

**The Form and Function of
Narrative Perspective in Kim**

Scott's True Country

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The floating, shifting narrative of Kim Scott's first novel *True Country* (1993) is one of the most captivating elements of the text that explores contemporary modes of Aboriginality. The narrative of *True Country* does not simply move the story from event to event; it underpins the moral of the text itself. With shifting perspectives and an unwavering sense of hope, the narrative embodies Billy's acceptance into the community of Karnama, the home of his grandmother.

Billy's journey as a young school teacher to the remote tropical community of Karnama in Northern Australia is told through the first person perspective of Billy and various others within the community, a removed second person descriptor, and, most importantly, omniscient narrators that seem to embody the Aboriginal history of Karnama. This omniscient presence constantly shifts and coalesces, with the voice of one and many; it is land, people, myth and history, the quintessence of Karnama and its Elders past and present. This essay will begin by discussing the omniscient narrators, before analysing two distinct modes of understanding the narrative style, one that comes with the first reading of the novel, and another that only emerges with subsequent readings and foreshadowed knowledge. The essay will then go on to discuss the affects of the floating narrative, as both hopeful and realistic, one that embodies the morals of the story and privileges

multiple perspectives in forming our understandings of the truth.

There is no one dominant narrative perspective throughout *True Country*, though the omniscient narrators occupy the most powerful position. It is they who introduce and welcome the reader to Karnama, 'yes, you might never see a better place. Our home... Is like we are a forgotten people then, on a maybe shrinking island; a special place for us alone... Welcome to you' (p. 16). Often, but not always, speaking as a collective, 'we saw them' (p. 63), these narrators observe not only what is happening within the progression of the story, but are the caretakers of Karnama's history, 'that's only the way it should be, the way it used to be. They used to do it like that ... But now? ... Things are all anykind and make no sense' (p. 207); and nurturers of the community's future, 'But. But maybe we gotta be the same so's we can make people remember that we belong here. And we got something to tell. Here first. For a long time. This whole big

Australia land binds us. And we fragment of a great... A Dreamt time. A maybe rented time. A time the fabric of which is tom and rent and now not holding together, like a torn flag fluttering' (p. 193). There are moments that imply living Karnama Elders are part of the narrative collective, 'Samson, Fatima, Moses...' (p. 218), though not consistently, as the narrative collective occupy a space outside a grounded reality and critique even those characters. These narrators guide us through the story, allowing the reader glimpses into various characters' perspectives, such as allowing us to see the 'grey mist hazy world' (p. 215) of Beatrice's madness, or the bitter racist mind of Alex calling the Raphael 'Cheeky. Bastard. Cheeky black bastards. That's what he thinks' (p. 232). The narrators carry the magic of Karnama, acknowledging that it is they who cure Beatrice, 'they called us. We fixed it. Good for them that they asked us, and let us' (p. 218). These narrators are intimate and inextricable from the land,

and it they who so often guide the reader over the landscape, as though reading and remembering a map of Karnama, 'you might fly in many times, high up and like reading river, hill, tree, rocks. Coming from upriver and the east, you flying flying fly in looking all the time and remembering' (p. 16). The repetition of levitation and flying is clearly a potent image for Scott, and he employs it on numerous occasions throughout the text, 'imagine, again, seeing all this from above, as if you were flying slowly, just drifting, quiet, way above them' (p. 102), which serves to emphasise the floating, drifting affect of the omniscient narrators, the links between their voice and the way we understand the land. The omniscient narrator is not simply an outsider relaying the story, but very much an invested character (characters) within the text, 'ah yes, we not there maybe, but we know that mob, we hear things' (p. 109); and ultimately it is they who welcome Billy as someone who will help them preserve the history of the

community, 'so Billy is doing it with us now, and Gabriella too. We might be all writing together, really' (p. 98).

