

DARK TALES FROM THE LONG RIVER

DAVID PRICE

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YEAR LEVEL: Y7–12

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITY: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

ABOUT THE BOOK

From searches for serial killers and missing persons to the persecution of migrants and Aboriginal people, David Price takes us back to a time when the line between lawmakers and criminals was lightly drawn. Based on a wide array of contemporaneous accounts of life in the Gascoyne, these sometimes shocking, sometimes disturbing true crime stories depict an era when Australia's laws served to maintain order rather than to secure justice. *Dark Tales from the Long River* offers a window into an evolving history of Western Australia that is still struggling into the light.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Price is a Western Australian educator who grew up in the small town of Carnarvon in the 1960s. He has been a teacher, principal and Director of Schools in many parts of the state. Although he now lives in Perth, David has long been intrigued by the hidden history of his home town and its wilful amnesia about the treatment of Aboriginal people and Asian migrants by the first settlers.

THEMES

- Australian colonial history
- Race relations in colonial Australia
- Racism against Indigenous Australians
- Racism against Asian Australians
- Law and order
- Crime and punishment
- 'Frontier justice'

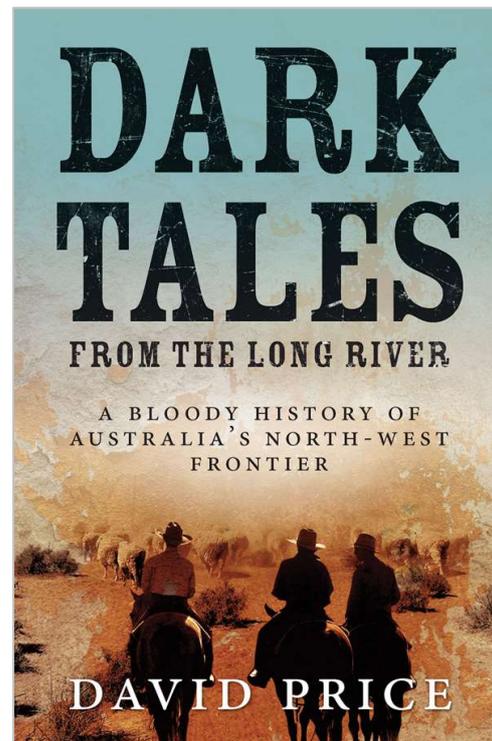
AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

Years 7–10 History

Years 7–10 Civics and Citizenship

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Biography of the author: fremantlepress.com.au/contributors/david-price
- Racism No Way – Timeline: racismnoway.com.au/about-racism/timeline
- Racism No Way – What is institutional racism?: racismnoway.com.au/about-racism/understanding-racism/institutional-racism
- Racism No Way – What is white privilege?: racismnoway.com.au/about-racism/understanding-racism/white-privilege



CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

1. Do you think we can judge the actions of people in the past according to the values and attitudes of the present, or should we consider them within the context of the attitudes and values of the time? What does this mean for concepts of right and wrong?
2. How objectively or subjectively do you think the author has portrayed the events described in this book? Has he conveyed his own opinion on each case, or has he left it up to the reader to decide? Explain your answer.
3. What is meant by the term 'frontier justice', and how does this concept apply to these stories?
4. What is meant by the term 'institutional racism', and how does this concept apply to these stories?
5. What is meant by the term 'white privilege', and how does this concept apply to these stories?
6. Australia was colonised by the British on the basis of 'terra nullius'. What does this term mean and how did it affect the treatment of Aboriginal people and their ties to the land?
7. Do you think Australia has come a long way since the events in the book, or do you think we still have a long way to go? Find an online news story from this year that supports your answer.

Creative writing exercises

1. Imagine you are Magistrate Foss's son or daughter. Choose one of the cases presented in this book and write a dialogue between you and your father about his handling of the case.
2. Write a letter to the editor in response to one of the newspaper reports included in the book.
3. Research an historical event that occurred in the place where you lived. Pretend you are one of the people involved in the event and write a journal entry describing what happened from their perspective.
4. Pick a current social justice issue that you are passionate about and write a creative non-fiction essay about it, using newspaper extracts to illustrate prevailing societal attitudes.
5. Write a letter to the government of today, outlining how you feel about a social justice issue you are passionate about and what you would like done about it.

Topics for debate

1. Magistrate Foss was basically a good man who did the best job he could under the circumstances.
2. Times were really tough back then – things were just as bad but in different ways for the British settlers as they were for Indigenous people and Asian migrants.
3. Things are different now, and we know better. We would never let such injustices happen today.
4. A crime is a crime, and the offender needs to pay the price regardless of the circumstances.
5. The problems back then were not with the laws but with the application of the laws.
6. If a person in authority acts in a way I think is morally wrong, there's not really anything I can do about it.

