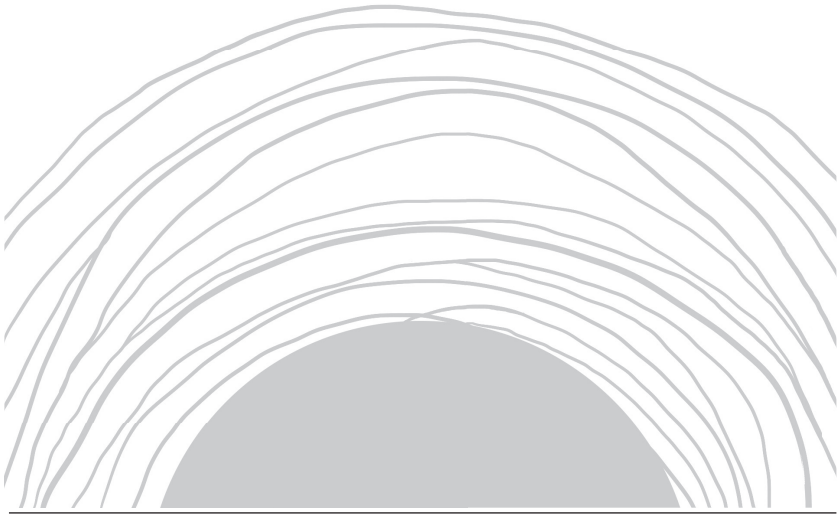


TERRA NULLIUS

CLAIRE G. COLEMAN

READING GROUP GUIDE

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CLAIRE G. COLEMAN INTERVIEW

by Jenny Terpsichore Abeles

Q. I AM very interested in how different writers talk about their “process.” Yours stands out to me, as described on your website and other places, as writing this novel while driving around the country in a caravan. Can you describe a bit more about how the experience of traveling through the landscape of your novel affected its creation? Do any particular moments or anecdotes stand out to you where the landscape you were in became imprinted on your novel?

A. I have been asked many times what it was like to write a novel while traveling around the continent. It was hard to answer because at the time I had not written under any other conditions. I do know one thing though, I would not have written the same novel had I not been traveling, the conditions under which a novel is written is often deeply embedded in the book’s DNA.

Landscape is all through *Terra Nullius*, the places I travelled were in the feel of the landscapes in the book. I described few places accurately and many places were unsettled in space because I used them metaphorically not literally, but they were there nevertheless. Someone pointed out to me that most the characters in *Terra Nullius*

are moving for most the narrative and I was moving too, so movement is important in many ways.

There is one example I can remember well. We were traveling through the Pilbra, in Western Australia. I stopped so my partner could photograph the colours, they were so vivid, the purple-red stone, the wildflowers, the grey dry-adapted foliage all conspired to cast a purple tinge over everything as far as the eye could see. I leaned against my car and looked at the other side of the valley. There was a rocky hill, it's top cracked and jagged, like crooked teeth or gravestones, where a massive rock had weathered and cracked. That very hill, that scene, that place, is in *Terra Nullius*.

Q. You've spoken about the "hidden history" of native peoples in Australia, one that is more brutal than historiography typically wishes to account for. How do you think that history, and the hidden histories of colonized/indigenous people across the globe, could be revised more honestly? How could colonized and colonizer alike work to face and accept more truthful versions of history in order to proceed together into a more just future? What steps do you see (museums, monuments, legislation) being taken in that direction?

A. It is vitally important the truth of colonisation is acknowledged; lies are one of the weapons used to continue the oppression of colonised people. It seems unlikely to me that the truths of colonisation will be understood if only the victims are telling the truth, if only the victims are fighting for truth and justice. It is also important for settler individuals and institutions to do their bit.

I have friends and acquaintances working in the institutional environment who are working to change the way those institutions manage the interface between coloniser and colonised. Museums and art galleries are part of a movement to change the dialogue, they pay a pivotal role.

