

# Book Clubs and Reconciliation: A Pilot Study on Book Clubs Reading the 'Fictions of Reconciliation'

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## Introduction

**H**OW CAN WE USE BOOK CLUBS AS SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON HOW WORKS OF fiction are received and function in the public sphere? We have been thinking about this question while developing a research program to examine the functions of contemporary Australian historical fiction, and specifically those texts that we term the 'fictions of reconciliation'. We decided to use book clubs initially as a way of examining the kinds of interpretations we had seen emerging from within the literary academy. Many such interpretations presume a particular model of an 'ordinary' reader; one that we regard with scepticism. Talking with book clubs seemed to offer an opportunity to test this model of readership, particularly as it pertains to the fictions of reconciliation. Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) was an obvious choice of text: from its publication it has proven to be popular and controversial, particularly amongst members of the academy. But did non-academic readers necessarily reach the same negative conclusions about the novel's politics of race?

This paper reports on how we addressed this question through a pilot study using a focus group methodology. In the first section we consider the context for this research in relation to the 'fictions of reconciliation'. In the second section, we offer an overview of the current state of book club research in order to locate our own work within this expanding field. We then look at the methodology that we used, before turning to the two key themes that emerged from focus groups

discussions with five book clubs: 'consensus/dissensus' and 'reading as social practice'.<sup>1</sup> We then reflect on what the book club focus groups can tell us about the reception of texts like *The Secret River* in the context of these themes.

### The fictions of reconciliation

Since the late 1990s, many works of Australian fiction novels have taken the relationships between Europeans and Aborigines as their principal theme.<sup>2</sup> The fictions of reconciliation tend to be 'mainstream', a fact demonstrated by the number of such texts that have garnered accolades and commendations.<sup>3</sup> Second, although not exclusively 'historical', many of these books are historical fictions that draw upon the revisionist national histories that emerged at the end of the 1970s, and they entered a literary and cultural marketplace defined by the so-called 'history wars' (MacIntyre and Clark). Furthermore, these works are framed by paratextual elements that reference reconciliation as an idea and project: through their use, for example, of evocative cover jacket art and images, and publisher blurbs on the book's national/historical significance. These books signal reconciliation as principal concerns, and, in some cases, they have incited heated debate; Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) is one such text.

Against a background of ideological battles over Australian history and its (mis)use, a number of academic historians, including Mark McKenna, Inga Clendinnen, and John Hirst, objected to *The Secret River* on the grounds that it distorts the 'truth' (McKenna; Clendinnen; Hirst; for an overview of the affair from the perspective of the history discipline, see Pinto). And while literary and cultural studies scholars who have discussed *The Secret River* have tended to draw on different critical tools to those of historians, a number of them have been similarly hostile to Grenville's book. Indeed, in recent academic literary criticism of *The Secret River* a critical orthodoxy has emerged, namely that Grenville's novel, despite its performance of sympathy towards Aboriginal Australians, is nevertheless a text that is 'complicit with the [conservative

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<sup>1</sup> A fuller explication of the themes that relate specifically to *The Secret River* is reported elsewhere (Nolan and Clarke 'Book Clubs').

<sup>2</sup> These include titles like: Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* (2003); Andrew McGahan's *White Earth* (2004); Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005), *The Lieutenant* (2008) and *Sarah Thornhill* (2012); Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* (1997) and *Carpentaria* (2006); Gail Jones's *Sorry* (2007); Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999) and *That Deadman Dance* (2010); Noel Beddoe's *The Yalda Crossing* (2012); Jackie French's *Nanberry: Black Brother White* (2011); Peter Watt's *Cry of the Curlew* (2000); and Rohan Wilson's *The Roving Party* (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Including the nation's most prestigious literary award, the Miles Franklin. Winners of this award include: *Journey to the Stone Country* (2003); *The White Earth* (2004); *Carpentaria* (2006); *Benang* (1999) and *That Deadman Dance* (2010). Grenville's books have been shortlisted for the Miles Franklin and the Man Booker, and have been awarded a range of other major national and international prizes.

nationalist] myths [it is] interrogating' (Carol Merli qtd. in Gelder and Salzman 84; Kelada). Elsewhere we have argued against this interpretation (Nolan and Clarke 'Reading *the Secret River*').<sup>4</sup> Yet, quite apart from our own reading of the book, we have observed that the conventional critical account of *The Secret River* contrasts with the way the book has been received in other settings such as the literary media, our own classrooms, and book clubs (or 'reading groups/clubs/circles').<sup>5</sup> Having a strong interest in postcolonial literary culture and the problems of reception we have been asking ourselves, what do 'ordinary' or 'lay' readers do with books like *The Secret River*? How do their readings relate to reconciliation? Book clubs provide one site in which to explore such questions.

