



Nanberry: Black Brother White

By Jackie French

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BOOK DESCRIPTION

‘The breeze held the scent of strange things now, of memories of a world far away.’(p 4)

The year is 1788 when the book opens, and Nanberry is playing on the beach when he and his family are amazed to see strange ships arrive in Warrane (Sydney Cove). More than a year later, Surgeon John White who had arrived with the First Fleet under the command of Captain Arthur Phillip, is struggling to stem the tide of chronic illness, disease and injury suffered by those in his care. Governor Phillip sends him on a mission to rescue a group of Aboriginal people said to have been inflicted with the pox, and he returns with an eight year old Aboriginal boy named Nanberry, who has been orphaned. White decides to take the boy into his household as his ‘son’ and this decision provides the catalyst for the action. The experiences of the convict housekeeper Rachel Turner and Andrew, the child she has to Doctor White, are the further threads in a rich narrative which offers insights into the travails of those men involved in early settlement, of the contributions of women such as Maria and Rachel in this era, and above all, into the tragic displacement of Aboriginal people during that time.

Nanberry is a complex and pivotal character in this novel. As a child he is acculturated to white ways of thinking. But he also remembers his own cultural background. He is isolated by the fact that white people generally don’t accept him and by the fact that his own people are suspicious of him as well. He also cherishes a deep-seated yearning for the sea, and eventually spends part of his life as a sailor. So he effectively lives in three worlds. At sea he is simply a ‘sailor’, whereas on land he is always reminded of how his two worlds (black and white) are split and yet remain intimately connected as well. His life is changed first when he swims under the sea as a child and finds it a ‘new world’ (p 1) and then when the ships bring a hint of another world; and also bring men who try to re-create that world in this new

place. Nanberry is tantalised by the mystery of these new people: 'If only he could slip between the wrinkle at the edge of the sea and sky.' (p 4)

Surgeon White is something of an enigmatic hero as well. He is not impressed by the new colony and yearns to return to England, to have a 'normal' family life. Nevertheless, he establishes a home in Port Jackson – with his servant Rachel, his foster son Nanberry, his illegitimate son Andrew and a pet o'possum. His tragedy is that he neither feels able to acknowledge his bond to his lover nor to his foster son, and that he believes his real son's only future lies in returning to England to be educated as a gentleman. Despite his caring nature, White fails to recognise that he has already found a family, and abandons a group of people who really care for him.

This novel describes the clash of two cultures and the consequences for both sides. In it, Jackie French has drawn again – as she has done in other novels such as *A Waltz for Matilda* – on early colonial history for her inspiration. It is a sweeping fictional character novel which demonstrates that Surgeon White is just as much a prisoner of the society he grew up in as are the convicts he has been sent to treat. And it also implies that Nanberry is both victim and victor. Taken from his people, he is transgressive in both his mastering of white language and customs, and in his refusal to bow to the white man's subjugation.

This novel is therefore a lament for Nanberry's life, and a celebration of it as well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jackie French is a multiple award winning and very diverse writer. Of her books she says on her website that: *'There were 132 at last count, slightly more than we have varieties of apples. If something is worth doing you may as well go heart and soul and boot leather ... I write for kids and adults, fiction, history, gardening, pests control, chooks and some that must be a nightmare for book shops to work out what genre they are. Have a look at 'which book?' for a probably not quite up to date list of what is where and for whom.'* Her website offers further detailed and fascinating insights into her life and work.

<http://www.jackiefrench.com.au>

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

'This book is based on extensive research, but its style is simple and straightforward, easy to read and understand, with vivid prose bringing to life the early days of Australia's first colony. I intended it to be read by the 10 – 14 age group, although younger children would identify with the young Nanberry. It would be suitable as a class set book, or a book to be read with parents, for younger children. Adults and teenagers too will identify with the love story of Rachel and Surgeon White.

'The inspiration for this book began when I thought about writing about Surgeon White and his pet possum. I'd known about the man and his passion for plants and animals since my mother read me his diaries when I was a child. But as I wrote, more information became available, from Old Bailey transcripts on line, to letters from sailors. The book changed to a love story between a lonely man and a convict girl; then moved on to the extraordinary story of their hero son.