Legislation, on the other hand, seems far off in Australia. Despite the work being done by many to change the laws; successive governments in Australia have worked to broaden the divides that

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are so damaging to our society. I hope one day to see a government determined to make things better or at least stop making things worse.

Q. Some of your Settler characters occupy a mindset that's difficult to relate to – Sister Bagra stands out to me, particularly. How did you get into the heads of such characters in order to tell the story from their perspectives? What historical or psychological clues did you use to imagine their thoughts and feelings?

A. It took a lot of imagination and a lot of soul searching. I imagined what sort of person I would have to be to do the sort of thing those people do. I believe there is no such thing as an evil person, only evil acts, so I had to imagine how someone could logically and emotionally decide to do evil. Their behavior needed an internal logic.

The character of Devil was based on a real person from history, A. O. Neville, the “Chief Protector of Aborigines” in the early 20th century. I did not have to imagine the things he did, they happened. What I had to do was try and understand his motivation. Once I had that the character was already there.

Q. How did you discover that you're a writer? Or, maybe, how did you become a writer?

A. I became a writer by writing *Terra Nullius*. I had tried before to be a writer but had never managed to actually do it, never managed to complete anything. When the story of *Terra Nullius* made itself known to me I felt compelled to write it. It was in the process of telling that story that I learned how to do it.

Q. You've mentioned in *The Gaurdian* that “The entire purpose of writing *Terra Nullius* was to provoke empathy in people who had none.” At some point while reading the book, I began to feel that “Settler” and “Native” weren't valid boundaries between people, and the more meaningful distinction between people seemed to

be empathetic and unempathetic. Apart from reading stories such as yours, how can we tip the human scales toward greater empathy between people who are not alike in immediately observable ways?

A. People tend to have empathy towards people they know. Getting to know people from other backgrounds tends to lead to greater empathy. It's important for people to approach people from outside their own backgrounds and communicate with them. People are generally nice, people generally get along and getting to know people from outside your own background is generally productive.

Q. As someone who appreciates seeing her favorite books made into movies, I'm wondering if it's possible with a book such as this? Have you given any thought to a movie or television adaptation?

A. I have given much thought to it, I love watching movies. However I cannot see how it could ever be done. I have been living with *Terra Nullius* for many years now and I still can't see how an adaptation would be possible. That bothers me a bit, I think if there was a way to dramatize the story it could change many lives.

Q. For American readers, some plot-details and historical cues in *Terra Nullius* might not feel as local and present as they do to Australian audiences. What do you hope American readers take away from this novel?

A. The historical cues are not as local for American readers but that does not mean there is nothing for American readers to gain. Many of the problems from colonisation are identical between our countries. Colonisation is colonisation, slavery is slavery, there is no way to separate them. I have heard many times of evils done there, in America, and many of them sound a lot like what happened here. I think there is a lot to gain.

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Q. The end of the novel seems to suggest the arrival of a moment of change. Do you feel a similar zeitgeist in our current moment, in Australia or the world more generally? What catalyzes such moments and how can we best respond to them?

A. I think in the world at the moment there exists a potentiality. Things seem currently to be getting worse, the far right are on the rise, there are other bad things happening. On the other hand there are a generation of people coming up who are refusing to accept what is happening. Things will change for the better if we help those who are willing to fight for a better world.

Q. In a piece you wrote for *The Guardian*, you described how low self-esteem affected your ability to think of yourself as a writer, a feeling I imagine is familiar to many writers and would-be writers. What advice do you have for others who feel this way?

A. Just write. If you are scared then write anyway. The worst that can happen is that you don't get that thing published, submit it somewhere else, write something else. The best that can happen is beyond your wildest dreams.

I was scared right up to the moment when *Terra Nullius* was published. I am still scared now, with more books to come. Fear does not have to be crippling, fear can help us climb to new heights.

Q. Reading through your interviews, reviews, and articles, it's clear that you've become a voice for a particular justice movement. What has this metamorphosis – from private to public figure – been like for you? How do you handle criticism of your outspoken views on the rights of Indigenous peoples? What inspires, emboldens, fortifies, or motivates you to persist despite critics and haters?

