

KAYANG & ME

Kim Scott and Hazel Brown

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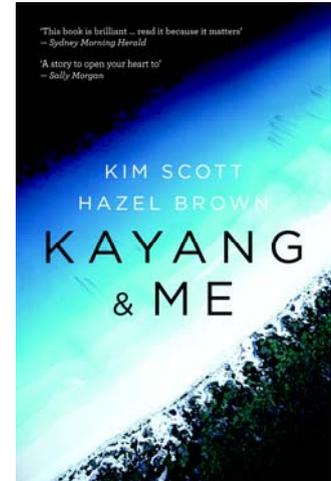
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Themes: Indigenous, community, family, culture, history

Year level: Y10 to Y12

Cross curriculum: Indigenous, History



ABOUT THE BOOK

Wilomin Noongar. What does that mean? Aunt Hazel reckons the wilo (curlew) can completely camouflage itself. It closes its eyes and just lies there, motionless. You only see it when its eyes open. So sometimes those of us who are disconnected and dispossessed only become visible when our eyes are opened to history. Acknowledging our people — wanting recognition and welcome — we call out.

Award-winning novelist Kim Scott and his elder, Hazel Brown, have created a monumental family history of the Wilomin Noongar people. Told in two voices — Kim's and Hazel's — *Kayang & Me* is a powerful story of community and belonging, revealing the deep and enduring connections between family, country, culture and history that lie at the heart of Indigenous identity.



The 2013 edition of *Kayang & Me* is supplemented for the first time by photographs of many of the Wilomin Noongar family members.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kim Scott is a descendant of people living along the south coast of Western Australia prior to colonisation, and is proud to be one among those who call themselves Noongar. His writing has won numerous awards and prizes, including two Miles Franklin Literary Awards. Kim's novels include *True Country*, *Benang: from the heart* and *That Deadman Dance*. He is currently Professor of Writing at Curtin University in Western Australia.

Hazel Brown is the senior elder of a large, extended Noongar family. She has worked as a rural labourer, was a member of Western Australia's first Metropolitan Commission of Elders, and is a registered Native Title claimant over part of the south coast of Western Australia.

STUDY NOTES

A. About the Book

1. Why have Kim and Hazel chosen to tell this history in two voices? What effect does this mode of storytelling have on the reader?
2. *'Everybody that was there is gonna tell it different [...] Just 'cause something's written down doesn't mean it's true either, does it?'* (pp. 152–153).

What do you think Hazel means? To what extent do our personal and cultural contexts determine the way we interpret events?

3. *'That's white man's stuff,' Aunt Hazel said, as if my reliance on paper was a disrespectful challenge. Her emphasis was on the authority of the old people's word, and their sense of the importance of place.* (p. 79)

How does Kim's approach to uncovering his family's history differ from Hazel's? How do Kim and Hazel manage to bridge these differences in their conversations?

4. What transformations does the reader observe in Scott as he gleans his family history? Where does he stand in relation to his Indigenous heritage at the beginning of the book and at its end?
5. In what ways do you think the non-fiction *Kayang & Me* informs Scott's 2010 novel *That Deadman Dance*? In your response, consider Scott's following comment:

Both are concerned with a similar locale to some extent, but That Deadman Dance also tries to access the self-assurance Kayang Hazel displays as a descendant of those who first created human society in her part of the world. It also, I think, tries to show its central character, Bobby, as someone, like Kayang Hazel, who values individual human relationships above and beyond ways people might be grouped politically or socially.
6. Early in Hazel's story, she mentions the massacre at Cocanarup (pages 7, 10). What impact does this have on the reader?
7. Bobby Roberts works against his people, considered a traitor by some and is a controversial member of Hazel and Kim's family. Who is Bobby? Discuss possible reasons for Bobby's apparent betrayal of his family and community. Use the text to support your answers.
8. Fanny Winnery is a matriarchal figure in this book. Explore this concept.
9. Consider the picture of Harriette Coleman on page 77. Why is it significant? In your answer refer to the background of the photo as described by Kim Scott on pages 76–78.
10. Discuss the historical implications of Campbell Taylor's journal entry from page 60 and reasons why you think the authors included this in the text.
11. *I told him I'd read how a surveyor set explosions to try and make Nightwell a permanent water source and destroyed it.* (p. 225)

What is the author suggesting about the approach of the first settlers to the land?
12. The Carrolup Native Settlement was a place of sorrow, destruction and death (pages 104–106). Describe the effects this place has had on Hazel and the people she talks about.
13. What do you think Hazel means when she notes that '*Runny noses and that only came about when people started living in the houses with concrete floors*' (p. 119)?
14. *I don't think that white people now, especially government people, I don't think they quite realise just how hard it was for Noongar people.* (p. 154)

This is a powerful political statement. How do you understand Hazel's words?
15. Read the chapter 'Gnowangerup Doctors' starting on page 165. Hazel takes the time to recall the wilful neglect of her friends and family by local doctors. Discuss why this is such an important topic for Hazel.
16. Do you agree with Kim's statement that '*Undoubtedly, there's a growing appreciation of Indigenous heritage and culture*' (p. 204)? Justify your response.
17. Take the time to note the titles given to each chapter. How are they relevant to the text and what can we learn about the tone of each chapter from the headings?
18. Map Hazel and Kim's family tree. Note the depth of information they provide. Consider how this compares with your own family structure.
19. Use the five W's to organise the following concepts:
 - a. Who: who is important to this story?
 - b. Why: why is this history important to us today?
 - c. What: what have you learnt about Noongar culture that you didn't know or understand before?
 - d. Where: where is this text set? Refer to the two maps on the inside cover of the book (front and back).