'I had already written the first version of the book when an unexpected meeting with one of Nanberry's descendants made me rethink it all. The book became the story of two brothers, two worlds, and the triumph as both boys found heroism and fulfilment. '

CHARACTERS

- **The Significance of Character:** Characters are the heart of any narrative, the catalysts for action, and the central core around which all other narrative aspects must revolve and work. In this work there are several major characters (some of whom figure briefly in the action) and a cast of minor ones.

Discussion Point: Apart from Dr White, Nanberry and Rachel Turner, which other character(s) did you consider to be central to the novel's plot and themes, and why?

- **Major Characters:** **Surgeon White** is a trained surgeon who has radical views on medicine and who genuinely cares for those he treats; **Nanberry Buchanau White** is one of the Cadigal people, and is a skilled linguist and successful sailor, amongst his other talents; **Rachel Turner** is an intelligent young woman who has been sent to the colony as a convict who is assigned to Dr White and becomes his mistress; **John Moore** is a generous-spirited and honest carpenter who prospers in the colony, later marrying Rachel; **Maria** is former servant to Dr White who then marries Jack Jackson, and is widowed, and remains a close friend of Rachel's; **Captain Andrew White** becomes a soldier before returning to Australia years later, to find the home he had never really forgotten.

Discussion Point: Which of the main characters did you find most appealing, and why?

- **Minor Characters:** Several people appear a number of times, if fleetingly, e.g. Yagali, Bennelong, Balloonderry, Booroong, Lon, Garudi, Jack Jackson, Mr Tench, Colbee, Governor Phillip.

Discussion Point: Is there a minor character who might have played a larger part? Why would you have liked to have seen more of this character? For example, Jackson's early appearance was memorable, and one could well have heard more of his life.

- **Character Arcs** are the curve on which key events show how a character grows or develops in response to events and to interactions with other characters in the novel.

Activity: Choose a character and trace an arc on which key events indicate some aspect of their personality or change in their behaviour. Two examples are: Nanberry, whose adoption as a child has a significant effect on him. From wanting to become 'English', he gradually realises that he is neither one thing nor another, and is accepted by neither black or white; he resolves to rediscover his heritage and become a 'man' in the traditional way; he also becomes a seaman, which adds another 'layer' to his character.

Rachel has had a journey which might have ended in a number of ways. Her betrayal by a gentleman sent her to Australia; she might have died as a poor servant or prostitute in England, or been raped on board; she avoided that, and then was lucky enough to be taken in by a man with scruples, Surgeon White. She becomes a gentlewoman in his house, and learns her own power. Her marriage to Moore allows her the freedom to become a respected and influential woman.

Discussion Point: How might life have been different for Rachel? What other turning points in her life might she have had?

THEMES AND BACKGROUND

Aboriginal People, History & Culture

Until relatively recently, much of the history of Aboriginal people was neglected due to a lack of written records, and to wilful destruction of their history by the processes of colonial invasion. Historians and fiction writers drawing on historical records are restoring some of this history.

- **Aboriginal self-determination** was quelled for decades after early failed experiments in brokering an equal relationship between white and black. Like Nanberry, many were tolerated only when they adhered to white society's rules, and became either servants or were patronised as foster children and sometimes later discarded.

Discussion Point: Did Surgeon White treat Nanberry fairly in your opinion? Despite his best intentions, White treats Nanberry generally not as a foster son but as a 'pet' not unlike the o'possum. It's no accident thematically that both are left behind when White returns to England. What else might White have done to make Nanberry's future a brighter one? How does Nanberry take control of his own destiny?

- **Nanberry** was a real person, possibly the nephew of **Bennelong** after whom the famous landmark and an electorate in Sydney are named. Bennelong's life has been

documented, and the story of the discovery of his gravesite has been in the news this year. [See Eamonn Duff 'Found: Long-Lost Grave of Bennelong' SMH March 20, 2011 <<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/found-longlost-grave-of-bennelong-20110319-1c1bt.html>>] Nanberry's life has also been traced in a range of documents, as well.

Discussion Point: Study the lives of these two men and of other Aboriginal people in this era, whose lives have been documented. What do their stories have in common? Where do they differ? Older students might also read Kim Scott's novel *That Deadman Dance* (2010) as a fictional example of such displacement.