It is Billy's tale that drives *True Country*, and consequently he is the other major narrator of the text. A primary reading of *True Country* implies a linear progression within the narrative, privileging Billy's first person perspective initially until slowly succumbing more and more to the omniscient narrators. This narrative shift parallels Billy's transition from Settler Australia into Aboriginal Australia. Searching for an understanding of his Aboriginality, his past, and his future, Billy 'has been quiet' (p. 194) much of his life, until gaining acceptance into Karnama, 'he's all right that fella, good teacher. He Nyungar, or what. Is he?' (p. 88). His acceptance into the community occurs progressively, as he loses his inhibitions and finds his place among the town, 'laughing and teasing, the men easily persuaded me to join in the last of the dances... I took off my shoes and socks. I

felt ridiculously free, pounding my feet among them' (p. 74). The omniscient narrators are the first to welcome him, which is fitting once it is revealed that Billy's 'pudda - grandmother' (p. 170) is Walanguh's sister. Compared to the other Settler character's in the text, Billy is the only one who is not regarded as fundamentally different, exemplified in two parallel trips undertaken separately by Billy and Jasmine to the beach; when stopping to pick bush apples 'everyone's off' into the bush, including Billy who 'enjoys the collecting' (p. 153), a stark contrast to a later trip where Jasmine is ignored by the women she is driving to the beach, 'they returned, Jasmine drove on, her passengers laughing and munching... Jasmine was offended... she thought it was bad mannered' to not offer her a piece (p. 264). The omniscient narrators, guardians of Karnama, spell the Settler characters into leaving, 'ah, they all leave, these other people. Let them go, we getting rid of them. Gone. Father Paul, the builders, Alex and his family. Murray

too.' (p. 277). Even Liz becomes villainised the more Billy becomes part of the community, marking the growing distance between himself and his Settler life, 'she was an angry woman that one' (p. 271). Liz is comfortable amongst 'a wall of clean linen and sweet perfumes... Liz accepted the role' (p. 253). The whiteness of Liz, 'her white skin gleamed' (p. 279), and the other Settler characters, 'a face that was all red' (p. 231), 'pink spots, little pink bits around their nails and eyes' (p. 164), becomes more apparent as the text moves on and Billy is markedly not included within those descriptions, 'not black. Or dark brown, or purple-black, or coffee coloured, or black-brown. Maybe tan.' (p. 191). The shift from outsider to one who floats out the window with Walanguh 'mute and grinning' (p. 299) shows a totality in Billy's acceptance into Karnama on a profound level, and is charted not only within the moments of the text, but fundamentally within the narrative structure.

However, a distinctly different narrative mode can be understood with subsequent readings of *True Country*; once it is understood that Billy is either dead or transcended in some way by the end of the novel, the narrative reads as though Billy is retrospectively telling his acceptance into Karnama with the omniscient narrators alongside him. In a secondary reading of *True Country* Billy's eventual acceptance into Karnama is obvious, the text opens with the observations 'I am flying. I was coming to a landing' (p. 18), but during a primary reading moments such as this seem to simply be a part of the shifting temporal narrative. In a linear reading of the text Billy seems to know things about Karnama even before he has arrived, noting as he flies in the first time 'I saw the white ribbons of water which poured from the rocks and were shredded and swept downstream. That river is always a torrent at this time' (p. 19). That torrent is the one that will later be 'coiled around him, took him, wanted to swallow him' (p. 298), and so

when the narrative is understood as being told retrospectively it becomes clear that he knows what the river is like 'at this time' because he has already lived this story. Billy's narration speaks as though he is a soaring spirit alongside Walungah, knowing even from his early interactions with Fatima that 'I was about to take off, and soar. That's what I thought, even then' (p. 51). In the closing passages of the text, floating with Walungah 'searching for a place to land' Billy 'knew who he was, he recognised the land below him' (p. 299). In this scene the 'rain spat in the window, onto his face... I felt it. See? Now it is done. Now you know. True country' includes Billy as one of the omniscient narrators, a privileged knower. Here Billy is not simply learning, he is teaching the story of contemporary Aboriginalities 'we gotta be moving, remembering, singing our place little bit new, little bit special, all the time' (p. 299).

The complexity of the formal structure is echoed within the morals of

the text itself. There are no simple answers for the people of Karnama, and no sentimentality. The narrators of *True Country* are not naïve, but they are positive, and the structure emphasises the fluidity of perspectives. Gabriella, returned from Melbourne with greater knowledge of Settler Australia can 'see now. I see it's a funny place. It's how people would like to think of Aboriginal people. Still some hunting, still bush tucker, some dancing, some art. Even a mission, a mission still with power. Clout' while similarly recognising 'there's this gambling, and drinking, and fighting. Kids running wild, and sleeping with dogs' (p. 192). No character, or narrator, is blind to the serious issues of Karnama, but in stark contrast to the Settler characters who regard the community as desperate, the narrator's are unwaveringly hopeful, 'true, this be a mad place, in some ways. But we can fix that. Maybe. This one was a real story, but should not be. This bashing to try show he is a powerful one, and to have control' (p. 286). The narrators

understand the complexities of the inhabitants, in the same manner that the reader is exposed to the multifarious perspectives of various characters, whereby the moral of the text is imbedded within the narrative structure itself.