### **The cultural work of book clubs**

Book clubs are key sites of reading in modern societies (Hartley and Turvey; Poole; Sedo 'Reading Communities'; Swann and Allington). Sociologist Marilyn Poole claims that in Australia: 'Reading groups constitute one of the largest bodies of community participation in the arts' (280). Although Poole bases her claim on data collected from a single study, it echoes similar claims made of book club activity in places such as the U.S. and U.K.<sup>6</sup> Readers participate in book clubs for a range of reasons, including: leisure; becoming a better reader; interactivity (engaging with texts with others); developing a sense of achievement (reading books they otherwise might not); social contact and intimacy; and intellectual development.<sup>7</sup> Book clubs then are popular and meaningful forms of cultural activity.

Readers in Poole's Australian study (conducted with Frances Devlin-Glass and others) indicated that their book clubs helped them to keep up with

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<sup>4</sup> We are by no means alone in this regard. Kate Mitchell, for example, concludes: 'However, rather than approaching the novel as a corrupted form of history's reconstruction of past events, it seems more useful to situate this text as an act of memory in the present, which shapes both past and future. Even as it represents the past, Grenville's novel addresses a present both deeply divided and in danger of forgetting its history. It uses the affective power of fiction to reinscribe and reactivate Aboriginal Australian history in the contemporary historical imaginary' (Mitchell 253).

<sup>5</sup> National and international literary reviewers, for example, overwhelmingly read the novel as a positive contribution to Australians' revisioning of their national past (see for example, Sullivan; Clarke).

<sup>6</sup> Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey, for example, estimate there are as many as 50,000 book groups in the UK, and 500,000 in North America. These figures do not include the numbers for groups proliferating on the Internet. Nevertheless, such figures remain estimates only, and there is clearly a need to obtain reliable statistics to inform us of how widespread the book club phenomenon actually is, and of the profile of those who participate in such groups.

<sup>7</sup> Jenny Hartley notes that book club readers typically value texts with strong characters, plots, and settings with which they can identify and empathise; realism over alternative modes; and discursive engagement with their peers (Hartley and Turvey 125–38).

contemporary Australian writing. These readers shared a concern with the politics, especially the identity politics, of literature. They participated in order to 'maintain their currency as literate citizens through group discussion' (Devlin-Glass 583); and the book club provided a context for: 'Individual views, opinions, and values [to be] explored, enlarged, and challenged' (Poole 280). Book clubs appear to foster intellectual and social engagements that are of a different order to other public and semi-private domains. And this insight is supported by postcolonial studies scholars James Procter, Kimberley Chabot Davis, and others who examine how book clubs provide contexts for reflection on issues of history, identity, and justice. (Procter; Davis 'White Book Clubs'; Burwell).<sup>8</sup>

That said, one must not assume that book clubs present 'utopian' reading environment. All books clubs 'illustrate the complexities of contemporary reading communities where vernacular reading practices are negotiated and normalised by the membership' (Sedo 'Cultural Authority' 106). Book clubs come in various forms, and demonstrate different practices. Some are more 'social' than others; some have particular political and religious ideologies and affiliations. As well, one shouldn't trivialize book clubs: as when critics, literary journalists and, indeed, writers advocate a hierarchy of reading practices, at the pinnacle of which sits the solitary, intellectual reader (Clee; Cusk; Kiernan; Barstow). Some reviewers offer backhanded compliments to writers whose work are likely 'to become a book club favourite' (Smith); and some academics decry the habits of book clubs that seek quick 'emotional gratification' and that are primarily sites in which 'female relationships can be nurtured and enjoyed' as opposed to the serious analytical work of, say, a university literary studies classroom (Barstow). Such sentiments speak to misunderstandings of the functions of book clubs, and reinforce the need for further study of these groups.

## **The Reading Reconciliation study**

### *Participants*

The *Reading Reconciliation Study* involved focus group interviews with five book clubs comprising a total of thirty-two participants. Using 'purposive sampling'

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<sup>8</sup> Procter investigates book club members' engagements with Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the novel's themes of race and colonialism. Against a postcolonial academic critical discourse suspicious of 'ordinary' readers' race politics, Procter observes a high degree of openness amongst his study participants. He concludes that 'popular' readings of *Things Fall Apart* allow for 'a more self-reflective, delimited account of postcolonial reading in order to illuminate the specific conditions, the particularity and peculiarity of its central activity' (195). Davis examined book talk by readers of the racially mixed Oprah Book Club and concluded that: 'Although cross-racial sympathy can often devolve into a colonizing appropriation, [...] empathetic crossings within cultural space can play [a role] in the development of anti-racist coalitions' (Davis 'Oprah's Book Club' 399).

