

Hospitality

» KATE GRENVILLE

Hawkesbury River.

On the rutted streets of Sydney, William Thornhill was just another felon with a pardon in his pocket that he could not read. Out of town on the river he was something better: a man about to make a new life.

He had sailed upriver all morning. Now he was among the cliffs, where the blacks attacked. Last week they had taken the *Industry*, speared the captain, bludgeoned the men. Thornhill had known them. Could have been on the *Industry* himself that day.

But the tide was about to turn. Blacks or no blacks, he would have to make fast somewhere.

Now the rain was coming on too, a grey curtain coming down the valley towards him, and at first it seemed just a branch twitching under it. Then he saw a black man on the shore, beckoning him in.

It was just the one, white-haired and spindly.

Thornhill got the knife and put it in his belt, under his hand. Then he pushed the tiller over. One old greybeard: he could handle that.

As Thornhill got a rope around a tree trunk the man began to speak with a sideways gesture of his hand. Then he waited.

Thornhill licked his lips.

I come in peace.

The words sounded false and preachy. He went on quickly.

The damn tide is turned, see.

The black man spoke again, pointing up into the bushes, making roof-over-head gestures.

He had a shelter, Thornhill realised. There'd be a cave up there.

You must think I'm green, Blackie!

He heard the shake of anger in his voice.

Think I'll walk into your little trap?

The old man began to move away, gesturing for Thornhill to follow.

He swung the axe to clear a space. It was sorry work. A branch heavy with rain whipped him full in the face, another knocked off his hat.

(above & following pages)

Hawkesbury River, NSW, 1889, by Charles Potter. Gelatin silver photograph; 13.8 x 18.9cm.

PHOTO: STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA

Awkward under the man's gaze, Thornhill finally got the patched old sail up over a rope: drooping at one end, flying up in the wind at the other.

Snug as you please!

He looked around. The black was gone.

Every bush dripped, but the thought of a long cold night made Thornhill ingenious. Under a fallen log he found eight dry leaves, and with his knife he scraped off some splinters of dry bark. Back under the canvas he struggled with the flint in his wet fingers. He crouched over the mess, enraged at this hopeless fiddling.

Then the black man was beside him. He touched Thornhill on the arm — gently, as you might a child — and signalled for him to come along, mimed *fire* and *food*.

Thornhill reminded himself of dead Turner, dead Sweetman, but at that moment a gust of wind lofted up the sail so it came away and collapsed on itself.

It would soon be night. The rain whipped down at them, the forest twisting under the blasts of wind.

All right then Blackie, Thornhill said.

He gestured with the knife that the other man must go first. If this was a trap, the old man would get the knife through the ribs.

The cave was big enough for ten men, but held only a small fire, beside it a dead possum. The old man scooped a pit in the ashes with the butt-end of his spear, laid the possum in it, scraped ash over. He signed to Thornhill: they would share it, it would be good.

Then he sat beside the fire, nothing more threatening than a man waiting for his dinner to cook. He was naked as a babe but for the string around his waist. Thornhill warmed himself too, seeing the steam rise out of his clothes.

Outside the trees strained against the wind, but in here it was as cosy as a parlour and the possum was sending out good smells.

Blackie, Thornhill said at last, I could half envy your life, no man your master and your tucker free for the taking.

Heard himself with surprise. Envy this naked savage with his bare backside on the ground?

But the man laughed, looking Thornhill up and down, and Thornhill could see the joke: these sodden boots, the britches gone hard with wet, the coat that was binding under the arms as it dried.

What's your damn game, Blackie, he said.

The man watched his mouth.

If I was you, be buggered if I'd cook a nice possum and share it out.

The two men stared at each other through the wavering air above the fire. Outside a stream of water pattered against rock.

Then the man leaned forward and Thornhill had the knife up.

I got my eye on you Blackie!

But he was only pulling the possum out of the fire, peeling away burned fur and skin. Thornhill ate the piece he was offered: succulent meat, rich juice.

But even sucking away at the bones, licking his fingers, Thornhill did not put the knife down.

When the old man packed the fire tight with wood, then stretched himself out beside it, Thornhill made a show of lying down too, slipping a palm under his cheek and curling in towards the fire.

But he was not going to sleep. That was what they would be waiting for, if there was a they out there. They would wait, and by the time he woke up he would be dead.

The fire burned slowly, crackling and fizzing. Outside in the great chilly darkness, the rain was easing, the night becoming quiet.

Thornhill looked at the man's face, but his features seemed to have disappeared into the flickering light. Were his eyes closed?

He felt the knife handle slippery with his sweat.

From down by the river the frogs started up, first one by one, then all together. A mosquito sang past his ear.

Thornhill lay watching the shape of the other body. It did not move, not by the smallest shift or twitch, but he thought its stillness might be like his own: false. Any second he would spring to his feet — Thornhill had seen how they did it uncoiling the body like a freed spring — and jam the spear into his entrails. *Now*. It would be *now*.

He leaped up, the knife in his hand.

You bugger, he shouted, you will not get me that easy!

But as he stood he saw the other man's face in the firelight, eyes closed, breath puffing serenely in and out. Thornhill's shout half-woke him: his eyes flickered open, he murmured something, then closed his eyes again in perfect trust.

Thornhill stood looking down at him. There was what he knew in his mind: Turner with his brains spilled out, Sweetman with a spear through him from back to front. And there was what he saw in front of his eyes: a man who had shared out a possum and laughed with him.

He went to the front of the cave and looked out into the night. A breeze caught hold of a tuft of leaves and shook a shower of drops down onto the ground below, the sound of each droplet distinct in the still night. The glow from the cave behind seemed very small in the largeness of the night. Beyond it he could feel the darkness going on, mile after mile: air sliding between the trees, leaves shifting quietly over each other, a world out there that made sense in some other way altogether from his own. ¶



KATE GRENVILLE FAHA is the author of nine books of fiction. **The Secret River** has won numerous awards and is an international best-seller. Her other books include **Sarah Thornhill** (the sequel to **The Secret River**), **The Lieutenant**, and **The Idea of Perfection**. All have been published in the UK and the US as well as Australia, and three have been filmed. Her latest book is **One Life: My Mother's Story**. AUTHOR PHOTO BY DARREN JAMES.

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