



Sorry

GAIL JONES

A teacher's Reading Guide

INTRODUCTION

In an interview in London in June, 2007, Gail Jones answered a question about the role of literature in being a guide to ethical behaviour. She said: "I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that literature can play a part in moral discourse." The novel was published before the apology to indigenous Australians was delivered by the Federal Government in February, 2008. This is not to claim that the themes and issues it presents are no longer relevant but, instead, the historic speech delivered by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd adds yet another dimension to the reading of the text.

This book could be regarded as a challenging one for students but it is also a deeply satisfying text, for those over the age of fourteen. There have been criticisms that Jones tends to present her Aboriginal characters as being too perfect but her response is that her personal interaction with a variety of Aboriginal communities "has been all about forms of affection and care."¹

It is also enlightening to be aware that Jones spent some of her childhood in Broome, which was one of the few Australian locations to be attacked during World War Two: in May, 1942 the Japanese air force destroyed Allied air craft and bombed the Broome itself, killing over a hundred refugees. Western Australia was also the location of the last massacre of Aboriginals, at Lake Coniston in 1928, two years before the Keenes arrive in Broome.

SYNOPSIS

In a moment of absent mindedness, Nicholas and Stella Keene marry, after meeting when he spilled tea over her in a Cambridge café. They move to a remote part of Western Australia, outside Broome, so that Nicholas can pursue his dream of writing an astonishing work of anthropological importance.

The reality is that he is trying to escape his horrific memories of World War One, although he carries a permanent reminder in the form of shrapnel in his back. He is also trying to escape the expectations of his father who wants him to take over the family business in London. Stella has wasted twenty years of her life as a lady's "companion". Her only interesting feature seems to be to be able to quote extensively and almost constantly from the tragedies of Shakespeare.

The tea Nicholas accidentally poured over Stella becomes a symbol of what he does to her, in terms of violence and infidelity. Their only child is born with the help of the competent wife of the nearby

¹ Random Editorial Team – these quotations came from www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/ accessed on 15/04/08 at 11.32 a.m. I am not sure if you need to apply for copyright – Suzanne O'Connor

property owner. The Trevors have four adult sons and a deaf-mute boy, Billy, who becomes the close friend of the Keenes' daughter, Perdita. Her parents are incapable of loving her but she finds companionship with Billy and a sister in Mary, the educated Aboriginal girl, who is the Keene's housekeeper.

When Nicholas is murdered, Stella and Perdita leave for Perth. By now it is 1942 and, before they leave Broome, Perdita is the unwilling witness of the Japanese air attack on Broome which resulted in the deaths of many refugees. These two traumatic events have rendered Perdita almost speechless because of her overnight development of a crippling stutter.

Once they are settled in Perth, Stella suffers another mental breakdown and is institutionalized. Perdita has the good fortune to be fostered by a loving couple who, among other caring acts, have her stutter treated and ultimately cured. The doctor who treats her is a Russian refugee of surpassing gentleness and wisdom. That cure also frees Perdita's memory about the details of her father's death and she faces the horrific realisation that it was she who killed her father, although Mary has been imprisoned for the crime.

As an adult, Perdita comes to realise that she has yet to apologise to Mary for her sacrifice. Jones has described her novel as a "political allegory. I didn't want to write a propaganda novel, but I did want to make Mary symbolic."

THEMES

(1) Power and purpose of dreams

Examples:

- "In my dreams I still sometimes stutter....." (Page 21)
- "And that night, for no reason, Stella dreamed that there was snow falling softly in the desert." (Page 19)
- Stella's dreams of snow that are inherited by Perdita (Page 46)
- "I had my snow dream again last night." (Page 105)
- "Afraid of slumberry agitation.....a peace." (Page 214)

Activity: Using the above quotations, as well as two others from the novel, write about 350 words on the different functions of dreams in the text.

(2) Solace and companionship offered by reading

Examples:

- "There is no refuge so private; no asylum more sane." (Page 31)
- "Proxy lives, new imaginings, precious understandings." (Page 66)
- "As an adult companionship she shared with Mary in reading." (Page 206)
- The sharing of *The Lives of the Saints*, presented to Mary when she was being educated in a convent.

Activity: Reflect on your reactions to your favourite book. Write a personal letter to your best friend, explaining why you like the book so much and trying to persuade that person to read the same book.

(3) Variants of communication

Examples:

- "What had stuck in her mouth like muck, like vile disturbance?" (Page 97)
- Richness of signing (Page 199)
- "The clumsy instrument of human speech" (Page 205)

Activity: Research Signing Language. Write up the findings of your research in the form of a Formal Report, on one piece of A4 paper.

(4) The role of “The Other”

Examples:

- “What intelligent Englishman would go willingly to Australia?” (Page 11)
- “I was a foreign coin they possessed, a worthless shape.” (Page 27)
- “These features made him look both stupid and wise, and old man Dauwarrngu said that Billy knew things, secret things, like blackfellas, this one Billy-fella.” (Page 33)
- “Locals in Broome thought Nicholas Keene a fraud and a bloody no-hoper; no one seemed to know what the hell he was doin’.” (Page 40)
- “... the integument of exile, neurosis, migrant sadness.” (Page 65)
- “She wanted to show she was part of the group.” (Page 69)
- The episode of the weeping teacher and Perdita’s rescue of him (Pages 184-5)

Activity: Compose brief dialogue between Mr. Graves and Perdita, when he thanks her for her kindness. Consider how stilted this conversation might be.