(Liamputtong and Ezzy 87) groups were recruited through a database of book clubs compiled from State and community libraries; Internet and bookshop notice boards; and through informal social networks. Three of the groups were located in Brisbane; and two were from Tasmania.

Of the thirty-two participants five were newcomers to the groups and/or had not read the book and as a consequence their comments are not included in the focus group transcripts. All except one of the participants were female. All participants were over 30 years of age, with the majority (84%) being aged 50 years or more. Table 1 gives a breakdown of the ages across groups. Group 1 tended to have the oldest participants, whereas Group 3 had the youngest.

	Groups				
Age (years)	1	2	3	4	5
31-40			2		
41-50			2		1
51-60	3	3		2	3
61-70	5	1		3	2
71>	3	1		1	

Table 1: Participant ages by group.

Twenty-three participants had a university undergraduate or postgraduate degree, with almost half of the participants (N=16) having a postgraduate qualification. Six others had TAFE qualifications. Participants tended to reside in middle-class suburbs represented by high median individual incomes (average=\$70,222).<sup>9</sup> Of the 32 participants, 8 were retired; the rest were employed in some capacity and/or studying. The average length of involvement of participants with the group was 9.6 years, with the shortest tenure being 1 year, and the longest being 18 years. The average lengths of involvement across each group were: Group 1=7.3 years; Group 2=18 years; Group 3=8 years; Group 4=6.8 years; and Group 5=9.8 years.

Participants were asked: *Does book club make a difference to your quality of life?* Only two participants answered in the negative. The overwhelming majority felt that the book club contributed positively to their quality of life. The following

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<sup>9</sup> There was a marked difference between the Tasmanian and Queensland groups: the former resided in suburbs with lower median incomes (Tasmanian average=\$62371; Queensland average=\$73362) reflecting the demographic differences between the states.

statements reflect the range of opinions in this regard, and in doing so demonstrate the different dimensions of participants' quality of life to which the book club contributes:

I have learnt a great deal about indigenous peoples—this has deepened my understandings and compassion and activity in lobbying. I can enjoy the interaction with the group. Attendance at meetings is a high priority. (Group 1)

Apart from the members whom I enjoy enormously, you get to read fiction/non-fiction titles that perhaps you wouldn't have discovered on your own! (Group 2)

I love book club! I had always wanted to join one. [...] Book club members are very interesting women and I enjoy their company. We always have plenty to talk about even if it is not always the book! (Group 3)

Some books are educational and make me question my values and add to my knowledge. (Group 4)

[The book club] has been a great interest in difficult times and in better ones a continuing pleasure. (Group 5)

Participants valued their book club meetings as pleasurable social events; as opportunities for members to read books they might not otherwise choose; and as part of their ongoing intellectual development.

In summary, the participants in this study reflect the demographics of those of other studies. They are typically middle-class women, well educated, middle-aged or older, who have had long and durable involvement in their book clubs, and who value highly their affiliations with these groups. Moreover, as reflected in the focus group data, all participants are passionate readers. Significant for our purposes, as well, is the fact that all of the participants identified as non-Indigenous Australians.

#### *Focus groups*

In the case of four of the groups, the members had read and discussed *The Secret River* some time prior to recruitment in the study. For these groups we conducted a focus group interview that used guiding questions framed around the participants' recollection of their impressions of *The Secret River* and the discussions they shared. The other group incorporated *The Secret River* into its monthly reading schedule. We recorded this group's meeting to discuss the book

(without our presence), and immediately after this we recorded a focus group interview.<sup>10</sup>

While focus groups have been a popular tool of qualitative social research since the early twentieth century (especially in the social and health sciences), and are used in film and television reception studies (Philo; Tulloch), they have generally been absent from research in literary studies. They have, however, been used repeatedly in studies of book clubs ever since Janice Radway's study of the reception of romance fiction (Radway), and since then they have been used in other significant studies on book clubs such as those conducted by Elizabeth Long. Focus groups provide a flexible, efficient and convenient way of studying meaning making through dialogue and interaction (Farnsworth and Boon; Hydén and Bülow). They provide detailed information 'about perceptions, feelings and impressions' and can be used for 'almost any topic in a wide array of settings from very different types of individuals' (Stewart and Shamdasani 140). Also, we felt that focus groups would provide a reasonably naturalistic setting for book group members to interact in ways not too dissimilar to their usual meetings. As well, while we both have experiences using focus groups we were confident this is a format we can employ in a valid and reliable manner insofar as it relates to activities that we undertake as teachers and critics.

