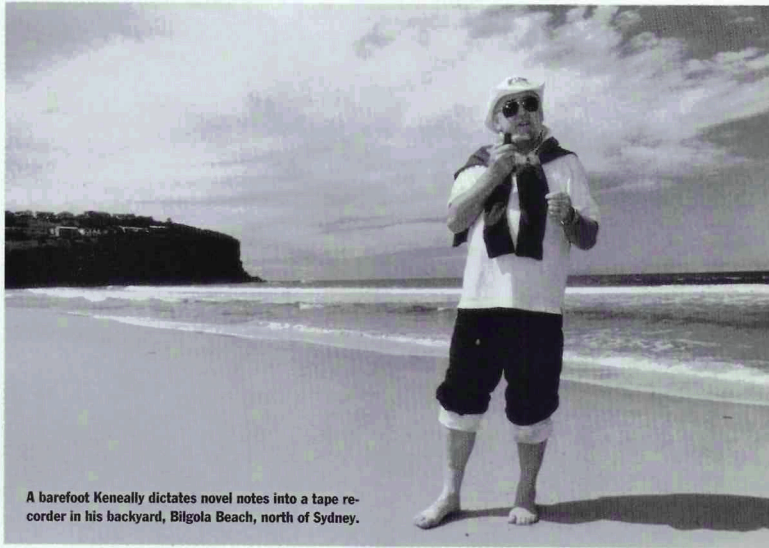


# Novel Approaches

*Australian writer Thomas Keneally has made a career dissecting moral dilemmas in more than 20 works of fiction.*

*His most successful book, "Schindler's List," is now a major movie.*

By Jeff Book



A barefoot Keneally dictates novel notes into a tape recorder in his backyard, Bilgola Beach, north of Sydney.

**W**hen the first convicts sailed here, Australia might as well have been Mars," Thomas Keneally says, gesturing toward Sydney's skyline as we navigate traffic on the Harbour Bridge. Like white sails in the sunshine, the famous opera house floats into view, a landlocked regatta. "The British thought of this place as a gulag, but now, on a sunny day, it's more like a branch of Club Med," he observes. With his bushwhacker hat and chin whiskers, Keneally could pass for a prospector just in from the Outback. Over the last 30 years, however, this Aussie has produced more than 20 novels and several works of nonfiction.

In his writings, Keneally, 58, has roamed widely in time and space: Australia, Ireland, Antarctica, Eastern Europe during World

War II, the American South during the Civil War. He examined Ethiopian famine and revolt in *To Asmara*, Joan of Arc in *Blood Red*, Sister Rose, World War I's flawed armistice in *Gossip from the Forest*, and aboriginal outrage in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. His best-known work, *Schindler's List*—1982 winner of Britain's coveted Booker McConnell Prize—is the latest movie directed by Steven Spielberg and is due out this month. It's based on the true story of an unlikely angel, the wealthy German industrialist Oskar Schindler, who played cat-and-mouse to save more than a thousand Jews in Poland during World War II.

Schindler is a classic Keneally hero—conflicted, flawed, but transcendent in his humanity. The initial outcry from those who saw the work as a skillful documentary not fit for a fiction prize has long since faded; the book has sold some two million copies worldwide, more than any other Booker McConnell Prize winner. With the rise of

neo-Nazism and ethnic cleansing during the film's decade-long gestation, *Schindler's List* has only become more timely.

Discussions with Spielberg allayed Keneally's fears that the master of the megahit would pave over the story's ambiguities, creating, for example, a single arch-Nazi nemesis for Schindler. "I felt there was enough dramatic tension in the ironies and contradictions of the SS death industry and in Schindler himself, his mixture of hedonism, decency, expediency, and folly," says the author. "Luckily, Spielberg came to the same conclusion."

Keneally was the first to tackle the book's adaptation. He started on the screenplay but says it ultimately tackled him, agreeing with Spielberg's observation: "It's very hard for a novelist to adapt his own novel." Although Keneally didn't write the shooting script, he's satisfied that the movie is faithful to the historical account. Spielberg, who felt the weight of his own Eastern Eu-

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This past year Keneally returned to his home town of Sydney to head the republican movement advocating Australia's break from the British monarchy. Above: The writer stands near the Harbour Bridge.

ropean Jewish heritage, made only subtle changes based on talks with *Schindlerjuden*, Jews who had been saved by Schindler.

