



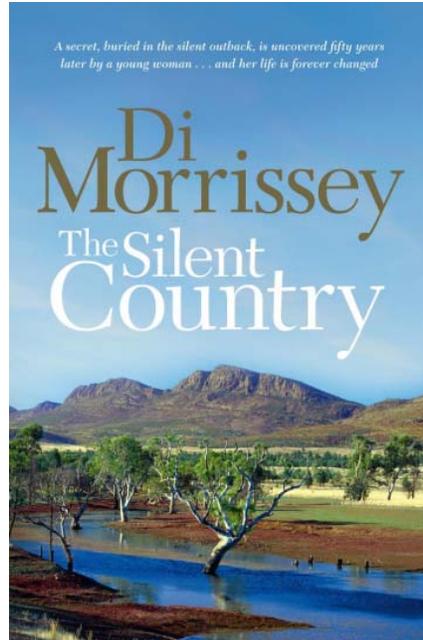
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NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Di Morrissey



THE SILENT COUNTRY

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'I know there are stories, secrets, out there,' she said aloud. 'This land is too old and has seen so much. But it's a silent country that will never speak to me. Only to its own people.' (p 388)

This novel is about encounters with outback Australia, and particularly between white and black Australia, and the insights to be gained in such encounters. Twenty-nine year old Veronica Anderson is a respected television producer who prefers to work behind the cameras because, 'I get to determine what makes a good story. It's my call and my responsibility and I like that.' (p 4) Andy Fitzgerald, her boss and executive producer of the show 'Our Country', is very supportive of her work, and they make a comfortable team. Things look set to change though when William Rowe, a philanthropist businessman, buys the network and the show. He wants to update the show's format and insists that Veronica 'front' the new version. Veronica, meanwhile, is in the throes of uncovering an intriguing story which takes her to Darwin and leads her to unexpected changes in her life. She is about to discover a 'silent country' and to be made aware of a culture she has never before experienced.

When Veronica agrees to go to an evening celebrating the history of the film industry with Andy, they meet Colin Peterson a retired banker who mentions that he was involved in making a film in the 1950s. It was a 'documentary film which was supposed to showcase the Australian outback to the world prior to the 1956 Melbourne Olympics.' (p 24) He tells them that the eccentric expedition into the outback to make 'Wild Australia' was led by an over-excitabile Russian filmmaker named Maxim Topov, and the story really whets Veronica's appetite. She decides to interview Colin and begins to unearth what sounds like a very promising story about early film-making. But as she delves deeper she discovers there are tangents to this story which are every bit as interesting as the impetus to set off on the journey. Her investigations take her to Darwin, to a property called Brolga Springs, and to Italy to interview Marta Johanssen the 'star' of the doomed film. They also introduce her to Jamie McIntosh, an environmental ranger whose Aboriginal heritage introduces her to a new world and culture, and also fills in another gap in the story, since his mother Doris was the child who charmed the members of the doco crew when they visited Brolga Springs.

Each of the characters on the documentary journey were from different backgrounds, a fact which emphasizes the growth of multiculturalism as a result of the post WWII exodus from Europe. Topov's business partner in the venture was Madame Olga Konstantinova. The crew included Peter, a Dutch mechanic, Drago, a Croatian cameraman, the lead actress, a Scandinavian named Marta Johanssen, Helen Thompson, the well-bred English business manager, and Johnny, a cockney cook and driver. Only Colin was a local. Each were struggling to make a go of it in this promised land: 'Not all immigrants that come here do so with just a suitcase and the clothes on their backs. Australia is the land of opportunity and some who have come here hope to exploit that. They paint a welcoming picture but your country is conservative, indeed, oppressive,' said Peter. 'Like its mother country there is a club and you are part of it or not. Capitalism can disadvantage the poor and make the rich richer.' (p 45)

The novel also engages with the plight of Aboriginal people, and the successive attempts to deny them equal rights before the law. 'Places where they'd been born and worked and lived with their families were taken over, leased by big corporations from down south or overseas as tax write-offs. White managers were put in, none of them local or necessarily experienced, so often the places were mismanaged. A lot of the cattle stations were run down, went bankrupt, but the big bosses in the cities down south didn't care as it was a tax loss. 'Then came change. There was a push for Aborigines to control and run stations and some have been very successful. Local indigenous people were hired to run them and training for the young people was introduced and often there was sophisticated tourism marketing and promotion. In a way some of them have been too successful, or else they've taken their eye off the ball.' (p 229) This summary describes the changes since the Wave Hill Station 'walk-off' a landmark event in rebellion against unequal Aboriginal wages and rights. Since then, there has been a contrary trend towards Indigenous management of properties, with some successes and some failures.