A. I believe that the greatest good comes from people acting according to their abilities rather than doing only what will benefit them. I have a platform, a voice, I am capable of bringing society's

attention to the plight of colonised people and asking for justice. I do it because I can and when I am attacked it just tells me I am having an effect.

The critics and haters, when they attack, are just telling me I am getting to them, that they are scared. If they left me alone I would not know whether or not my work is going to elicit change.

Q. Have you been to the United States? If so, what did you do or see here, and what were your impressions? If not, what would your ideal North American tour look like?

A. I have never been to the US. I would like to tour the US with a book one day, although admittedly sometimes your politics there scares me. I would particularly love the opportunity to speak with First Nations people in the US find our common ground in the effects of colonisation. I believe Australia and the US have both good and bad in common. I would take the opportunity to explore that.

Also fishing, lots of fishing, your fly waters look awesome.

Q. Who else do you think American readers should be reading, writers perhaps not already well-known here?

A. There are so many, many of them are my friends and family. I risk leaving someone off the list and upsetting them, therefore here is a partial list:

- Bruce Pascoe, particularly his amazing *Dark Emu*.
- Kim Scott, whose novels are stunningly beautiful, particularly the Miles Franklin award winning *Benang*.
- Ali Cobby Eckermann, a brilliant poet.
- Ellen van Neervan, whose poetry and short stories are ground breaking.
- Alexis Wright, the winner of the 2018 Stella prize and a past winner of the Miles Franklin award and one of Australia's greatest writers.

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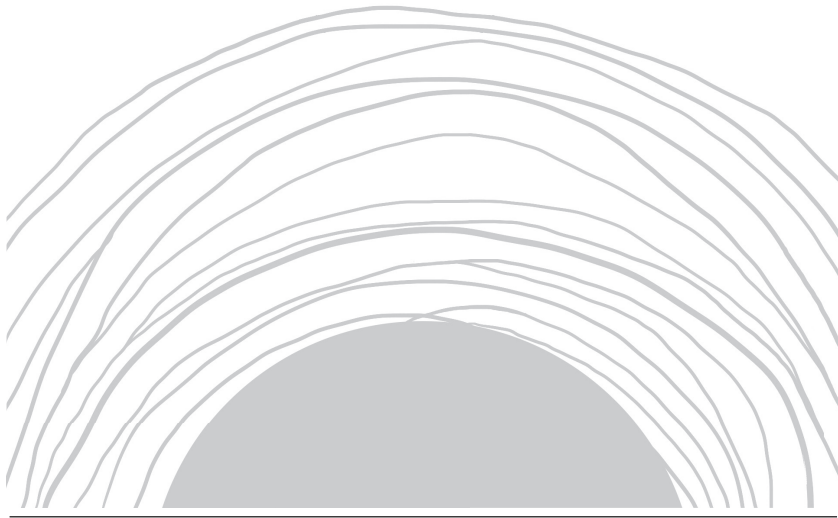
- Tony Birch, one of our most accomplished writers.

There are many many others. Our First Nation writers produce some of the best literature in Australia but are often unfairly ignored.

Q. Do you feel that people occupying opposite sides of an aggrieved history can learn to live together in mutual respect? If so, what are some crucial steps in that process?

A. I believe that it is possible. In Australia we are a long way from that even though some people think the discussion is unnecessary. There is a crucial step that is often if not always ignored, particularly in Australia. That step is “truth telling”. Colonial propaganda has an uncomfortable relationship with the truth. For example, there are still people in Australia who believe that the “Colonisation” was peaceful and that there were few if any massacres. The truth is very different.

Although *Terra Nullius* is a novel it is built on a foundation of fact and I consider it part of the process of truth telling.