(5) Racism

Examples:

- “There had been ‘disturbances’, the Protector said. There had been casualties.” (Page 12)
- “They would be the subjects, or rather, the objects, of his research.” (Page 19)
- “They wore cast-off clothes, mostly filthy and shredded, and had matted hair and looks of drear resignation.” (Page 19)
- “These were ‘half-caste’ girls, in need of assimilation.” (Page 22)
- “At the Trevors’ Nicholas discovered he could force the cook, Martha, and she would not tell.” (Page 28)
- Nicholas turned to look, but he did not say anything. He simply seized his daughter’s wrist and dragged her away.” (Page 46)
- “And them whitefella p’licemen just love to stick us all in gaol.” (Page 148)
- “No one will believe the word of a bush black fella.” (Page 203)

Activity: Using reference material from the library, as well as the ATSIC web site, draw up a chart demonstrating the continuing challenges facing Indigenous Australian. You could consider such headings as: average life expectancy, causes of death, infant mortality, average income, rates of imprisonment both by state and nationally, numbers of Indigenous university graduates, and retention rates at secondary school.

(6) Impact of Violence of all Kinds on Children

Examples:

- “The first time she saw Nicholas swing at Stella, striking her with an audible wack to the cheek, she ran outside, alarmed, to consider what had occurred.” (Page 14)
- Last paragraph of Page 80
- “... That there is always war somewhere and peace somewhere else (Page 82)
- “There was a moment of unreality when she watched them tiny, suspended, then Perdita heard gunfire as seven of the Zeroes flew directly overhead.” (Page 132)
- Revelation of the identity of the killer of Nicholas Keene (Pages 192 -194)

Activity: Imagine you are Perdita. Write a page long diary entry of your reactions and thoughts, after you have witnessed your father’s violence against your mother. Re-read page 14 for some ideas of the sorts of reactions you might have.

(7) Cultural Dislocation

Examples:

- “Even as a child Perdita knew this to be false. To the end of the paragraph. (Pages 37-8)
- Mary’s reaction to the plot of *The Winter’s Tale* (Page 64)
- Mary’s bi-cultural learning

Activity: Write a short story of about 600 words, based on an experience of cultural dislocation you may have experienced or read or seen. Films such as *Lost in Translation* may provide you with a starting point.

(8) Richness of Indigenous Culture

Examples:

- The variety of Mary's knowledge and skills (Page 54)
- Mary's practical skills imbedded in the landscape (page 60)
- The cleansing ceremony on Page 98
- "... they had gone north for ceremonies, for dances, for the 'sorry-time' of mourning someone in their own community, someone important." (Page 101)

Activity: Research the achievements of current Indigenous artists in the creative fields of painting, acting, dance or music. Present your findings as a Power Point presentation.

(9) Friendship

Examples:

- Initially, Mary and Perdita bond over the shared loss of their mothers (page 58)
- "The world was transforming." (Page 111)
- "How was it possible, she often wondered, to continue with so much missing?" (Page 142)
- Joyous reunion with Billy Trevor (page 169)
- Perdita's realisation of her failure to apologise to Mary (Page 211)

Activity: Prepare a class debate with the subject that "Authentic friendship is not possible between people of different cultures."

STYLE

(1) References to other texts especially Shakespearean plays

Examples:

(A)

- Stella reading *The Tempest* on the voyage to Broome
- *You do me wrong to take me out of the grave- King Lear* (Page 25)
- Significance of choice of Perdita's name, from *The Winter's Tale* (Pages 26-7)
- Hamlet's soliloquy (Page 36)
- Opening of Part Two with quotation from the last Act of *Macbeth*
- Stella's performance on Christmas day of Act V of *Othello*
- The "storm scene" from *King Lear*

(B) Reference to Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. Note also that Conrad was a Polish sailor who wrote in English

(C) Reference to Wordsworth's poem *The Leech Gatherer* (Page 148)

(D) Reference to both the novel *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier and Hitchcock's film version (Page 177)

Activity: Allocate the different texts to individual class members. Each student is to write up the plot of the text AND indicate, with a visual aid, how that plot is linked to *Sorry*.

2. Circular Time

Jones does not tell the story in direct, linear time. This allows her to place the key revelation of the identity of Nicholas Keene's killer almost at the end of the novel.

Examples:

- Pages 91 to 96 returns and amplifies the details of Page 1
- Pages 124 to 125 adds further layers of meaning to Page 1

Activity: Research Traditional Aboriginal measurement of passing time. Why is Jones' use of non-linear narrative appropriate?

3. Changing Perspectives

Examples:

At times, the narrative is told in the third person and then it switches to the first with Perdita taking over the function of narrator.