- **Racism** is deeply embedded in the interactions typified in this novel. Jackie French makes an explanation (in her 'Apology' at the beginning of the book) regarding the racist attitudes and words necessary to give the real flavour of the times she's describing in Australia.

Discussion Point: Discuss how the white people in this novel treat Aboriginal people. What instances of racism were in evidence?

- **Violent conflict** was rife in these early years, although successive generations have sought to deny the existence of such massacres and armed conflicts, and some commentators continue to do so.

Discussion Point: Research the interactions between Aboriginal people and white settlers. Read books such as Henry Reynolds' *The Other Side of the Frontier* (2006) to give some context. Discuss these conflicts and the role played by white settlers in decimating the populations of Aboriginal people.

- Apart from the effects of violent conflict, many Aboriginals died of **introduced illnesses** such as small pox and influenza.

Activity: Read about how settlement affected Aboriginal people in terms of their health, food sources, lifestyle and culture. Write a newspaper article detailing this.

- People in the novel are surprised by Nanberry's dress in gentlemen's clothes, his command of English manners, and ability to speak English.

Discussion Point: Do such reactions stem from ignorance, insecurity, prejudice or fear?

- There are many references to **Indigenous beliefs** in the text, for example: initiation ceremonies (pp 212-5), a warrior's code of honour (p 10), and communal rather than individual ownership of land which is crucial to Aboriginal belief.

Activity: Read and research Aboriginal cultural beliefs and languages. Consider how these differ in various parts of Australia.

Settlement/Invasion

- This novel takes place in the first years of white 'settlement' (some call it 'invasion') in Australia. It demonstrates how tenuous that first settlement was, and challenges views of the history which present it as a triumph over nature and adversity. Not only did the powers in England appear to abandon this sorry group of settlers in the first years, when the ship that was to supply them was wrecked on the way, but many themselves demonstrated attributes which were not terribly admirable, such as ignorance, laziness, corruption, greed, cruelty and violence.

Discussion Point: Invite students to discuss these years with reference to this novel, and to other non-fiction sources.

- The commonly presented myth about early convicts was that many were simply petty thieves. Some historians (such as Robert Hughes) however have now recognised that they were often the very dregs of society and that the soldiers, too, were not always of high calibre.

Discussion Point: What did the lack of moral fibre amongst these early settlers mean for the colony?

Read other books about early settlement. [See **Bibliography** below.]

Activity: Prepare a display based on your reading, containing creative responses by the students to what they read.

Convicts and Officers

- The convicts in this novel clearly are regarded as lesser class citizens. And yet some gained their ticket of freedom and became prosperous citizens.

Discussion Point: What hurdles did they have to overcome in order to achieve a free life? (Read the novel carefully in order to answer this question.)

- Many of the officers and soldiers in this novel do not behave admirably. There are stories of drunkenness, brutality, corruption and violence. (The military forces at that time actually earned the nickname 'Rum Corps' for their behaviour.) In what ways did these men abuse their power?

Activity: Research the times and the behaviour of groups such as the NSW Rum Corps. [See for example, '1788-1810—Early European Settlement' <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/web/common.nsf/key/historyearlyeuropeansettlement>]

Land Ownership and Management

- The novel opens with a lyrical prologue in which Nanberry is playing with his family and friends. It is headed 'Warrane (Sydney Cove), The Time of Many Fish and Feasts' indicating that the Aboriginal people had their own names for places later renamed by white settlers, and that they also relished times when they knew particular foods would be plentiful. Nanberry thinks to himself: 'There was a time for the settling of disputes, and a time to go west to feast on eels, a time when the bees wore fluffy yellow pollen on their legs, when you knew that in another season of moons the nectar would flow sweet and pale green when you poked a stick into the honey trees.'(p 13)

Discussion Point: Find out more about Aboriginal placenames and understanding of seasons. For example, in the area where you live, what Aboriginal place names can you locate?

- Often in the novel, Nanberry and other Aboriginal people are shocked by the filthy surroundings in the white camps; by how they dirty the drinking water and ruin the local land. This is at stark odds to the idea that white people came here and 'made use' of the land where the Aboriginal people were 'doing nothing with it'. The myth that white settlement brought 'civilisation' is challenged by the actuality.