Successful focus groups require a clear set of questions that provoke discussion within the group, and our focus groups were guided by a question protocol, adapted as situations required (see Table 2).

**A. Preamble:** We'd like to ask you about your impressions of the book, before we start talking about the discussion as a whole.

What do you remember about your reactions to reading *The Secret River*?

Can you remember how the book made you feel?

**B. Preamble:** Now we'd like to hear about your general book group's discussion of the book:

Tell us about your memories of the book group discussion.

Was there consensus? Tensions? Difficulties? Surprising reactions?

**C. Preamble:** Could we ask some more specifics about the discussion?

What did you discuss about the characters and events?

Were there any other important elements that you talked about?

Did you talk about how reviewers and critics reacted to the book?

<sup>10</sup> In future studies we intend to repeat this format, and record groups' discussion of the text and then record the focus group in the presence of the researchers. This will provide us with more nuanced information about how individual groups respond to given texts, as well as providing a means of clarifying details raised in the focus groups.

**D. Preamble:** Let's talk about the impact of this novel:

How did the book make you think about the past?

How did the book make you think about the present?

Does reading a novel like this change anything?

Table 2: Focus Group Protocol

Meetings ranged in length from 1.5 to 2.5 hours. In four of the groups two researchers facilitated discussion; the focus group for Group 2 was facilitated by a single researcher. All sessions were audio-visually recorded.

Transcripts of the interviews were checked by each recorder for accuracy and then examined using thematic analysis. As psychologists Victoria Braun and Victoria Clarke point out, thematic analysis is a foundational method of qualitative analysis (78). In Braun and Clarke's terms: 'Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (79). The advantages of this kind of analysis are that it is, first of all, relatively straightforward and efficient, and it shares many features familiar to us as literary and cultural scholars. Furthermore it is an approach that lends itself to different theoretical orientations. In undertaking this kind of analysis we were able to develop a profile of each book club, and identify a number of points of comparison and contrast across groups.

It was not our intention to identify a 'representative' style or sensibility, and indeed, in studies like this, focus group data does not lend itself to generalisability across a population. Nor does our analytical approach aim to generate normative claims about readers' responses to *The Secret River* in the context of reconciliation. Rather our focus groups speak to each group's experience of the book, highlight common themes and concerns, and generate further research questions.

The book clubs in the present study displayed different orientations towards reconciliation as an idea, a practice, and a social obligation. Group 1 embraced reconciliation; indeed this group served explicitly as a forum in which members could deepen their understanding of what reconciliation means for them as non-Indigenous citizen.<sup>11</sup> The members of the other groups appeared more ambivalent in their discussions of race and history. These groups were also more 'generalist' in their choice of reading material. One group—Group 5—belonged to a formal book club program run by a local library, and so their choice of

<sup>11</sup> As one member put it: 'we are an issues-based book group, we come together to read about the topic [reconciliation] and that defines who we are.' Amongst other things, it would appear that the group provides a safe-space for participants to engage in discussion about a contentious public issue: 'I know there are issues that I just let go when there are people outside of the group, because I know I can discuss them here.'



reading was largely determined by this program. Yet sharing a commitment to reading—and especially reading novels like *The Secret River* that receive great public attention—meant that the groups could not avoid engaging with the idea of reconciliation in their discussions, even if in an implicit manner. Reading *The Secret River* brought them into a conversation; a conversation that the nation has found it impossible to avoid.

### **Emerging themes**

A number of significant themes emerged from the focus group interviews, which we discuss more fully elsewhere. Here we consider two significant themes that we term ‘consensus/dissensus’ and ‘reading as social practice.’ We chose to report on these themes because they relate specifically to our guiding questions: viz., what can book clubs tell us about the public reception of works of contemporary fiction, especially those with clear political and moral themes?

#### *Consensus/dissensus*

Theories of conformity, social influence, and ‘group think’ might suggest that book clubs naturally encourage consensus amongst members, especially when discussions turn to deeply contentious issues. And certainly a tendency toward groupthink and consensus is one of the chief criticisms levelled against reading groups by critics and writers sceptical of the kinds of reading practices they encourage (Barstow; Cusk). The findings of researchers like Hartley and Turvey, Devlin-Glass, Poole and others casts doubt on this. Nevertheless, evidence of a ‘consensus effect’ would lend credence to the dominant critical reading of *The Secret River* described above (that readers would adopt a clear ideological position in relation to the text’s representations of history and race relations), especially given the ethnic homogeneity of the groups. Yet our experiences with the focus groups complicate such a view.