It traces the impact of government policies on the stolen generation, and the outcomes of that treatment. 'Len looked at her. 'Half-caste kids with light skin are taken away by the protection people to be assimilated into white society. They're being "saved" by the missions. To my mind it's just a way of training them up to be bloody domestics for the white stations and breeding the black out of them.' ' (p 169) Doris was spared this by the kindness of Annabel Johns, the wife of the station owner, but was eventually sent away to schooling, when the owner died. When the doco crew visit Brolga Springs they discover a community of Aboriginal people who perform their traditional dances and are clearly living in both their own culture, and in that of the white station owners as their employees. When Veronica visits the station fifty years later she finds it owned by an Aboriginal Corporation as a tourism venture managed by white owners, with an Indigenous training scheme attached to it. Whilst the latter is a heartening sign, it also indicates how much has been lost in the previous decades.

One of the myths perpetrated by ignorance is that Aboriginal culture has died out. 'Was!' Jamie reacted. 'This isn't a culture that *was*, it's a culture that's still with us now, despite all the attacks, the despoiling, the dismissal of it as an inferior civilisation, it still survives.' (p 230) Certainly many languages have been lost and many people have been denied access to their traditional culture but there are still many diverse and very vibrant communities of Aboriginal cultures throughout the country. The problem is that many Australians have little exposure to Aboriginal culture and don't realise how diverse and vibrant it is. The novel, in depicting the efforts of Doris and her son Jamie, reveals how active many Aboriginal people are in the campaign for their people's rights.

This novel raises numerous concerns about how land has been managed since white settlement, and how flora and fauna have been threatened by these management practices. 'So what happens to all the water that floods over the land, heads down the rivers?' asked Veronica. 'Is it going to waste?' 'No way. That's how Mother Nature designed it,' said Jamie emphatically. 'The wetlands need it, the ocean needs it. People don't seem to like wetlands. They like the word but a wetland is a swamp and they don't like swamps, so they cut them open, dry them out, expose the soil to the air and then any water that touches it turns into acid or evaporates.' ' (p 253) The novel also canvases the issue of conservation: 'Australia is losing animals at an alarming rate. And by losing I mean they're extinct.' 'With diseases? Introduced pests? Development? Out of-control bushfires?' asked Veronica. 'All of that but what's worrying is that the mammal population is dying out in untouched remote areas.' '(p 274)

The story also emphasises Aboriginal rights to land ownership. 'Yes, it's as though somewhere there's a switch that connects us to where we come from and belong, no matter where we've been. It turns on and you just know. This is the right place. I find the land seems to speak to me.' (p 293) Jamie is speaking here of the sort of attachment which drove cases such as the Mabo legislation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have fought long and hard for recognition of their ownership of land which cements in public perception an acknowledgement of their prior claim to this country. It also validates for them the deep feeling they have for their country; the intimate bond between the land and its first people.

This novel traces Veronica's journey from a feeling of bewilderment to understanding. 'Veronica looked around her. 'There's a whole language and history here isn't there that we can't see?' 'It's why white engineers, mining people, government officials, developers, can't understand why they shouldn't dig the ground, or move rocks and fell trees. They see physical structures like buildings or bridges or roads or stockyards as evidence of civilisation that should be preserved, but Aborigines have a different concept of what heritage means.' ' (p 309) She begins to see a 'silent country' through Jamie and Doris's eyes, and by the end of the novel she has begun to understand a place which has been kept 'secret' from her. And now she's really 'listening' for the first time.

WRITING STYLE

1. The novel is structured in past and present. As Veronica chases her story we hear varying people's views of the action eg Clive and Marta in third person, and Annabel Johns' diary (pp 201-2) in first person. How does this interplay between different times add to the thematic impact of the novel?
2. What contributed to suspense in the novel?
3. How would you describe the characterisation in this novel? What devices does the writer use to convey ideas about characters? For example, does dialogue reveal much about characters? Choose a passage to illustrate your answer to this question.
4. Were there any passages which were particularly evocative in the use of descriptive devices?
5. Di Morrissey's novels are each inspired by a particular landscape. How does this novel depict the Northern Territory?

