slightest hint that Jane Wiseman's illness might have lingered because she was pushed downstairs by her husband ... some tiny thread to start tugging on.' Alas, 'no clues'. 'I found myself leaping to fill in the blanks,' she confides: 'I had to remind myself that, although this was a good story, that's all it was: a story I'd made up out of almost nothing' (*SFSR* 81-82).

And so, eventually, Grenville acknowledges this tension and relinquishes her family apocryphal tale - it has no traction, it bogs her narrative - and she finds a

better one (*SFSR* 179). Exciting research discoveries might have saved it but, alas, she makes none. She takes the decision of an experienced writer who knows story: 'kill your darlings ... I saw exactly what I needed to do. It was so simple. Get rid of William and Sophia Warner. Cut them out, kill them off' (*SFSR* 181). The first apocryphal story is abandoned long before it becomes an issue of truth. Is it because apocryphal texts have been contested that they develop surprising resilience, or despite it? What will become of this one? Faithfully retold by Grenville's mother, with all its enduring elements, it had outlived its usefulness. Perhaps it will lie dormant now for generations.

Apocryphal Story 2: An Alternative History of the Hawkesbury

Section A: Writing against the Canon

'Canon' and 'canonical' have several applications in a twenty-first century context. In this paper, the terms refer to 'literary works regarded as significant by the literary establishment' (*Australian Oxford* 1997). I expand this to include history. James Ley criticises the loose application of the word 'canon', in a new book about Australian fiction (Ley 2009: 21). For the sake of argument I hope that readers will accept my broad usage without more detailed qualification.

The survival of apocryphal texts - oral and written - depends on their temporal and political context. Apocryphal stories and historical fictions articulate and realise the spirit of their time of writing, often capturing a zeitgeist, aligning themselves with politics, including resistance, and with national cultural identities. Grenville wished to transform a political moment into narrative truth. She is a product and a protagonist of her times, imagining herself as writing against the canon: writing fiction, yet in some essential way, truth, about the dispossession and massacre of Indigenous people, at a time when Aboriginal Reconciliation has stalled.

When publishing *Paving the Way* (1897) about a hidden massacre, Simpson Newland was acutely conscious of his historical period, writing in his preface:

As, in a work on Australian pioneer life such as this purports to be, it might be difficult to present bare facts in an acceptable form to the general public, my object has been to blend truth and fiction in a connected narrative ... The time has not yet arrived in the life of Australia when the historian or novelist can write with an untrammelled pen. (Newland 1912)

Was the pre-Federation climate in which Newland told his massacre story more hostile than the stalled Reconciliation climate in which Grenville told hers? Alongside *his* imagining of a secret massacre Newland creates another apocryphal story about a famous horse ride.

Grenville's fictionalising of settler events along the Hawkesbury River revives them in public imagination after years of silence, and thus transforms them during a period of Australian government when black armband-ism is strongly contested. Positioning her main protagonist, William Thornhill, as a self-conscious white settler modelled on her ancestor Solomon Wiseman, she refuses to focalise her story through Indigenous characters - a postcolonial convention. The reader views the massacre through Thornhill's metatextual inner monologue: 'By and large he had never considered them to be bad men. And yet their lives, like his, had somehow brought them to this: waiting for the tide to turn, so they could go and do what only the worst men would do' (*SR* 300). Grenville writes back.

Section B: Hidden Story

Had the *SR*'s plot and metatext grown from stories suppressed in hegemonic

accounts of settlement? Consider *SR* in relation to some descriptions of religious apocrypha as containing ahistorical, mysterious and esoteric stories that espoused greater truths, previously kept hidden from the populace. The irony of its dissemination as an award-winning novel, then, as a spoil of the history wars, undermines *and* underlines its potency as purveyor of a secret story. Many Australians had never previously considered settlement as invasion. Grenville's version of these events was further mysticised by critics, politicians and historians labelling it as spurious and heretical, a criticism commonly associated with religious apocryphal narratives.