Discussion Point: Research Aboriginal land use and cultivation practices and how they kept all water sources clean

- Many of the early settlers failed to recognise the abundance of food in this new colony because they were used to a certain diet, or had never even cooked for themselves.

Activity: Research and read about food in early colonial days. How much did the white settlers desire to replicate the foods of England determine how they used or abused the land they found in this new country?

Women's Rights

- Rachel has been betrayed by a gentleman in England and forced to endure the filthy conditions on board ship, whilst avoiding sexual approaches from those on board. When Surgeon White takes her in she's grateful for his kindness, but eventually becomes his mistress, recognising that he can never make her his wife. Like Maria,

her future lies at the mercy of often corrupt men, until her marriage to John Moore offers her security and freedom.

Discussion Point: How were women treated in these early colonial days? Read the stories of other colonial women (such as Mary Bryant and Mary Reibey) and how they traversed the tenuous border between civilisation and savagery which many of them had to endure. [See for example 'Convict Women in Port Jackson'. <<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/convict-women-in-port-jackson>>]

- Rachel and Maria have few rights, and yet like other women they made an often unacknowledged contribution to such early development.

Discussion Point: Discuss how women's roles, often in a domestic sphere are under-recognised.

KEY QUOTES

The following quotes relate to some of the **Themes** above. You might like to present any one of them (or two related quotes) to your students as a catalyst for further discussion, or as the subject of an essay outlining how the quote reflects a theme which is central to this novel:

<p>'It seemed this man would decide what would happen to him now.' (p 54)</p>	<p>'Nanberry, he thought. I am no pet. I am Nanberry Buckenau. Nanberry.' (p 74)</p> <p>'He was free! He was Nanberry! He was Nanberry ... White.</p> <p>He stopped running, found the bush where he had stripped off and reached for his clothes, then returned to his father's house.' (p 176)</p>
<p>'And he had new people now. He was learning to be <i>English</i>'. (p 64)</p> <p>'And by then he would really be Andrew, and English. Nanberry would be gone.' (p 66)</p> <p>'Who was Nanberry, really?' (p 210)</p>	<p>'The sea and sky seemed to whirl around him. It was as though his past life had slapped him in the face.' (p 82)</p> <p>'The world he had known was gone, even if some of its people had survived.' (p 85)</p> <p>'His sense of being an outsider began to ease.' (p 214)</p>
<p>'But why did the English need to store so</p>	<p>'The weekly ration was only two pounds of</p>

<p>much? ... The whole world was food. Why keep it shut up in here?' (p 65)</p> <p>'What magic had made plants grow in straight lines?' (p 54)</p>	<p>flour now, two pounds of salt meat or ten pounds of fresh fish, and a cup of rice-and-weevils or dried peas-and- weevils. It was enough to keep a man alive, but only just.' (p 102)</p> <p>'Well, fresh food had saved their lives. But most convicts and marines were too stupid and too lazy to grow their own.' (p 16)</p>
<p>'He watched carefully to try to understand what she meant. This was a new world. He had to learn its rules.'(p 58)</p>	<p>'He'd thought he'd understood the English world. But once again he had been made to realise that he could see only the edges.' (p 209)</p>
<p>'Thank you for teaching me to see the land around me.' (p 273)</p>	<p>'She took up her broom, and began to sweep the hard dirt floor as clean as she could make it. Natives might be lurking, and smallpox and starvation, but at least she could keep her house clean.'(p 28)</p>
<p>'But Nanberry could never be a warrior now, unless Arabanoo did the ceremony alone. Nanberry would never be allowed to carry spears, never be able to marry. Would he be a boy forever without the proper rites?' (p 47)</p>	<p>'It was time that he became a man.' (p 211)</p>
<p>'How could this girl think that this collection of huts and convicts on the edge of the wilderness could ever be a town?' (p 123)</p>	<p>'Where there had been cabbage-tree huts, there were stone warehouses, stout cottages, and wharves not with one poor vessel hired to ship convicts, but ship upon ship ... It was...big.'(p 266-7)</p>
<p>'Strange that one of the first English words he heard a native child say should be <i>dead</i>. But that is what we have brought them, he thought. Death.' (p 51)</p> <p>'It was a scene from Hell.' (p 110)</p>	<p>'Life would go on in its proper seasons, as it always had before. His people belonged to this land. The ghosts would surely go away.' (p 4)</p>