READING GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. WHAT DO you make of the title of the novel? How does Coleman elaborate in different ways on how the land belongs to no one? How does the idea work for or against the colonizers who used it to empower their colonization efforts?
2. For all its surprises, this novel remains a story about colonialism. What do you know historically about different colonialist efforts? How does this novel expand upon or surprise what you already know on the topic?
3. Where do you sense the earliest hints that this is not the colonization story you thought it was? How does the revelation of the true nature of this story proceed?
4. This novel is full of unhappy characters, Settler and Native alike. If Settlers are not happy in their new lands, what, in your opinion, motivates colonialist or expansionist endeavors? Consider this from a variety of perspectives: psychological, sociological, political, economic, spiritual, and personal.

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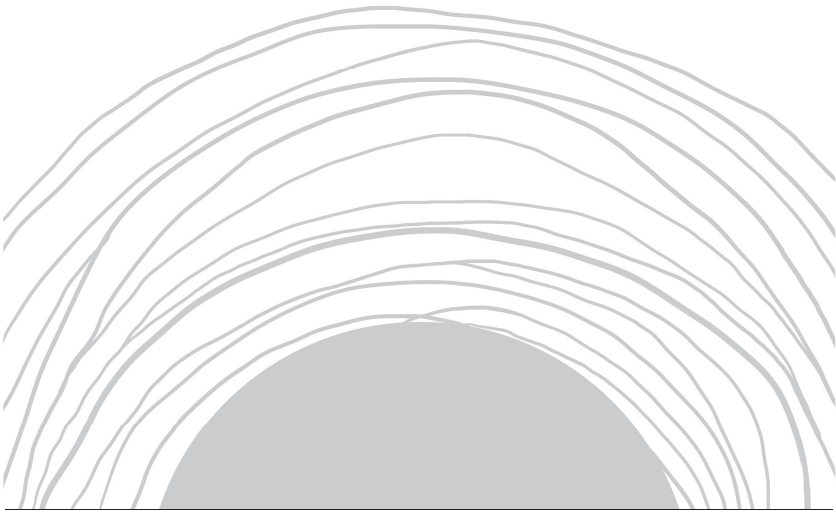
5. It becomes obvious almost immediately that many Settlers do not believe the Natives are human in the same way they themselves are. How many different kinds of evidence can you find of dehumanization in this novel? What kinds of moments lead certain characters to a realization of the humanity of “the other”?
6. In Johnny Star’s first positive interaction with a Native, he thinks that “. . . he wanted to find the humanity in the Native” because “. . . he was looking for the humanity in himself” (63). How does dehumanization work against oppressors and oppressed alike? Weigh the benefits and drawbacks of domination for the Settlers.
7. What, in your opinion, constitutes a state of being that demands the same respect you believe yourself worthy of? What events or beliefs from history have caused dehumanization? What signs of dehumanization are evident in our current world? How can these be effectively countered or resisted by everyday people? Does the novel offer suggestions for this?
8. In the blurb at the beginning of Chapter 16, a Settler registers a completely positive reaction to an aspect of Native culture, “Art,” lamenting that many galleries and museums were destroyed before they learned to appreciate the value of this strange, new phenomenon. How has the art of colonized peoples been denigrated, destroyed, stolen, redeemed, and appropriated? What examples of a particular culture’s art stand out as particularly moving or appealing to you personally?
9. Who are the sympathetic and unsympathetic characters in this novel? What do the sympathetic characters have in common? The unsympathetic characters? What philosophies of human relationships can be drawn from each set of characters?
10. At the beginning of the novel, Jacky tells himself, “I belong somewhere, I had a family once. A family who misses me” (8),

thus beginning a quest. Does he find what he set out to find? Does his quest come to a successful conclusion? Why or why not?