While each group demonstrated broad agreement on aspects of *The Secret River* and the novel’s significance, they also displayed degrees of dissensus: that is, disagreements about the text and the issues it raised. At times, dissensus was clear and explicit, involving statements of claim and counter-claim between group members. At other times dissensus was subtle, or apparent in a performative mode, as when one group member claimed to ‘play the devil’s advocate.’ Furthermore, group members frequently identified dissensus as a valued quality of their group’s practice: they appreciated hearing perspectives that differed from their own.

Although all of our participants share a love of books and book talk, and identified themselves as ‘readers’, such an affinity did not translate into a direct consensus on the book. Indeed members of Group 4 were initially surprised by

the level of consensus in their discussions of *The Secret River*, as suggested in the following exchange:

- A: Everybody liked it. [...]  
 B: Which is unusual.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, a shared 'liking' of the book did not equate to a shared interpretation of its meaning or impact. Members of Group 2, who differed markedly in their assessments of Grenville's novel, illustrate a similar point:

- A: Um, I felt very positive actually, just a great read, that's my general impression. [...]  
 D: I remember that [C] wasn't so over-the-moon.  
 C: Yeah, I mean I enjoyed it as a, it was a bit of a page-turner, but there were things about it that I didn't buy.  
 E: I wasn't comfortable with it.

The last speaker goes on to explain her discomfort—'I'm not talking about the writing [...] I'm talking about the subject matter'—with respect to the prominence within the public domain of the book's topic: namely, its contentious interpretation of Australian colonial history. This led to the following exchange:

- E: I don't think you do forget that happened, that's the thing. We are always reminded of it all the time.  
 B: No you don't forget it happened.  
 D: But I don't know that you are. For a lot of people who don't know anything about Australian history [E], I think to read that novel, [...] they would have to have had their eyes opened [...] I mean, she [Grenville] was drawing on fact.  
 E: But surely everybody knows.  
 C: [over] And the brutality and injustice.  
 D: [replying to E] No, no, I don't think I would assume that.

Here participants agree on the impact of the text's representation of history but disagree on a substantive issue: namely, the degree of public understanding of colonial history and its legacies.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A third member added, 'I've never been to one [group meeting] where everyone has enjoyed the same book [...] often enough, the best nights are when we all hate it!'

<sup>13</sup> A similar exchange took place in Group 3:

- A: This was on the list of books I didn't like.  
 B: See, this is the thing that happens, and you think, how could you not like this?  
 A: I'm fairly sure that this ... I've had a thing for a long time, since I was a kid, about Australian literature. [...] It's a bit jingoistic, this whole 'Australia's calling

The degree to which consensus/dissensus was articulated across each group is difficult to measure. Perhaps the most complex reflection on this theme came from a member of Group 1:

We are very comfortable in voicing our opinions and also hearing different opinions [...] it helps sort of formulate them. [...] And where you have people with different opinions, that helps to perhaps clarify the issue. [...] We don't all have the same opinion, but I think that sharing of ideas really helps to [...] formulate opinions.

Across the five groups, participants concurred, voiced disapproval, exchanged comments, questioned one another, compared and contrasted each other's statements and perspectives, and so on. For all participants, the book club was valued for the way it allowed for ideas to be tested, and new perspectives and knowledge to be encountered. As well it appeared that the focus groups generated discussion and reflection amongst participants about *The Secret River*, and provided an opportunity for participants to reconsider prior impressions of the novel. In effect, the focus group discussions became supplementary to the participants' prior conversation about Grenville's novel (we discuss this further below).

#### *Reading as social practice*

'Reading as a social practice' emerged as a second theme in the focus groups discussions. That is, members of the groups more or less understood their book club as a space in which they engaged in conversations that reflected and helped to fashion their understandings of their own identities, their cultures, and others. This theme is evident from other studies of book clubs/reading groups (Allington and Swann; Sedo 'Reading Communities'). Book club researchers like Poole, Devlin-Glass, Procter, and Davis contend that readers in book clubs are, on the whole, active and engaged. Books and reading may provide the context for conviviality—a regular get together over wine and food—but that is not say that the conversations that arise in such contexts are somehow apolitical or amoral. Indeed the idea that book clubs might provide a context in which people have the opportunity to test and contest significant moral and political ideas is inherent in the work of scholars like Davis, Procter, Poole, Devlin-Glass and others. It would seem that for the participants in our study—to varying degrees across groups—the book club serves an intellectual purpose. Our focus groups certainly support