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What inspired you to write this book?

I grew up in the town of Carnarvon and, although I went to school there for 12 years, the only thing I learned about Aboriginal people was that they were hunters and gatherers, and that Albert Namatjira was a famous painter. This did not help me understand the Aboriginal people with whom I went to school, or their parents. It didn't explain why some Aboriginal people lived on a government reserve at the outskirts of town or why some children lived on a Christian mission far away from their parents. At the same time, there was nothing in my town to remind me that Asian people had once been part of the town's early history. Only a small, separate part of the cemetery gave any clue to their existence. As I grew older, I came to realise that most communities – and their teachers – have only a narrow knowledge of local history, particularly when it relates to cruelty or

unfairness. It seemed to me that all of Australia had adopted a wilful amnesia, had chosen to forget what was uncomfortable about our history since colonisation. So I decided to write these stories because I thought it was a simple way to get people to engage with our past. Sometimes we find it easier to read a story rather than to listen to a lecture. I have tried to leave my voice out of the stories for that reason. I want the reader to come to their own understanding of the past, and to reach their own conclusions.

Do you have any personal connection to any of the people or places in the book?

One of the stories in this book involves a legendary pearl that was found in Broome in 1905. Stories about the pearl, which was stolen and led to the deaths of four people, have abounded in Broome for all the many decades since. While many myths have grown up around the pearl, I have avoided these because the truth is just as interesting. My great-grandfather, John Travers, was the co-owner of the lugger, *Cleopatra*, that found the infamous pearl. When he and my great-grandmother, Georgina, escaped the turmoil that followed the pearl's disappearance, they came to Carnarvon with their baby daughter, Sheila, my grandmother. Within a couple of months, however, John Travers disappeared off the Carnarvon jetty and was never seen again. Georgina was from Scotland and now she was a single mother in a distant and hostile land, stranded in an outback town far from anywhere. Even so, she set up her own successful business and became a well-known and admired member of community still struggling to establish itself on the edge of the Indian Ocean. At the same time, Georgina raised Sheila single-handedly and provided for her education. She never remarried. Georgina was a remarkable person but, in many ways, she was also a pioneer of today's modern woman. Her story reminds us of the enormous, often unwritten, contribution that women made to the growth of the Australia we know today.

How did you research the amount of detail you've included, which makes these stories feel so real?

Most of my research began in Trove, a searchable online government repository of all the newspapers published since the beginning of Australia's colonisation. I then supplemented the news stories with research from Hansard, the record of parliamentary debates and proceedings, as well as historical references and court records. I have focused on newspapers because the language they used gives us a powerful insight into prevailing attitudes and beliefs about law, order, punishment, migration and Aboriginal rights. It is telling and confronting for the modern reader to see, for example, racist language routinely appearing in the newspapers of the time.

Do you have a particular favourite story in the book and, if so, why?

For me, the story of how the Aboriginal toddler, Topsy, was shot dead, and how her killer went free, captures through one family's tragedy the wider tragedy of what happened to all Aboriginal people. But there is also another story that I enjoy for its irony – how a man was shot to death in the bush, and how his killer was released from prison only to be shot to death by his own horse. It reminds me that truth is so much more compelling than fiction.

You seem to have mostly kept your own opinions out of these stories, just presenting the facts as they happened and allowing readers to make their own judgements on whether right or wrong was done. Was this a deliberate decision?

When we hold strong views about a subject, we often do not like to listen to contrary views. In fact, we live in a time when we are able to exclusively access – mainly online – only the information and opinions that suit our own view of the world. In Australia, many of us have trouble accepting the full truth of our history, especially when it involves legalised theft, racism, murder and exploitation or profound miscarriages of justice. But we cannot hold people completely to account for beliefs and understandings that are not informed by facts – invariably, all bigotry, all prejudice is founded on ignorance. I knew that if I tried to simply present evidence of a hidden history in Western Australia, there was a danger that it would appear like a lecture, which people with different views would resist. In fact, they would probably read the cover and put the book back on the

shelf. But all human beings enjoy a good story, so I decided to simply tell some interesting tales that any reader would get lost in. Maybe, I reckoned, they would come to their own realisations and form different views of the past. It was my way of getting the horses to the water; once there, I hoped that they might drink it.

Are you a full-time writer?

No. While I spend a lot of time writing, it is all in my spare time, and not all of it is for publication. I learned a long time ago that the only way to learn anything is to keep doing it. That is true of writing too.

Are you planning to write more books?

I am currently writing a true story about how Aboriginal people were once forced onto two barren islands near Carnarvon to be treated for venereal disease contracted from white men. It is another tale from our hidden history. Then I am going to try my hand at fiction with a book called *The Upside Down River*. It's a story about what lies below the surface of life in a small country town.

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