- e. When: when is this story set (years and centuries)? Discuss important dates in the story, and the significance of the text's extensive temporal scope.

B. A National Narrative

20. In what ways does *Kayang & Me* challenge colonial Australia's national narrative?
21. How does Hazel's world of the 1920s–1930s compare with Kim's world of the 1960s? How do those eras compare with Australia today?
22. In her review of the book in *The Monthly* (June 2005), Inga Clendinnen notes: *What is moving about this woman is the way she refuses to take ideological shortcuts. Every judgment is individual and grounded in experience.* Do you agree? Discuss with reference to examples from the text.
23. *Kayang Hazel, although relatively fair-skinned, was the eldest in a family of predominantly dark brothers and sisters. She never had a dog tag.* (p. 184)

How is Hazel treated compared with family members with darker skin? Give examples. What issues would an enforced hierarchy that is based on skin colour cause within families and communities?

24. *One among other Noongar and wadjela children running barefoot in a suburb a skip, hop and a step from the reserve, I was only ever at the fringe of a community which showed all the signs of being under siege.* (p. 15) What are the 'signs' to which Scott refers?
25. *I hate the white man who put the gun in my grandfather's hands, so they could get control over Noongars, and gave him the chains, so he could chain them up. And white people are still doing that today, like with ATSIC and their black bureaucracy.* (p. 47)

What do you think Hazel means by her comparison of ATSIC to white people giving Noongars guns to use against other Noongars? You may like to consider Scott's comment on page 197 that *even Native Title becomes just another way of dividing people, providing an opportunity to dispute one another's Indigenous identity while prioritising white law and racism.*

C. Language and Culture

Useful links for this section include:

- **South West Aboriginal Land & Sea Council's Kaatdijin website** (www.noongarculture.org.au)
- **The Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project website** (www.wirlomin.com.au)

26. *Sometimes it's as if, learning to make the sounds, I remake myself from the inside out. As if, in making the sounds of the language of this land, I make myself an instrument of it. As if, in uttering such sounds and making such meanings, I not only introduce myself to ancestors named Winnery, but beckon them closer to me.* (p. 240)

Throughout the book, Scott returns time and again to the significance and power of language. Give your own examples of the ways in which language can have power.

27. Consider the connection between language and culture. Do you think the preservation of language is important? Why or why not? If a language is lost, what knowledge might be lost along with it?
28. Consider how meaning is changed when you translate a text from one language into another. A useful exercise is comparing a few English translations of the same text (for example, see www.dartmouth.edu/~karamazov/resources/?page_id=427).
29. Reread page 223. What are some other examples of 'Default Country' terms? How are they incongruent with the landscapes and rhythms of the southern hemisphere and, more specifically, Western Australia? In your discussion, you may like to examine the traditional Noongar division of the year into a cycle of six seasons (information is widely available online).

30. Many Indigenous Australians are bilingual: they speak their group's language as well as English. Refer to the glossary and pronunciation guidelines at the back of the book. Go through the list of Noongar words and try to pronounce them. With a partner discuss your experience.
31. What can Question 30 above teach us about the experiences of Noongars and settlers when they first met? What were the consequences of the language barrier?
32. Based on what you've learned in the book, and with reference to pages 11–12 and the Glossary, what observations can you make about the Noongar language?

D. Wider Reading

33. Kim Scott references a case study from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody that describes *a young man 'of Aboriginal descent' standing on one leg in front of a mirror with the other foot resting on his thigh. You know, that iconic one-legged stance — you've seen it on tea towels. The report also notes that the boy made a boomerang a day or two before taking his life.* (p. 198).
- Why might the young man in custody have stood in this way and made a boomerang? Were they things he had grown up with himself?
 - What do these acts tell us about the mental state of the young man in custody?
 - What is Scott's tone when he tells the readers they've seen this stance on tea towels? How does this comment affect the way we read the passage?
 - Research the issue of Aboriginal deaths in custody in the past and today.
34. Reread Scott's exploration of Indigenous identity in Australian newspapers, books and magazines on pages 197–212. Discuss this in relation to your own observations of how Indigenous identity is represented in literature and the media today.
35. *Soon after the beginning of the twentieth century, the infamous 1905 Act and its amendments institutionalised the disempowerment of Noongar people. It isolated them, and created a fault line between Noongars and wadjelas.* (p. 95)
- Obtain and read copy of the *Aborigines Act 1905 (WA)*, which is freely available online through various national archives (try <http://archive.aiatsis.gov.au/removeprotect/52790.pdf>). In what ways does the Act create a fault line between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people? Who is vested with power through this Act?
36. The first line of the 1905 Act reads: '*An act to make provision for the better protection and care of the Aboriginal inhabitants of Western Australia.*' Discuss the use of the word 'protection' in this context.
37. Explore other instances in history where a race hierarchy was enshrined in law. When and where did it happen? What were the consequences? Has it changed, and if so, how did change come about? Are there still places in the world where this happens, and what can we do to change this?