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you', and all that sort of rubbish. [...] Maybe it's because you were force-fed it when you were at school.

the view that reading *The Secret River* prompted reflection within the groups on the nature of Australian history, race relations and reconciliation.<sup>14</sup>

Each group in our study shared an understanding of the power of reading: good reading and writing was the pretext for their meetings. Yet they differed in the way they understood the political significance of reading and writing. For members of Groups 1 and 4 the book club has social purposes, but it also has important pedagogical roles: readers valued their group for the way it helped them engage with works of literature that could teach them things about the world. In fact, for Group 1 a commitment to reconciliation was the *raison d'être* of the club. While there was an appreciation of the social pedagogical value of reading in Groups 2, 3 and 5, these book clubs appeared to place greater emphasis on the social value of their meetings. The point here is that both purposes were obvious in all groups, and they weren't considered mutually exclusive.

Across all groups there was a general consensus that Grenville's novel was 'powerfully written' and affecting. The majority of readers enjoyed reading the book and applauded Grenville's skills. In particular, participants tended to praise the book for its realism (although they did not use this specific term) and its readability: that is, its plausibility, perceived veracity, quick moving plot, and attention to physical, psychological and historical detail. Time and again, participants noted that the book 'felt real' and was 'a good read': 'just a great read, that's my general impression', 'Great story' (Group 3).<sup>15</sup> And these qualities accounted for the book's impact on the reader. That is, the degree to which they felt they had learnt something about the past, had experienced a sense of 'intimacy' with history; felt emotionally moved by the characters and story; and/or had confirmed their belief in the power of storytelling to move, educate, and change the values of readers.

Members of Group 1 enjoyed reading the book, and recalled many details from the book even though their original discussion of the book had taken place four years prior to the focus group. Some participants stated that they appreciated the book's treatment of history, as well as its narrative qualities: 'I loved it because I'm a keen family historian [...] I just thought it was a very readable book.' Most of the other members concurred on this latter point. And as the discussion progressed the relationship between the book's impact on participants' understanding of history and their ability or otherwise to empathize with

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<sup>14</sup> We provide specific details of this in reference to *The Secret River*, elsewhere (see Nolan and Clarke 'Book Clubs').

<sup>15</sup> Members of Group 4 voiced similar appreciations of the writing:

A: And she was [Grenville] just an excellent writer. From every aspect I felt.

B: Her descriptions were just so brilliant.

characters was drawn back to the book's 'readability': 'I just thought it was easy to read, and it was very simply descriptive [...] and it seemed to have more of an impact because of that.'

It became clear that at least in the case of *The Secret River* the members of Group 1 held very strong views about the importance of storytelling and fiction as tools for cultivating a reconciliation sensibility: and this reflects a further facet of the theme of 'reading as a social practice'. In many respects these are values that are familiar to bourgeois literary culture and that position literature as a civilizing influence, educative and enriching. At the same time the group considers itself to be engaged with the important goals of reconciliation: namely, attending to histories of invasion and Aboriginal dispossession, and empathising with Indigenous subject positions:

- A: I also identified with the Aborigines, I kind of entered into the conflict.
- B: The brutality made sense. [...] You have to feel desperately sorry for the Aboriginal people, but you could also understand the white people doing it, because they had been brutalized all their lives as well.
- C: What it does for me is that it makes me want to know more, it pushes me to explore. [...] I want to know what was happening else around there (sic), I want to know what it was like for both sides.

Most participants acknowledged Grenville's book as an explicit political intervention in Australian history and race politics. And a number of readers across all groups found reading the work disturbing in part because it provoked reflection on their moral and political values. One participant from Group 5 put it this way:

Does it [the novel] bring out a specific issue? How are we then to think about that conflict long ago and the ongoing conflicts or the issues? You know, you start something in history it keeps going down the generations and we have to deal with these things. How do you ... do you have to redress balances? Do I have to redress that balance? You know, all these sorts of things come out when you read that sort of thing.

When describing the literary qualities of *The Secret River*, participants re-iterated values observed in other studies: they appreciated good plots, realistic and complex characters and scenarios, as well as characters with whom they could empathize. Yet readers' appreciation of Grenville's book went beyond these, and the quotations above demonstrate that—even when readers did not particularly like the book—*The Secret River* provoked reflection on personal and social values, which for some participants was an unsettling experience.

### Discussion and conclusion

The findings from this paper raise two questions. The first is, how do book groups manage consensus and dissensus in their reading of Australian literature? And the second is, how does the group's understanding of reading as a social practice relate to other aspects of their lives? Answering these questions requires more information than that reported here, which is why we are currently engaged in further research on book clubs and their reading of the fictions of reconciliation. Yet the present data does provide some suggestions. For a start, it was clear that readers displayed varying degrees of critical engagement with the novel. While most readers enjoyed the novel, there were a number who did not and who voiced dissatisfaction with the book. Some saw it as manipulative, or felt that the overall depiction of race conflict was too blatant. And, as noted above, a number of participants and groups chose to focus on the novels deployment of a familiar 'convict narrative' that served to ameliorate the guilt of the main protagonists. However, even those who disliked the book became engaged in the debates that were prompted by its reading and by the groups' discussions. It seems to us then that one of the most significant challenges for literary critics engaging in research on book club discussions, is to avoid the temptation to graft onto the book club the dominant idea of the 'solitary reader'. As Elizabeth Long states:

What goes on in the meetings is primarily a conversation. As such, it is an intersubjective creation the takes on the weight of reality, however ephemeral is may be. This reality comes into being because of the strands that comprise it, but it cannot be reduced to them. [...] In the same fashion, participants in book groups create a conversation that begins with the book each [person] has read but moves beyond the book to include the personal connections and meanings each has found in the book, and the new connections with the book, with inner experience, and with the perspectives of the other but to suppose that emerge within the discussion. At its best, this kind of discussion is profoundly transformative. (144)

The material for our study comes predominantly from focus group interviews in which participants were asked to reflect on their previous meetings to discuss Grenville's *The Secret River*. In only one case did we record an initial meeting to discuss the novel. In this case the book club had integrated the novel into their normal schedule and we recorded their meeting, and then, immediately afterwards, recorded a focus group with the researchers. The transcript of that group's discussion suggests a number of things about how the readers in this book club read and talked about *The Secret River*. It also suggests some important differences between the kind of literary discourse one finds in an academic context and the vernacular criticism of book clubs. Here we shall mention just some of the key points here. In the discussions of the novel the book

club members primarily focused on character, plot and description. Considerations of the literary merits of the novel revolved around the works apparent realism. And the value of the text appear to be based on its plausibility, its qualities as 'a good read', in the way provoke reflection on contemporary affairs. All of this is consistent with what we know of the styles of discussions of book clubs in general (Long; Hartley and Turvey; Barstow; Berg; Allington; Fister). Discussion moved rapidly from topic to topic, and frequently evoked reminiscence, as when club members remarked on the beauty of the descriptions of the Hawkesbury River setting and their own experiences of that locale. At other times reflection on the book evoked reflection on the contemporary politics of race. In one exchange, for example, a member considered the massacre scene and how that altered their perceptions of the character of William Thornhill, the text's protagonist. After a brief exchange about the qualities of the massacre scene, the discussion shifted to the question of apologising for historical violence.

- A: We have lost a lot. And there is no way now, I don't know, it's all very well saying sorry, but it's an empty word. It's like Lindy Chamberlain says, if people have got to be made to say sorry it's a sorry not worth having. That's how, if I were an Aborigine I would feel like that.
- B: Sorry said by us has nothing really to do with what was done in 1813 or so on. That's what I feel when they stand up and say sorry.
- C: But you've got to do something. But if you put it in with some words. It's a statement.
- A: It is, it's a feeling. But how many of the people that say sorry have that conscience of what really was done?
- C: Well I walked across the bridge down in Hobart a few years ago and it is my most moving experience. I felt like there was solidarity on the bridge and before and afterwards.

As well as an instance of group reflection on the issue of apology, this exchange also demonstrates the quality of dissensus and the theme of reading as a social practice. No agreement is reached; the discussion is in a sense left hanging and unresolved. The book discussion has provided an opportunity for the controversial topic of a white apology for colonial violence against Aboriginal people to be named and for different viewpoints to be stated. Ironically the discussion here was truncated by one of the participants becoming conscious of the recording equipment and asking whether they should be discussing such topics!

Elsewhere we have considered how respondents reflected on specific qualities of the novel's historicity and the respondents' identifications with Thornhill (Nolan and Clarke 'Book Clubs'). In particular we have considered the responses of book

club members in light of criticisms of *The Secret River* made by academic critics, historians and literary critics: the former are being concerned that readers will confuse history and fiction; the latter that they will empathise with the central character, thus ameliorating white guilt. The focus groups that we have conducted provide evidence both for and against these assertions. And that is not unexpected given the format and design of the study. However, it is clear that such broad claims about literary culture, like those made by Grenville's detractors, call for nuanced enquiry and reflection. The findings of our pilot study have provided us with a number of questions for further investigation.