THE AUTHOR

Di Morrissey is one of Australia's most successful writers. She began writing as a young woman, training and working as a journalist for Australian Consolidated Press in Sydney and Northcliffe Newspapers in London. She has worked in television in Australia and Hawaii and in the USA as a presenter, reporter, producer and actress. After her marriage to a US diplomat, Peter Morrissey, she lived in Singapore, Japan, Thailand, South America and Washington. Returning to Australia, Di continued to work in television before publishing her first novel in 1991. Di has a daughter, Dr Gabrielle Hansen, and her children, Sonoma Grace and Everton Peter, are Di's first grandchildren. Di's son, Dr Nicolas Morrissey, is a lecturer in South East Asian Art History and Buddhist Studies at the University of Georgia, USA. Di and her partner, Boris Janjic, divide their time between Byron Bay and the Manning Valley in New South Wales when not travelling to research her novels, which are all inspired by a particular landscape. For further information visit <http://www.dimorrissey.com>
Read: 'Interview with Di Morrissey' ABC Talking Heads with Peter Thompson, 2005.
<<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/talkingheads/transcripts/s1336300.htm>>

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The novel starts out as an investigation into an eccentric 50s expedition and ends as a mystery story and an insight into Indigenous Australia. Discuss these various strands to the novel.
2. 'Half the people in gaols across the country are Aboriginal and yet they make up only two per cent of the population. Our people have shorter life spans and suffer dreadful health problems. Time isn't fixing it. We are losing the next generation, like Travis, to despair.' (p 434) Discuss these issues and how the Australian government has /hasn't addressed them recently.
3. Veronica's sister Sue and husband Philip and their two toddlers lead a hectic life which is the opposite of what Veronica aspires to. Is their life typical of affluent double income families today? Or are they exceptionally disorganized? Veronica compares her sister's parenting with Jamie's parenting of Billy and finds the former wanting. Are her perceptions accurate or does she expect too much?
4. Coincidence plays a large part in this narrative. eg Jamie's mother Doris being the same child encountered by the doco crew. Discuss some of the turning points in the plot which were coincidental. Is this typical of life in general?
5. John Cardwell's threatening behavior is ultimately defused. This acts as something of a red herring in the narrative as it suggests that Johnny may have had something to cover up, but ultimately the death of Topov lay at someone else's door. How does this work to create suspense in this novel?
6. 'Andy, I've taken on this network as a business. And it doesn't matter whether you're making steel or TV shows, if you don't succeed, you'll sink. I'm not heartless, so I hope I can improve the fortunes of this station and everyone working here. But I cannot indulge the arty, cultural warriors who argue that what we do is un-Australian.' (pp 72-3) Discuss William Rowe's comments about his takeover of the network. He encapsulates here the public suspicion of consolidated ownership of the media. What is your view of such concentration?
7. 'She shook hands with the two men. Bonza was a wiry, wizened man in his late seventies who looked as though the sun had tanned his skin to match the worn crinkled leather hat he was wearing. He was dressed in a tight T-shirt and wore a heavy gold chain with a large shark or croc tooth suspended from it. His hand was calloused and he gave Veronica a direct, but friendly, stare. Reg, probably a bit younger, was dressed in a blue cotton shirt and jeans held up by a leather belt with a fancy silver buckle. He had smooth dark skin and a shy smile.' (pp 216-7) Are characters like Bonza and Reg the exception or the rule in outback Australia?
8. 'Then spend time with someone who loves his country, in every sense and you might get closer to the core of what you're chasing,' advised Doris.' (p 268) Is the key to understanding the Australian outback having someone local 'explain' it to you?
9. Veronica's research is greatly assisted by the access available via the internet. How successful do you think her searches would have been without such access?
10. 'There is no culture here,' said Marta. 'They are starved for it.' (p 356) Is this an accurate description of Australia in the 1950s or is Marta prejudiced by her European background?
11. ' 'And it's close to Asia – you can practically see Indonesia. Makes you realise how near our northern neighbours are,' said Veronica. 'My granddad talks about the war, reckons there were a lot more Japanese midget subs that came close to shore than they know about,' said Dougie.' (p 196) Is Australia wilfully blind to its proximity to Asia? Should we accept that we are part of the Asian region, and develop more policies accordingly?
12. The novel includes many references to classic works of Australian film and early television. Discuss a show, or a star mentioned who meant a lot to you.

13. Veronica witnesses tourists challenging their guide and wanting to swim in croc-infested waters (p 300-1) which is possibly how such accidents generally occur, rather than being due to tour company negligence. Discuss.

14. At the end of the novel, Veronica is changing city, home, work and moving in with someone she's known a short time. What are the challenges she faces in deciding to live with Jamie?

15. Did this novel open your eyes to aspects of Aboriginal culture which you were unaware of?

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