10. On page 37, Sergeant Rohan ruminates on how the Natives lived “pointless, aimless lives in the dirt” without “protection” from the Settlers. What seems to be the point or aim of the Settler’s lives? The Natives? What in your opinion, should the point of human life be? How many different aims for human life can you think of? Which of these are consistent with one another and which in conflict with others?
11. Sister Bagra is a representative of the educational system the Settlers give to Natives. Since education by definition shapes the way we think, how can we ensure that true education differs from indoctrination or mind control? How does education in our culture work to enforce or resist oppressive tendencies? Try to give multiple examples for each category. How could education be reformed to create more equality amongst different kinds of people?
12. We are told toward the end of the novel that “Esperance” means “hope.” In what ways does this character embody, aim toward, or fall short of the concept of hope? How is hope spoken of, created, or destroyed throughout the novel? What kind of force is hope in people’s lives – emotional, psychological, intellectual, spiritual, or material?
13. On page 219, Jacky is compared to Robin Hood and other outlaws who, as symbols of resistance, became larger than life both in their own time and throughout history. Who are the symbols of resistance – the outlaws, innovators, freedom fighters, justice seekers, heroes and heroines – you admire most and what thoughts, realizations, behaviors, and actions do they inspire in you? Think historically and currently when looking for examples.

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14. Each chapter begins with a blurb from poetry, history, scientific studies, news reports, or other kinds of texts produced in a given culture. How do these kinds of texts affect the trajectories of individual human lives? Describe the reciprocal relationship between the stories we tell as a larger culture and the stories we live as individuals. How might this novel enter larger cultural conversations and affect the way we live?



AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS IS A work of fiction yet was influenced both shallowly and deeply by Indigenous Australian survival narratives and works of post-colonial historical fiction. Some, but by no means all, of the works of fiction that influenced this novel are *My Place* by Sally Morgan, *Benang* by Kim Scott, *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington Garimara and the film based on that book (name shortened to *Rabbit Proof Fence*), *Jandamarra and the Bunuba Resistance* by Howard Pedersen and Banjo Woorunmurra and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* by Thomas Keneally (and the film of the same name). *Jandamarra* was co-authored by a white man and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* was written by a white man based on the true story of Jimmy Governor but they are powerful nevertheless.

The historical context was provided by more books than I could possibly name and the anthropological context to the understanding of technological imbalance was provided by Jared Diamond's excellent *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. There are many other works that have had an influence on my life and work.

All these influences were important to the development of *Terra Nullius* and their authors deserve and receive my deepest gratitude.

The content and feel of this novel is not alien to an Australian audience and certain themes are almost certainly universal. However there are some cultural contexts that might benefit from explaining. When Australia was invaded by the British in 1788 (they would say "colonised") the land was taken by defining the continent as "Terra Nullius", meaning empty land. This doctrine, that formed the entire basis for Australian land law,

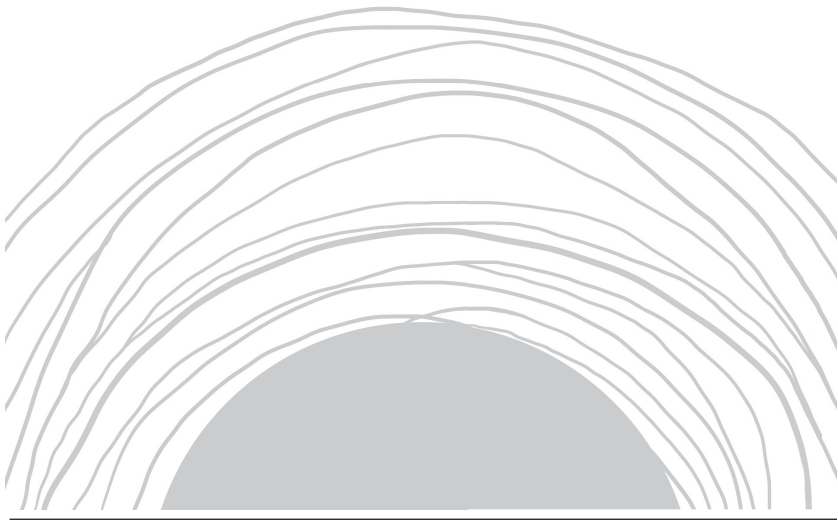
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was overturned in law by the Mabo decision in 1992. However, nothing has really changed. Many white Australians still act as if First Nations people did not exist. People, my nation included, are still fighting for Land Rights, the legal system still privileges settler land title, built on stolen land, over Native Title.