A pilot study is a preliminary step towards a larger investigative project with an eye to refining a set of research questions, as well as protocols and methods of analysis for addressing them. And it was with this in mind that we embarked upon this first stage of our research project. While the focus groups provided many valuable insights into the book club members' responses to *The Secret River*, there are clearly limitations to the kinds of conclusions that can be drawn from the present study. The size of the sample, its relative homogeneity, the differences in class and age of the various groups, as well as one-sided nature of the gender representation and the time lag between the initial reading of the novel and the focus group, all place limitations on the rigour of the findings. Perhaps more significant is the risk that the participants' responses and behaviours were influenced by presence of the researchers and the format of the interviews. In social research this is known as the Hawthorne, 'reactivity' or 'observational' effect or observational bias and it occurs when participants in a study consciously or unconsciously modify their behaviour in response to the study conditions (Sarantakos 201). It could be argued that given the sensitivities that surround reconciliation, that participants might have censored themselves or adopted positions that might not have truly represented their actual beliefs. In future studies we will attempt to deal with these issues and possible effects by standardising our methodology, including ensuring that we utilise multiple interviewers and analysts, and organising interviews to coincide with the groups' initial readings of the text.

That stated, the pilot study has drawn our attention to two very significant characteristics of the book club environment, which we feel require closer attention. Whether the book club is a useful site for gauging the possible effects of books like *The Secret River* in facilitating discourse on reconciliation seems to rely on at least two assumptions about the book club as a social entity. The first is the capacity of the group to foster conversation that allows for dissensus. The second is the character of the book club as a site of reading in which reading becomes a context for filiation and sociality, as well as for the engagement with ideas.



The idea that book clubs succeed when they provide environments in which participants feel safe to express contrasting views and opinions, contrasts with the view that book clubs encourage consensus. While it is clear that the members of each group in our study held broadly similar ideological viewpoints, there was clearly a great deal of latitude in their specific opinions and this was reflected in their considerations of Grenville's novel. It is also clear that for the participants in our study, the book club provided a space to engage in conversations of a kind that they may experience in other areas of their life. For some the book club had a specific ideological purpose, as for Group 1. For the rest, even though the book club served as a context for a group of friends to gather on a regular basis, it also provided a forum in which such acquaintances could feel able to address issues of specific political and moral importance.

We began this paper with two questions: What can literary scholars learn from book clubs? And how can we use book clubs as a source of information on how works of fiction are received and function in the public sphere? In the first instance we were motivated by our interest in the fictions of reconciliation and particularly the reception of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, and in turn we were concerned to examine the validity of what we have characterized as the dominate academic interpretation of this text. In the course of developing and implementing a methodology involving focus groups with book clubs a number of things have become clear. First of all, book clubs are one site of reading amongst many that constitute contemporary literary cultural space, including the academy. The readings that one encounters in such groups are by no means more authentic or valid than those one encounters in others. Each site of reading has its own particular conventions, dispositions, and regimes of value that influence how any given text is received within that site. We are not simplistically asserting that the discussion of *The Secret River* amongst the book clubs in this study refute the scholars who have critiqued Grenville's novel as a political conservative text. Such a move would simply recapitulate to the kind of positivistic model of reading and criticism that reception studies seek to destabilise. Rather the focus group data demonstrates the dialogical nature of reading and of the need to critically account for the politics and ethics of reading in process. Just as no literary text should be considered to have a singular effect, nor should we consider the reading of a text to be somehow 'fixed'. The readers in our study formed their views on *The Secret River* across a number of contexts: first in private, then in the company of their book club, and then in the context of the study. One of the challenges for us in future research is to examine whether and how readers' appreciation and understanding of a text changes across different settings.

This brings us finally to the issue of reconciliation and whether *The Secret River* prompted a kind of discourse that facilitated readers' understandings of this

concept. Again we must avoid simplistic rationalising. For most of our participants, reading *The Secret River* was, at times, a disturbing experience; for others it was boring or simply irrelevant. It helped to open the eyes of some; it confirmed others in their prior beliefs. Regardless, it provoked conversation across all groups, and it is perhaps in such provocations that the political and moral value of such a text lies. If the fictions of reconciliation like *The Secret River* facilitates discussion on issues of race and history, and book clubs provide spaces for discussions, then perhaps such texts and spaces do facilitate the evolution of understandings of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It is a possibility that we will investigate in future research.

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