Billy is sympathetic to these complex modalities, he sees and appreciates the struggle between people who are 'clever and proud... they still knew some of the old ways, and the old ways were good...And Billy saw the drunkenness. It was real. And wife bashing. And rubbish. He saw people manipulating young government workers who visited, and then afterwards bragging' (p. 196). It is in this same manner that the story critiques government policy by documenting its effects upon the characters. The blind government agent who fails to listen to the missionary's advice and gives Samson the role of ranger, who 'carried a notebook in his shirt pocket which he pulled out and scribbled in regularly. Could he write?

He lost the pen, and that was the end of that' (p. 197). The omniscient Elder narrators are realistic about failed ventures such as this, 'See? He was like a clown really, acting out, and some white people laughed at him. And that Toyota, his boys or someone rolled it and nearly killed some kids' (p. 197). In this observational manner Scott appears to argue for a Keating style self-determination by evoking the critiques of the Elders embodied within the narration. This is illustrated when Gabriella joins in with the school children for sessions of traditional handicraft, 'when Gabriella participated it helped the students consider it worthwhile', not to simply disregard it as 'stupid, this is blackfella stuff' (90).

While aware of the difficult issues that face Karnama, the narrators never lose a sense of hope 'We are serious. We are grinning. Welcome to you' (p. 299). The text doesn't shy away from a realistic perspectives of contemporary Aboriginal life, instead it invites us to analysis these ambiguities.

Each character is permitted to speak for themselves, echoed in Billy's belief in telling ones own story, 'it's problematic, see. I write for kids, but I edit. So, do I change it too much? Do I write only for the kids here? Who speaks? Have I the right to...' (p. 288). The text similarly emphasizes understanding, listening, criticising Billy for speaking over Fatima, reminding the reader 'you needed to hear the voice. And other people couldn't do that so well. And you needed other things; like hands waving in space, and lips pointing, and drawings in the sand' (p. 193). This acceptance is integral to the integration of the moments of magic within the text, which is understood unambiguously to be just as real as any physical aspect of Karnama, 'old days people could make magic. That's true. That's no story, it's true story. The old people they had a lot of magic in them. They even fly in the air. Sometimes like a balloon, a bird, like a snake, even just like themselves' (p. 79). Repetition of the word 'true', coming from so many various

characters, serves to emphasise the legitimacy of every voice, of every perspective. The text recognises everyone living in their own true moment, where *real* and *true* are not synonymous 'Oh, it need not be real. It is not this reality that we are homesick for' (p. 261). The narrative, and the narrative structure, teach that it is only when people are free to speak for themselves, and what they are saying is heard as true, that we can engage in a productive conversation with the reality of dysfunctional government, substance abuse, magic, anomie, and hope.

Within *True Country* the narrative structure is the manifest symptom of the hopeful moral that privileges multiple perspectives so as to deeply understand the complexity of the contemporary Aboriginal Australia. The narrative is not blind to the real and apparent issues facing Karna, but rather than condemning the community in the manner of the Settler characters, the omniscient narrative perspective invites a nuanced appreciation and

engagement within these topics. Rather than seeing the situation as 'a flat pattern, like the sea, the land from high above. Or you might see your shadow falling upon this page. And maybe that's all you'll see and understand' (p. 15) Scott requests we walk around the town, meet and understand the people, to 'gather, sing. It may be' (p. 15). Listening closely and understanding that true and real are not the same thing means that we may still 'sing for this new world' (p. 96). The formal structures and mediation of language create a narrative mode that is greater than the sum of its parts, it doesn't just place one word after next, one event before another, it emphasises different perspectives, the telling of an individual story while appreciating the wider context. Above all the narration gives the characters pride and hope. While there are no simple answers available, *True Country* welcomes us to engage with contemporary Aboriginal Australia, and requests us to understand it deeply and complexly;

like the omniscient narrators we should you' (p. 299).
be 'serious... grinning... Welcome to

Reference:

Scott, K. 1993, *True Country*, 2nd edn, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle.