Troy Bramston on the farmland that is at the heart of the story: ‘beginning …’

S

o opens Taboo. Kim Scott’s fifth novel and the first since he won the 2011 Miles Franklin Literary Award for That Deadman Dancing, a book Tom Keneally described as “an insider’s view of Australia before it was Australia”.

That simple first paragraph says a lot about Taboo. “They”, we assume, are Aboriginal Aus-

tralians. “Others” are white Australians.

The story unfolds in the here and now, unlike That Deadman Dancing, set in early-19th-
century Western Australia, or one of its prede-
cessors, Benang, which focuses on the decades of forced removal of indigenous children, the people we now know as the Stolen Generations. Benang was joint winner of the Miles Franklin in 2000. “Fury Aboriginal is contemporary,” Scott says in a telephone interview from his home in Coolbellup, South Fremantle. “Healing is a con-
temporary preoccupation, through truth and justice,” he concludes, “and land, giving back land.”

“Identity is not remote, or about posturing. In my part of Australia, Aboriginal people are everywhere. There’s a community that inter-
mingles. So the relationship, or potential rela-
tionship, between Aboriginal Australia and the modern nation-state is sort of in this novel.”

This is a novel where the descendants of the original inhabitants and the descendants of the people who took their land live in awkward, al-
most respectful familiarity. They are in Scott’s Western Australia. They are uncomfortable about dwelling on the past and in saying or hearing certain words.

“Our people gave up on that Payback stuff a long time ago,” we are told by an unnamed oc-
casional narrator, “because we always knew death is only one part of a story that is forever beginning …”

We soon meet the man who owns and lives in the house that形状s the setting of Taboo, Dan Horton, who two months ago lost his wife of 50 years. He and Janet fostered indigenous children on the station. Now, one of them wants to pay a visit, as part of a group of Noongar peo-
ple, including elders, who are returning to their homeland, to this place made taboo by death.

The ceremonial aspect of their visit is the opening of a Peace Park in town. When Dan tells his brother Malcolm about this and uses the word massacre, Malcolm says, “I wish they wouldn’t use that word. Massacre.”

They do remember, as boys, finding a skull at their father’s grave. They do remember, as children, the day they heard the news that the land was taboo, not to be visi-
ted. “It is a place for ghosts, not for living peo-
ple,” says one, Wilfred. Later another, Nita, reminds her friends that “there’s good white people too, you know that …”

With Gerald is his twin brother Gerrard, and Scott has a bit of fun with the two Gereys. He is also playful with animal metaphors. At a funeral of five or six generations who have occupied the land, to this place made taboo by death.

Premier who never was settles the score

Troy Bramston

Setting the Record Straight: A Political Memoir
By Carl Scully
IngramSpark, 468pp

In 2009 an embattled Nathan Rees warned that should he not be the NSW premier by the end of that day, his successor would be nothing but “a puppet of Eddie Obeid and Joe Tripodi”. This marked a decisive moment in the disintegration and degeneration of NSW Labor.

Rees, who had succeeded Morris Iemma in mid-2007, indeed did not see out that day as premier. His speech had an electrifying im-
 pact that continues to resonate.

Kristina Keneally, handpicked by Obeid, Tripodi and Ian Macdonald to replace Rees, tried to reassure voters that she was “nobody’s puppet” and “nobody’s girl”.

Former minister Carl Scully, in this self-pub-
lished memoir, Setting the Record Straight, pulls back the scar on these unhappy events and the pu-
cesses out.

This is an important book that deserves a wide audience because he is prepared to tell the truth about the deceitful state of NSW Labor in the post-Bob Carr era. Its publication is timely ahead of next weekend’s Labor state confer-
ence.

The author tells me that the party had to atone for allowing “criminals” to effectively ap-
point three premiers following Rees’ retire-
ment in 2005. Scully is referring to sub-faction ringmasters Obeid from the right and Macdon-
ald from the left. Appointing the premier, one observer tells me, was like the mafia lounging around in the back of a greasy pizza parlour in New York, dividing the spoils among the made men (and women).

Scully is unfair to Iemma, who was elevated to the premiership with the support of Carr and the imprimatur of Mark Arbib, then NSW Labor secretary. His Sussex Street successor, Karl Bitar, played a decisive role in smoothening a path for Rees to become premier in 2008. Rees was ousted because he sacked Tripodi and Mac-
donald from cabinet.

It is true, however, that Iemma was not hun-
gry enough for the job and Rees never ad-
equately filled it. Iemma, despite Scully labelling him “the master mumbler”, did win re-
election in 2007. This should not be discounted.

Keneally, however, in 2011 presided over the worst election result for Labor in more than a century. These disastrous years are now under-
scored by former ministers occupying jail cells. Others may soon join them.

Scully is not an impartial observer of these events. He had long aspired to become premier. His sights were set on succeeding Carr after the latter’s stellar electoral success, winning two landslides in 1999 and 2003. But Scully was blindsided when Carr announced his retire-
ment in 2005.

“I immediately felt an enormous surge of electricity through my body,” Scully writes about the moment he heard the news. “My time had now come. I felt overwhelmed with emo-
tion and excitement. I was ready. I was going to be premier.” Flamboyed by his family, he held a press conference and announced he was run-
ning.
Author Kim Scott: 'Identity is not remote, or about posturing'

"That sounds racist in itself, but it's an attempt to hang on to that quality of hostile circumstance." He adds, after a pause, that his writing has been an attempt "to add words to the kernel of truth that is now being built by the Coalition government."

There is value here for students, observers and practitioners of politics. There are many books about state politics published in Australia. The book brings with it some characteristics of a semi-autobiographical nature. Flanagan, a Miles Franklin virgin dedicated to his two adult sons. Details are available on his publisher's website (panmacmillan.com.au/pcidor).

Even so it seems almost inevitable for him to ask the question most authors don't want to be asked, whether he can win a literary award, in this case a Miles Franklin award, which would put him equal with Peter Carey and David Ireland. Only then Athley and Tim Winton have won four. He talks of this as "a matter of pride for me". He is a founding member of the Wirlomin Wirlomoh to the legacy of history.

Tony Birch, who is of part-Aboriginal descent, has written: "I have Tilly go through this experience, and that's the part of why she's damaged, like a lot of people who are at the interface of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds."

One of the reasons for writing is to help people be able to be connected, perhaps even transformed, by connection to places of heritage and who we were. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "old stories, music, song and dance. He has helped retell "ol"