During the years leading up to the 1988 bicentenary of the first landing [invasion], narratives sprang up in which warriors like Pemulway were transformed into resistance fighters or worthy enemies in a war over land. Hidden apocryphal stories are responsive to the political reasons for their telling, but we will come back to that. Mark McKenna believes in the 'survival and power of stories' in which settlers on the NSW coast claim to have 'shot the lot', seeing the reasons for their retelling as more interesting than their historical validity: 'a grasping of what happened on the frontier' (McKenna 2005). These stories were also apocryphal. Historian Amanda Nettelbeck notes that in 1840s South Australian settler memoirs:

this aspect of the foundation story is ambivalently represented, phrased in a way which, on the one hand, openly admits of violence against Aboriginal people as an inevitable feature of frontier life and, on the other hand, sustains myth that violence was rare. (Nettelbeck 2001: 100)

Apocryphal stories proliferate in oral family histories. No doubt, in some cases the discovery of massacre sites with attendant weapons and skeletal wounds removed their stories' apocryphal status.

Adam Gall sees Grenville's writing on this subject as a more subtle form of imperialism, and that she is 'producing, at best, an account of regrettable excess, a humanitarian critique of colonialism' (Gall 2008: 102). He sees her negotiation of the taking / taking up position as the crux of her thesis, and suggests an alternative and equally valid reading: 'the situation from the perspective of the frontier, a position which suggests that the transformation of the "good settler" is underwritten by a sublimated version of the same possessive logic' (Gall 2008: 102). For the most part, Grenville's 'take' on 'taking up' precipitated arguments between white people, many with a vested interest. Indigenous voices were notably silent during the worst days of the Grenville / history controversy. Journalists, academics and fiction writers, all stakeholders in the knowledge industry, weighed in. Perhaps Grenville was a pawn in a larger game. Apocryphal stories frequently attach themselves to conflict and contradiction.

In depicting the final violent scene in *SR*, Grenville draws on popular stories about a massacre nearby but not on her ancestor's land. Having few witnesses, frontier stories have a curious slipperiness, and frequently depend on oral transmission through the families of perpetrators and victims. Grenville's Wiseman's Landing narrative, if it exists, belongs to the ancestors of people whom she represents as adaptive and organised custodians of their land, and with their gracious and generous descendents, with whom she collaborated. We do not know how Darug elders, Auntie Edna Watson and John Gallard, feel about her interpretation of their shared history, now that they have told her stories handed down to them of 'boys thrown into the river to die' (*SFSR* 131). Perhaps hidden stories about Wiseman's Landing will remain so. Grenville's original apocryphal tale did not include a massacre. 'The historical account of

the Waterloo Creek massacre gave me details and phrases to create an episode in which Aboriginal people are ambushed and killed' (*SFSR* 162). In true apocryphal fashion, she extrapolates and speculates.

Section C: Speculation

If Grenville hoped to create new apocrypha, not only could her great grandfather have murdered his wife, she speculates, but also it was possible, even likely, that he killed Indigenous people to secure the new territory he annexed. This speculation outlined in *SFSR* attracts historians' ire. 'Shortly before Wiseman arrived on the river, the *Gazette*'s reports of "outrages" and "atrocities" increased ...' she says, and then surmises, 'it was becoming less important to fill in the blanks of that specific story. Another story was taking over ... if you wanted to put it in one word, you'd say there'd been a war' (*SFSR* 119-20). Her initial motivation in exploring a family story about her great grandfather is subsumed by her increasing sense of guilt in relation to the dispossession of all Indigenous people. Her speculation about the reasons for this guilt lead her to acknowledge her complicity in frontier violence, at least as privileged beneficiary, and her urgent need for witness in the form of a reconciliatory text.

The adroit image of a war as headache offers the inexperienced history reader some penetration of the frontier issue: 'Aboriginal people attacked settlers; settlers and soldiers attacked back. Not every day, not every week. But on and off, like a headache' (*SFSR* 113). In a disarming way, Grenville aligns herself with ignorant readers: 'No one told me about this kind of violence on the Hawkesbury' (*SFSR* 116). She justifies her inclusion of a massacre and her attachment of it to her family by documenting the open warfare between settlers and Aboriginal people in the Hawkesbury area where her ancestors lived; similarly the theft of crops: 'These things didn't happen to Wiseman, of course, but they'd happened only ten years earlier and a few kilometres from where they *could* have happened to him' (*SFSR* 119).

Grenville's strategic positioning could be read as an act of sacrifice during which she offers her ancestral family's integrity to appease and resolve her conflicted feelings about Indigenous dispossession, reshaping national collective memory; but was she disingenuous? Apart from historians' concerns about veracity, this raises questions about the role of apocryphal stories in constructing family memories and identity formation. Speculation is a strong feature of apocryphal tales, but how do her cousins feel, or her elderly aunts, about their family being implicated in a massacre that may not have happened?