Despite the Australian idea of what the country is; slavery existed in this country up until the late 1960s. Indigenous workers were not paid and for a long time were not allowed to possess money. People were forced onto stations where they had to work for rations. In the late 60s laws were passed forcing station owners to pay their Indigenous workers and those workers were immediately fired and expelled from the stations.

The “Stolen Generations”, a concept well known in Australia, refers to Government policies that allowed police and welfare to take mixed-race, First Nations, children from their parents for no other reason than for being mixed-race First Nations Children. The cultural after-effects of these policies have not yet ended and maybe never will.

The quote from ‘Solid Rock’ by Goanna at the start of the book is the only quote taken from a genuine source. All other quotes to introduce chapters were created to reproduce the feel and content of the assorted historical texts and documents written about and pertaining to my people and other First Nations Australian people in the past.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FIRST I WOULD like to acknowledge my Noongar ancestors without whose resistance and resilience I would not be alive today. Most of this novel was written travelling around the continent now called Australia; I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of all the lands that so inspired this work. Thanks also to Kim, you showed me what is possible.

This manuscript won the State Library of Queensland's 2016 black&write! Indigenous Writing Fellowship, a partnership between the black&write! Indigenous Writing and Editing Project and Hachette Australia.

I would like to thank the team at black&write! and at State Library or Queensland for their support and my editors at black&write! Project Ellen van Neervan and Grace Lucas-Pennington. Your assistance was invaluable.

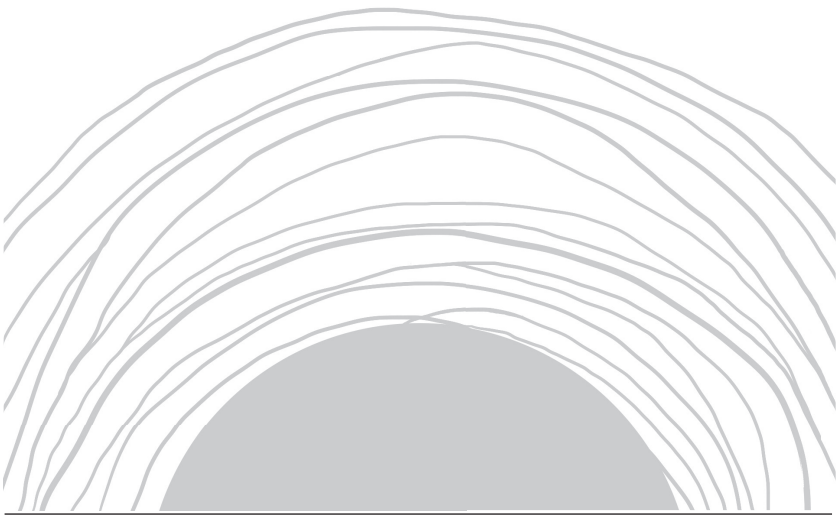
Thanks also to Hachette Australia for publishing the Australian edition of novel and for supporting the black&write! Project. My publisher at Hachette, Robert Watkins, sometimes believes in me more than I do and provided an essential lifeline when I needed it. Thanks also to project editor Kate Stevens and the rest of the team at Hachette Australia.

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Copyeditor Alex Craig smoothed off the rough edges I had left on the manuscript and Grace West designed a stunning cover; thank you both.

Thanks to Gavin and Kelly at Small Beer Press for this North American edition. I am so delighted that they decided to take my book out to another part of the world.

Last but far from least, thanks Lily, you helped me get up in the morning, you always believed, you were my first editor and critic. Volim te.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



CLAIRE G. COLEMAN is a Wirlomin Noongar (Indigenous Australian) woman whose people have occupied the south coast of Western Australia since time immemorial. Claire wrote her debut novel, *Terra Nullius*, while travelling around the continent now called Australia in an old, tumble-down caravan.