Keneally is a literary chameleon, but all of his stories turn on moral dilemmas shaped by history. He says he's attracted to historical themes because "they have a dramatic unity that the present lacks." History, as a character in his novel *A Family Madness* remarks, "comes up and grabs people." This is true even in stories set in the present, like the recent *Woman of the Inner Sea*, in which personal tragedy sends an affluent Sydney woman on a voyage of redemption into Australia's vast interior. Keneally, who almost became a priest, creates tales that carry a pungent whiff of brimstone, a sense of imperiled souls grappling with destiny. They also reveal a wicked wit, not surprising from a man who resembles a beatific imp.

His Australian stories reflect an awareness that, since the first English settlement at Port Jackson in 1788, immigrants have come to this land of the fresh start bearing unseen burdens, luggage that can't be lost. "I've always been fascinated by convict Australia," says Keneally, over lunch in the atrium of The Regent Sydney hotel. "This lobby was the site of the first hanging in Australia, from a huge Moreton Bay fig tree. A lad named Tom Barrett." I recognize the name from *The Playmaker*, his novel about Australia's first theatrical production.

Later we drive around The Rocks, once a notoriously rough district where drunks

were shanghaied into service on the high seas by the British Navy. "This was still a slum when I was a boy," the author recalls. But now it is full of stylish restaurants and boutiques. Along Circular Quay is Writers' Walk, a series of bronze plaques with Australia-related quotations from various scribes, Keneally among them. "In my childhood, the idea that writers had anything to say about Sydney would have been preposterous," he notes.

Keneally has lived in London, New York, and California, where he teaches in the esteemed graduate writing program at the University of California, Irvine. Described by one journalist as "the white-bearded rebel leader," Keneally is actually a diehard Aussie and, as chairman of the Australian Republican Movement, took an unpaid leave this past year to stay home and champion the severing of ties with the British monarchy. (Nearing the end of his term, he is planning to return to California.) Although Keneally and his cohorts believe that Australia should remain part of the Commonwealth, they favor replacing the queen with a leader elected by Parliament or the people. "We have a head of state who's a foreigner; no self-respecting country should have that," he says. Back in the '80s, when Keneally became an active republican, this was a distinctly minority position, but recent polls show that upward of 60 percent of his countrymen would like Australia to be a republic by 2001, the centennial of its federation. Many Australians feel theirs is an egalitarian society, while the monarchy exemplifies inherited privilege. "When I was a boy, Britain was referred to as 'home,' but that has changed," he says. "We are a more varied nation now, although some people think validity is always offshore.

"Actually, Australia is very Irish—something like forty percent of us have Irish ties—which gives us the same kind of cynicism and wit, a distrust of worldly glory and success," he says. "And both countries have small populations that are always going away to take on the big world."

Indeed, a skein of similarities connects the places he's explored in travel books: the Australian Outback, Ireland, and the American Southwest. All have mythical pasts, all are, in Keneally's words, haunted by absences. "The Southwest of the United States is very like remote Australia," he observes. "Fast food and cash machines exist cheek-by-jowl with another cosmology, with tribal curses and mysteries. Then there's the physical splendor of both places."

Keneally and his family have always been based in Oz (as Australians like to call their homeland). Since the early '70s they have lived in a house overlooking the ocean at Bilgola Beach, north of Sydney on the Barrenjoey Peninsula. Other area residents include the director Peter Weir and novelist Morris West. As we stroll along the surf, Keneally, who often dictates first drafts into a tape recorder, says, "This is good pacing sand—I've written several bits of novels on this beach. Out there you can see southern right whales migrating between Hawaii and Antarctica."

The house's broad verandas embrace the southerly "busters" that blow up in summer to banish the day's heat. The living-room walls bear aboriginal art, Keneally's own vivid daubs, and a turn-of-the-century photo of the general store his grandparents owned, 300 miles up the coast from Sydney. Pointing to one of the figures, Keneally's 25-year-old daughter Jane asks, "Is that the aunt who jumped from the train when it didn't stop for her station?"

"No, that's a somewhat more sedate aunt," he replies.

"There's no senility in our family," Jane confides. "Everybody starts mad."

Keneally is currently at work on a novel inspired by his grandparents' life in that isolated settlement. "There are some interesting parallels with today," he notes. "The country was coming out of a recession. And the Boer War raised the question of just how loyal Australians should be to Britain. The lifeline was the supply boat from Sydney, which was being ravaged by bubonic plague." An avid researcher, Keneally has been reading period newspapers, traveling, and conducting interviews for local color. For *Woman of the Inner Sea*, he went to work—as did the novel's heroine—in a bush pub.

We look at photos of Keneally and his wife, Judith, in Eritrea, where early this year

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they observed the elections gained by the revolt he described in *To Asmara*. Around them are jubilant voters celebrating with drums and flowers. "The government offered me the right to cast a ballot, but that would have jeopardized my Australian citizenship," he relates. "It was attractive because for the first time I would have voted in a republic." Another picture shows him in academic robes, receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Queensland. "You look very Tudor," I observe.