Section D: Enduring Common Elements, Archetypal Drama

Grenville was not retelling a local tale, but applying a paradigm: surely, if some accounts of actual massacres had been suppressed, her imagined one was too. Apocryphal stories frequently take up traditional narratives: men killing their sons, women sacrificing themselves for great causes, wars over land. While she considers herself to be writing fiction, and against the historical canon, she believes in her story of the Hawkesbury settlement as a broader truth from which readers will draw enduring understandings: 'After 200 years of denying our history or whitewashing it, as a nation we are finally willing to look it in the eye', she tells a 2008 interviewer (Grenville, in Errington 2008: 39).

Whether her truth gathers enough gravitas to enter the Australian canon will hinge on diverse and complex factors, including the effect of the 2007 apology to the stolen children generation, new historical research, and whether schools and universities take up the text. In the absence of an alternative it is likely that elements of the story will endure. In fifty or a hundred years readers may

accept Grenville's speculation that her family massacred Indigenous people to secure the theft of land near Wiseman's Landing.

Section E: Acceptance in Popular Memory

Grenville wrote *SR* while involved in postgraduate research at university. University ethics committees vet proposals involving Indigenous subjects; collaboration must be evident and transparent, following protocols and guidelines that recognise Indigenous sovereignty and custodianship over popular stories that can surprise and shock. Contemporary literary conventions for representing Indigenous characters would prefer them minor characters; they should not be exoticised or exploited in vicarious sexual or violent narratives, and writers should not appropriate their point of view. 'I had always known I wasn't going to try to enter the consciousness of the Aboriginal characters,' she insists (*SFSR* 193). Was the image of the chained Indigenous woman in *SR* discussed by an ethics committee or left to the candidate? *SRSR* contains no specific deliberations about the depiction of rape and other violence episodes in the novel, although Grenville found their writing difficult: 'These scenes of violence were the most difficult I had ever written ... I had to steel myself to get them done' (*SFSR* 162). Grenville does not shirk the difficult parts of settler history. Indeed, they become the main purpose of her tale and she depicts them in savagely beautiful prose. Their transmission as part of a national tale becomes imperative to her. 'Collective stories have to be more dynamic than private ones because they have more work to do,' argues Clendinnen, but 'they must represent the proper relationship within families, between genders, classes or nations, which in societies like ours, and nowadays everywhere else, are always changing' (2006: 39). And this is what Grenville sets out to do within her temporal ontological political context.

In keeping with this mission, she does not see herself as writing literary fiction. She disdains the genre. She wants to reach the masses. *The Secret River* won a swag of literary awards; it won the Commonwealth Prize for Literature and was shortlisted for the Mann Booker Prize - both signifiers of excellence in literary fiction - but Kate Grenville claims in the 2008 interview with Susan Errington that she hopes 'people who aren't interested in highly "literary fiction" will read and enjoy' her books; furthermore, the best thing about the book's success is that it 'seems to have escaped the "literary" ghetto' (Grenville, in Errington 2008: 38). Historian Robert Murray is in agreement, seeing *SR* as 'readable middle-brow historical fiction. There is a lot of good imaginative writing, character development and close observation of detail, though it slips in and out of cliché and melodrama, with a touch of Mills and Boon' (Murray 2007: 68). Examples have been given in my earlier (2007) paper of the way she uses language in *SFSR* to appeal to a broader rather than a university-educated audience. Grenville's four-page dedicated chapter in which she indirectly spoke to historians positions her as an uninformed member of the public, and is reasonable in tone, conciliatory, even deferential: 'The historians quoted document after document ... they were a revelation', and, 'The historians drew a complex, nuanced picture of those times' (*SFSR* 123, 125).

SFSR explicates the metatext of *SR* and her motivations for writing it. In the same interview she comments that 'historical fiction gives people who will never read history a chance to think about the issue history raises' (Grenville, in Errington 2008: 38). Her clearly stated aim is to shock the wider reading Australian public and, in doing so, inform them about their history.