CURRICULUM TOPICS

Language and Literacy

- ***Colloquialisms of the era give a tangible sense of the times.***

Activity: Make a list of all the uncommon words or expressions and try to guess their meaning from the context in which they appear. Then check their meanings in a dictionary. Which other expressions do you know, which date from an earlier era, and are not used now?

- ***This novel is a work of Historical Fiction or 'Faction'*** — a genre which relies on the author weaving together fact and fiction seamlessly. In it the life of Nanberry and others such as Surgeon White, Rachel Turner, John Moore and Bennelong form the framework on which the fiction is hung.

Discussion Point: Jackie French has kept to historical facts, and wherever possible used the words recorded, but also added more detail and minor characters to keep the book fictional. How much did you recognise from the history you have read? What was similar and what was different to actual events or people? Discuss the writing of historical fiction with your students, with reference to some of the articles on writing such fiction in the **Bibliography** below.

- ***Narrative Structure*** — The novel follows a chronological structure. However it does allow the various narrators to recall or to 'flashback' to incidents in the past which are significant in the background or framing narrative.

Activity: Create a timeline of all the incidents referred to in the book.

- ***Multiple Narrative Points of View are presented*** — the book has chapter headings indicating that they are written from the **perspective of different characters**, albeit each are in **third person**. The Prologue and Chapter 1 are from **Nanberry's perspective**, detailing the life he lived before the white men came; Chapter 2 is written from the perspective of Surgeon White; 3-4 Maria; 5 Surgeon White; 6 Nanberry; 7- 8 Maria; 9 Surgeon White; 10 Nanberry; 11 Surgeon White; 12 Nanberry; 13 Maria; 14 Nanberry; 15 Maria; 16-17 Nanberry; 18 Maria; 19 Surgeon White; 20 Andrew/Nanberry; 21 Surgeon White; 22-4 Nanberry; 25 -7 Surgeon White; 28 Rachel; 29 Surgeon White; 30 Rachel; 31-2 Nanberry; 33 Rachel; 34-5 Nanberry; 36 Rachel; 37-41 Nanberry; 42-4 Rachel; 45 Surgeon White; 46 Nanberry; 47 Surgeon White; 48 Rachel; 49 -50 Nanberry; 51 -3 Rachel; 54- 5 Andrew ; 56 Rachel; 57 Andrew; 58 -9 Rachel; 60 Nanberry; Epilogue Captain Andrew White.

Discussion Point: What effect does the telling from these multiple perspectives have on this narration? And why do you think Jackie French chose to tell all these stories

in third person rather than in first person? What advantage does this give the narrator?

Activity: Choose a chapter and describe the incidents from the point of view of another character. How different would the telling have been?

- ***The Cover of a book is an ideogram for the contents and a marketing tool as well.***

Activity: Create a new cover for the work drawing on either theme or incident to create the image. Use techniques such as collage. Write a blurb for the back cover of the book as well.

- A portrait of 'Nanbarree painted for a dance' by a 'Port Jackson painter' is held by the national History Museum in the UK

<<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/jdsml/nature-online/firstfleet/search.dsml?lastDisp=list&stype=keyword&keyword=600¬es=true&beginIndex=1>> Students might examine the portrait as background to discussion of his life.

SOSE

- ***Whose History?*** —There are many versions of history as the **Themes** above would suggest. In the **Bibliography** below there are websites tracing Australian history from Indigenous and women's perspectives as well as from the Eurocentric male views which often feature in such historical overviews. How different is the Aboriginal view of a particular incident likely to be from that told by a European convict, soldier or official?

Activity: Choose an incident referred to in the novel in the chapters headed 'Surgeon White' and then re-write part of that chapter from the perspective of Nanberry.

- ***Social Class*** —Initially Australia was a country inhabited by Aboriginal people, then convicts, officers, explorers, surveyors, and later free settlers, and new immigrants. Divisions between these various groups arose, based on wealth, power, race and religion. Many became socially 'upwardly mobile' in this new colony where the past could be erased or at least forgotten. For example, Mr Moore (a former carpenter) becomes one of the most respected and prosperous settlers as does his wife Rachel (a former convict).

Discussion Point: Imagine Surgeon White's reaction if he had returned to Australia? His son Andrew notes that the Moore home is much larger than his own father's. Ironically, those who prospered in this colony often surpassed the success of those at home.

Discussion Point: Such class mobility was denied to most Aboriginal people partly because class had no real value to them and also because they were denied the most fundamental rights and powers.

- **Values** —This novel is about a conflict between different sets of values. Nanberry has been raised to value communal relationships, to respect the land and his elders; to value becoming a warrior. Surgeon White has a sense of duty but also a moral compass based on his own superiority and his need for a ‘position’ in society.

Activity: Create a table and list some of the values demonstrated in any of the scenes or events in this book with a corresponding quote to illustrate each one.

- **Individual/Community** — This is one of the most fundamental differences between Aboriginal and white society. The latter value individual responsibility; the former believe in community responsibility.

Activity: Read more about this difference.

FURTHER POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Surgeon White creates a peculiar ‘family’ in his hut – an Aboriginal foster son, a convict mistress, an illegitimate son; a pet possum. The tragedy is that he refuses to regard his family as anything more than temporary. He not only willingly leaves them, but also causes the separation of mother and child, and denies his foster son any recognition.

Discussion Point: Invite students to discuss the notion of family. ‘The fact that Surgeon White can leave Rachel, his son Andrew, and foster son Nanberry with only a sense that he must provide for their financial welfare is indicative of his acculturation with a sense of duty rather than a true sense of family feeling.’ Debate.

2. The position of women in colonial society is starkly presented in this novel. If convict men were badly treated, women had virtually no rights at all. When Maria’s husband Jack dies, she has no right to his land and is nearly sold as a slave prior to being rescued by John Moore on behalf of Rachel.

Discussion Point: Discuss with reference to further reading and analysis of the plight of particular women.

3. The conditions on board the convict ships were truly appalling. Apart from isolated instances, there were precious few who cared about their welfare, and corruption and brutality were rampant.

Discussion Point: Were you shocked or surprised by the conditions? Did you know that sometimes food was withheld from prisoners and supplies sold for profit? Read more about this history.

4. 'Father White could read as well as write, but not him or Rachel. Why did a sailor or a woman need to read?' (p 208)

Discussion Point: Nanberry's acceptance of this lack of literacy is casually mentioned here, and yet is a fundamental point in the novel. For in depriving them of education, men in colonial society effectively denied both Aboriginal people and women a fundamental right, the lack of which hampered their access to power and security.

5. This text includes references to a number of European events which early settlers were far removed from but which affected their lives as well. Read for example, about the battle of Waterloo, which Andrew White has fought in before returning to Australia.

Discussion Point: How was the development of the settlement influenced by events in Europe?

6. Medical science was still primitive in the late seventeenth century, but Surgeon White is advanced in his advocating the need for fresh fruit and vegetables in one's diet, in his use of antiseptic and in searing wounds to prevent infection (albeit a radical treatment without anaesthetic), and in his willingness to try Aboriginal herbal remedies.

Discussion Point: Research and read about medical treatment in early Australia.

7. Read other novels about first 'settlement' [See **Bibliography** below] and compare them to this one.

Discussion Point: What common threads did you identify in their telling?

8. At its heart, this novel is about the interaction between white and black people in early settlement days and how that might be related to the development of this relationship since then.

Discussion Point: What did it say about white/black relations?

9. This novel canvasses many subjects and issues.

Discussion Point: What was the major idea that this novel conveyed to you as a reader? Was it a tragic or a hopeful novel?

NOTES ON THE TEXT

At the back of the book, there are extensive **Notes** (pp 278-305) by the author Jackie French and **References** (pp 305-7), on many of the historical and cultural issues referred to in this text. This should be an invaluable resource to teachers in using the book, in conjunction with these notes, in the classroom.

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