"Yes, like Henry VIII," Keneally agrees. "Slightly fewer girlfriends, though."

Last spring he traveled to Poland for the filming of *Schindler's List*. Its \$23 million budget is less than half that of Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*, but it's the biggest film ever made in Poland (where the book has yet to be published), employing 30,000 extras and using locations like Schindler's factory, places that have changed little since the war. Keneally's black-and-white snapshots of the re-created concentration camp have an eerie verisimilitude—the reason the film itself will be in black and white. One snap depicts the author with *Schindlerjuden* invited on the set by Spielberg, some of whom reacted with terror at the sight of the actors in crisp SS uniforms. Other shots show stars Liam Neeson and Ben Kingsley in costume, and director Spielberg in his omnipresent baseball cap. Dismissing those who regard the director as a glorified special-effects man, Keneally says, "Spielberg has a fine literary imagination. He could certainly be a novelist—although he might regret the decline in income."

Keneally is fascinated by filmmaking, and he has been involved in several Australian movies, including *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, adapted from his novel. Next year, Merchant Ivory Productions and director Peter Weir will start filming *The Playmaker*. "I've been very much a visitor to Hollywood, the boy from Sydney," says the writer. "It might be different if I'd taken the boat some of my relatives took to Brooklyn. But my primary business is the cottage industry of writing fiction, which brings me happiness."

The lightning of inspiration strikes Keneally via "anecdotes, flights of the imagination, stories that present themselves." He first heard of Oskar Schindler in a Beverly Hills luggage shop. The proprietor, who had been rescued by Schindler, insisted Ke-

neally write the story and introduced him to other Schindler survivors (more than 50 were tracked down and interviewed for the book). *Flying Hero Class* came from his own experience traveling abroad with an aboriginal acting troupe.

"Every book is a spiritual gauntlet," the writer says. "I can be sure that I will lose my way, doubt my ability, lose my faith. I draw on Catholic mythologies, but I am a Catholic novelist only in the sense that

see his favorite team, the Manly Sea Eagles, play the South Sydney Rabbitohs.

"The Souths are strictly wooden spooners, bottom of the table," he explains. "The Manly fullback is a redeemed surfer—they snatched him from the waves. And that little blond fellow is Toovey. He looks like a choirboy, and all the women boo when he's tackled hard."

The Souths manage some virtuoso plays, but Manly is victorious, Keneally ebullient.

*"Keneally creates tales that carry a pungent whiff of brimstone, a sense of imperiled souls grappling with destiny. They also reveal a wicked wit, not surprising from a man who resembles a beatific imp."*

Bellow and Doctorow are Jewish novelists. Both the Irish and the Jews have spent centuries examining moral minutiae. Joyce's consideration of how to atone for a fortune built on an ill-gotten dollar is like the Talmudic debate over whether to take a bucket of water across the kitchen on the Sabbath. And what if the neighbor's barn is on fire? These are questions of moral viability, inherently dramatic."

At a neighborhood restaurant, over what Keneally calls "ripper tucker" (fine food, in non-Aussie parlance), we discuss writing programs. "They can address technical problems, but it's like the boxer who makes the sign of the cross," he says. "Someone asks a priest at ringside, 'Will that help him, Father?' The priest replies, 'Only if he can fight.'"

Then there's rugby, which for Keneally is akin to religion. He's written extensively about it, describing it in *A Family Madness* as "a perfected model of an imperfect world." But watch it, mate—we're talking working-class Rugby League here, not Rugby Union; the former has been called a game for gentlemen played by thugs, the latter a game for thugs played by gentlemen. "When I was a boy," Keneally recalls, "we all wanted to play Rugby League, even the asthmatics."

Two days later he takes me to the Sydney Football Stadium to

Contrary to the neurotic (if not demon-driven) novelist stereotype, Keneally seems as well grounded as a goalpost. His equanimity, deep-rooted in Aussie mateship, has helped him take the measure of history's horrors and man's follies.

"Writing is about discovering things you didn't know you knew," he says.

His skeptical moralism stands out amid the cool ironies and teapot tempests of contemporary literature. In his books, as in person, Keneally is a genial companion, a citizen of Oz at home in the world. ■

JEFF BOOK, BASED IN LOS ANGELES, ROAMS FAR AFIELD FOR GOOD TALES AND TUCKER.

Keneally, below, revisits *The Rocks*—a slum when he was a boy but now a district teeming with stylish restaurants and boutiques.