Section F: Refuses Historical Verification

Grenville was not renewing a story told by or about her grandfather securing land on the banks of the Hawkesbury; apparently there had been none: 'Wiseman ... comes into conflict with the Aboriginal people. For that last part,

I couldn't draw on my great-great-great-grandfather, since there'd been no information about that part of his life' (*SFSR* 161-62). Her mother believes that 'by the time Wiseman had arrived there, they'd all gone' and yet, when her daughter visits the family home it resembles a fortress, bringing a flood of bloody images to mind (*SFSR* 97, 104). Unable to find more concrete historical evidence for her story - 'in the hundreds of pages about Wiseman, there was absolute silence on the matter of the original inhabitants' - she can only surmise, perhaps correctly, that he *was* involved in a frontier battle like the one at Waterloo Creek (*SFSR* 95).

Robert Murray, co-author of *Dharug and Dungaree: The History of Penrith and St Mary's to 1860* (1988), finds her representation of a massacre contrived and improbable, her depiction of rural vigilantes closely resembling difficult-to-prove clichéd and apocryphal stories of the late nineteenth-century (2007: 67). He discusses rain and corn and reprisals. Her depicted clashes with the Dharug occur at the wrong historical time, he suggests. They were already settled, he argues, and furthermore, the arrival of a large lugger intent on a dawn raid would not have taken them by surprise. The idea of taking six heads home in a bag 'seems to draw on and misrepresent three quite different episodes' (Murray 2007: 68). Murray's essay questions how closely novelists should stick to history, finding 'it irritating and disappointing' when a novel departs from a record 'he is familiar with' (2007: 67). He concedes that while the *SR* massacre incident is implausible for that area, Grenville 'pulls out the dramatic bits of the record over about fifty years and a wider area and concentrates them into one or two years - 1813-1814 - in one section of the Hawkesbury that was remote then and is still so, and that 'guesstimation' is part of what novelists do (Murray 2007: 67).

Grenville does not discuss the 'unreliability' of some historical documents, and the confounding lack of agreement between historians on some issues. Her concerns lie with the frustrating lack of evidence pertinent to her apocryphal family tales. Perhaps for this reason, as Murray suggests, she fictionalises an incident in which Governor Phillip slaps an Indigenous man. And she borrows 'details and phrases' from the Waterloo Creek massacre to create its fictional counterpart (*SFSR* 162). It is clear she believes that historical fiction writers take liberties with dates and times and details imperative to the framing and mechanics of their plots, and her aim, later stated, was for *SFSR* to make this process transparent (Grenville 2007: 71). This proves a sticking point for historian readers.

Section G: Political Manipulation

SR arrived in the thick of a street fight about who could write history and for whom. It is well into chapter two of *Searching for the Secret River* before she relates the story of the 2000 Reconciliation Walk across Sydney Harbour Bridge. I do not say this in a critical way, for the production of a novel is not unlike theatre; once done, the conscious and subconscious research, rehearsal and performance have a way of shifting in the artist's mind. Historical fiction writing, like oral apocrypha, has always been dialogic, public and reproductive.

Like many artists, Grenville experiences a moment of epiphany: during the Sydney Harbour Bridge walk for Aboriginal Reconciliation she makes eye contact with an Indigenous woman and shares 'one of those moments of intensity ... we smiled, held each other's gaze, until it sent a sudden blade of cold into my warm inner glow' (*SFSR* 13). Immediately, she knows that what she was doing on the bridge on a Saturday is inextricably connected to her ancestor's story as told in her creative work. Her moral imagination and her sharpening commitment to reconciliation drive her towards a new apocryphal

story: 'What I had to do was cross the hard way, through the deep water of our history,' she claims (*SFSR* 13).

Section H: Aesthetic Manipulation

Grenville regards the building of historical character as a creative enactment, a trick, rather than a definitive impersonation. Characters have fictional identities. She uses her acknowledgments to *SR* to make her declaration about its fictiveness:

One of my ancestors gave me the basis for certain details in the early life of William Thornhill, and other characters share some qualities with historical figures. All the people within these pages, however, are works of fiction. (*SR* 336)

Fiction needs first to be engaging. Historical fiction conventions suggest that scholarship should be lightly worn. Good intentions and research questions change, it seems, as art takes over. Neither *SR* nor the *SFSR* contains a bibliography. Sniffing out her story, Grenville researches, like many writers, as if following tracks or scat: 'one book led to another ... academic books, anthropological, local histories' (*SFSR* 127). She also uses the free association of images common in dreams or films, believing the most important artefact to be the finished book (Grenville 2006b). *SFSR* outlines her research by praxis, her way of furnishing *SR* with everyday experiential historical detail. She makes lamps and studies tools, seeing landscape in an eidetic way as she camps alone on the banks of the Hawkesbury, handling stones and discovering grinding grooves. It seems clear from her commitment to this process that she regards herself as a novelist - a purveyor of well-researched tales - rather than an empirical historian.

Section H: Establishment in Australia's National Collective Memory

While Grenville may be committed to the idea that writing fiction entitles her to artistic licence in the way that she interprets facts, some historians and critics considered her explanations in *SFSR* for doing so audacious. Perhaps she satirise herself in *The Lieutenant* (2008) (*TL*). 'It was foreign to Rooke, the idea of taking the real world as nothing more than raw material' ponders the scientist, over Silk, the writer (*TL* 47). Nevertheless, her perceived attitude offends, more than does her trespass on the historians' patch. While criticism is couched in deferential terms ('Kate Grenville is one of the best of our fiction writers'), it is apparent that some critics and historians consider that Grenville has got above herself (Hirst 2006: 11). Had that been her intention, or had she been caught like many writers, defending a 'throwaway line' (in Errington 2008: 39)? In any event, she is caught in crossfire.

Grenville's reference, on radio, to the history wars, suggesting that a 'novelist can stand up on a stepladder and look down at this', inflamed debate about historical fiction writing (Grenville, cited Koval 2005). The act of taking on her ancestor's hypothetical imperialism led her into new territory and into the history wars. Journalist Stella Clarke summarises historian Mark McKenna's 2005 essay, suggesting he believes 'that she's out of line: as a novelist she can't help but join conservative politicians in peddling sloppy "comfort history", and she should lay off claims to ascendancy' (McKenna, cited Clarke 2006: 110). Clarke misrepresents him, McKenna claims (2006: 15); in fact, he says, Grenville 'elevates *fiction* to a position of interpretive power over and above that of history' (McKenna 2006: 2; emphasis added). McKenna's concern with the history wars in general and Grenville in particular is that 'historians have lost much of their earlier cultural authority' as a result: 'When the public witness historians at war, they no longer trust historians as storytellers'

(McKenna 2005: 1). Such arguments cluster around ideas about whose story should be told, and by whom.

Who can deny historians' anger about their conflicted place in Australia's cultural identity production? In her 2006 *Quarterly Essay*, historian Clendinnen claimed that 'novelists have been doing their best to bump historians off the track' (2006: 16). She is on the lookout for historical fiction writers who show attitude ('exuberant confidence', 'insouciant exploitation of fragments of the past'), lack historical professionalism ('the collapsing of time', 'opportunistic transpositions, and elisions') and show off their subjective petticoats (2006: 16; 2007a: 73, 76, 77). Reviewer James Bradley in 2008 reads her *Quarterly Essay* as 'a savage critique' of *SR*; he 'cannot imagine how bruising the experience must have been for Grenville' (Bradley 2008: 24). Grenville responds in the following issue. The opening of Clendinnen's 'Response to Correspondence', 'I'm sorry Kate Grenville feels misrepresented,' is loaded with irony (2007a: 73). And if there were any doubt about the seriousness of Clendinnen's intent, it could be removed by reading the first few sentences of a book review in *The Monthly*: 'Lately I have been pursuing novelists [Norman Mailer] who seem to think they are writing near-enough history, when in fact they are making it up,' she challenges (Clendinnen 2007b: 48).

Grenville's unwillingness to focalise her story through Indigenous characters incites criticism from Clendinnen, who seems to think that Grenville wants to eat her corn and her yam daisies too. While Grenville refuses an Indigenous point of view, Clendinnen remarks that she nevertheless 'felt no such inhibition' in taking up that of a white settler man (2006: 23). Grenville wishes to present the consciousness of an ordinary man - Sir Walter Scott would approve of this - working with and against the sentiments of her times. But Clendinnen claims that this is what present-day writers cannot do successfully - enter the consciousness of nineteenth-century characters:

that apart from the material differences between centuries the cocoon of physical security in which we live might be our greatest barrier to understanding how it was for other people of other times, or how it is for people in other places now ...
(2006: 25-26)

Grenville does not deal with the topic of Aboriginal representation in her original acknowledgments to *SR*. She explicates it at great length in *SFSR*, but judiciously avoids her specific treatment of an Indigenous massacre. While yet wishing to convey the agency of her Indigenous characters, she recognises the difficulty of mediating the unspeakable cruelties inflicted upon them, employing the observations and interpretations of a male, white settler narrator. At the close of the 2007 Sydney Writers' Festival panel Clendinnen concedes 'fictional truths' but her consistent message might be: stay behind your lines and you won't get hurt (Clendinnen 2007c).

By necessity this paper's focus on Grenville's employment of apocryphal stories condenses the discursive complexities of the history wars. It is difficult accurately to delineate historians' responses in relation to the provocative subtext of *SR*, the fallout from Grenville's stepladder analogy, and her rationalisation of frontier history in *SFSR*. Clendinnen and Grenville continue to ply their trades with Text Publishing, both continuing, in their different ways, to augment Australia's collective cultural memory.

Section I: Economic Manipulation

Apocryphal stories have always been manipulated for economic reasons. My research led me to an apocryphal story about an Irish magistrate who hanged

his son. Despite its lack of historical verification, and the construction of false artefacts by Galway's city council, the surprising violence of the tale still draws tourists. Even when contradicted by mainstream versions of history, apocryphal tales show surprising motility. Tales of Australian poet Adam Lindsay Gordon raising the alarm about a shipwreck remained in popular memory for one hundred and fifty years, despite all evidence to the contrary, and have now been harnessed by tourism.

Fiction writing of any kind tends to be commercial. Stories must sell and tell. Although the historian knows how hard it is to be published, how difficult it is to make a living, nonfiction lists outweigh their literary counterparts; perhaps during 'war', history comes to the fore. Although it might be a dodge for fiction writers to say that they need to make a living, leaving historians to their arguments, the traditional privileging of literary fiction at writers' festivals and Kate Grenville's choice of subject matter bring her to the attention of historians.

Furthermore, *SR* is written simultaneously with *SFSR*, but it is clear that publication of the latter hinged on the wonderful commercial success of the former. It is fair to assume that a publisher of Michael Heywood's standing saw Grenville's book not only as a potential earner, but as a timely contribution to national conversations about Australian history, and that his editing reflected a wish to invite as many mainstream readers as possible. Apocryphal stories can be discursive attempts at mediation, or can open fire on a hostile public. Popular apocryphal stories thrive on renovation; Grenville's story sold.

Section J: Transformation

Has Grenville transformed a settler tale or made one up? She considered herself to be writing a historical novel. 'History is a lot more than facts and fiction is a lot more than entertainment,' she argues three years later (Grenville, cited Errington 2008: 39). Has her self-reflection exposed any more than muscular leapfrogging over experiential research and primary documents in her pursuit of fictional truth? 'On the one hand, I was shameless in rifling through research for anything I could use, wrenching it out of its place and adapting it for my own purposes,' she admits, but on the other, 'I was trying to be faithful to the shape of the historical record, and the meaning of all those events that historians had written about. What I was writing wasn't real, but it was as true as I could make it' (*SFSR* 191). *SR* is historical fiction.

The search for esoteric truth is like renewable energy to apocrypha. *SR*'s place as a goad to national conscience allows it to grow in importance; the details of its inauthenticity may yet wither away. Many readers know antebellum history from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and travel to Atlanta and Georgia to search out its artefacts. Robert Murray believes the *SR* is 'all most people will ever know about a particular situation' (2007: 67).

Conclusions

Whether Grenville's narrative enters popular and local memory, and spawns new retellings may depend on the resistance of historians. If a massacre denotes archetypal conflict - landownership and the patriarchy, why not? - then *SFSR* tells a familiar and universal story; lack of local antecedents may smooth its entry into popular collective memory; even so, it may never be verified as history because it has been invented by a privileged beneficiary of Indigenous dispossession who may, after all, have nothing to atone for.

Grenville's original family apocryphal tale has now been transformed from oral story to printed page; it has been dismissed and subsumed by a more dramatic

tale. The subsequent novel, *SR*, has the potential to endure as a new apocryphal story, gaining popular acceptance in collective memory. Grenville's book has been memorialised as an important book: an award winner *and* an artefact of contention; its high sales bringing it popularity and status. We can speculate about its capacity to be renewed within a national consciousness anxious about its history. When history and story collide, apocryphal narratives may wither away or may renew themselves, constructing and validating particular identities. Perhaps when clamouring voices die down this alternative history of the Hawkesbury River settlement will remain, an indictment of Grenville's and our national collective and symbolic guilt. Memory is invariably constructed and thus apocryphal.

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