Examples on Pages 20 and throughout the novel

- Perdita's viewpoint of her mother when she is in the asylum (Page 179)

Activity: using different coloured Post-It notes, annotate the changes in perspective in at least one section of the novel. What pattern emerges?

4. Symbols

Examples:

- The Spanish shawl given to Stella on her wedding day
- The folding table and canvas chair Nicholas orders from Broome (Page 23)
- The snake Mary kills for food (Page 70)
- St Pancras Railway Station (Page 76)
- The concept of time being compared to a strip of film (Pages 91-93)
- The tiger snake eating the caged finches (Page 113)
- The roses Stella brings home from the florist (Page 140)
- The paperweight in Dr Oblov's surgery (Page 174)
- The reference to Perdita's first experience of the cinema being "a punctuation" (Page 178)
- The blue dress (Pages 1, 91, 187)
- Mary's "secret secret" cat's cradle (Page 206)
- The selection of names such as Perdita, the lost child, and Stella, star-like, distant and cold

Activity: draw up a table with three columns. In the first column, write the symbol, in the second, add a relevant quotation and in the third explain the meaning of the symbol.

5. Strong Sense of Place

Examples:

- The paragraph beginning "From the tray of the old truck" on Page 43
- The description of Broome on Pages 106-7
- "Perdita had yet to realise how utterly lost she would feel; how there are no replacements, ever, for the locations of childhood and their avid, intensified, blazing encounters." (Page 117)
- "... locked in the melancholy of their own departure, coping with their own sense of times and places falling away." (Page 137)

Activity: Write a page of DESCRIPTIVE prose about a location, real or imagined, that has had an impact on you. You must write only in a descriptive style, without any narrative additions.

6 Elements of Post Modernist Writing

Examples:

- Self-consciously describes the book as “this speculating testament” (Page 21)
- Reflective passages on Page 145
- Use of italics to denote important perception (Page 180)
- Appropriation of a number of genres such as, for example, the elements of crime fiction: the murder, the mystery of the identity of the killer, the delayed revelation. It could also be argued that Jones uses some characteristics of the traditional Revenge Tragedy genre.
- Post-Colonial reading of the dominant culture and honouring of the oppressed cultures

Activity: Imagine you have been asked to make a speech to the students in the year below you. The topic of the speech is “What is Post-Modernism?” Using examples from *Sorry*, write the transcript of that speech.

7 Irony

Examples:

- “That first night, lying together beneath the high flimsy cone of a mosquito net, Nicholas had tried to reason with his wife, but ended up hitting her.” (Page 16)
- “Perdita was not entirely sure what this meant, but she liked the animating grizzle, the bad-tempered tone.” (Page 37)
- Perdita “wanted so much to be dark.” (Page 73)
- Fleeting moment of Stella expressing her love for Perdita (Page 132)
- “Perdita was almost happy.” (Page 162)
- First paragraph on Page 171

Activity: Select one example of irony from the list above AND another example from the novel and explain, in half a page, the levels of irony and their meanings.

8 Shifts in Register

Examples:

- The confronting description of Nicholas’ revulsion at the birth of his child (Paragraphs 1 and 2 of Page 24)
- The two halves of Page 49
- The use of Aboriginal English from people like the group camped beside the Swan River
- The use of Christian theological terms such as “transubstantiation” (Page 178)

Activity: Re-write Joey’s speech on Pages 147 and 148. In your opinion, what is the effect of the re-written speech?

9 Intensely Lyrical, Descriptive Passages

Examples:

- Paragraph beginning “The truck broke down” on Page 48
- Description of the Swan River (Page 148)
- Description of the appearance of the cinema (Page 175)

Activity: Using Page 175 as a model, write a lyrical passage about an ordinary setting such as your classroom, the school library, your local Town Hall and the main street in your suburb or town.

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of the text are presented on its cover?

You could consider:

- The positioning of the hands
- The rope surrounding/imprisoning those hands
- The colours and shading
- The font used for the title

2. Gail Jones says she was inspired to write *Sorry* after a hundred delegates at the Australian Reconciliation Convention turned their backs on Prime Minister John Howard who refused to apologise to Indigenous Australians. She asked the question:

“What does it mean when you don’t say the word you should say?”

Using this question as a basis, discuss the answers provided by the novel.

3. What roles does Jones assign to the women in the novel?

Consider:

- Stella
- Perdita
- Mary
- Mrs Trevor
- Flora Ramsay
- Pearl Underwood
- Sister Perpetua

4. Consider the structure of the novel.

- Why has Jones divided the narrative in this way?
- What is the relationship between the quotations and the content of the section
- Would the text be more effective without these divisions?

POSSIBLE ESSAY QUESTIONS

(1) Gail Jones stated in an interview in 2007 that she wanted “to make Mary symbolic.”

What are the symbolic functions that Mary fulfills?

(2) Gillian Dooley on *Writer’s Radio* described *Sorry* as “a brilliant evocation of childhood loss, language, humanity and inhumanity.”

To what extent do you agree with this description of the themes of the novel? In your opinion, are there further themes to be found?

(3) By a detailed deconstruction of the final paragraph of the novel, demonstrate how the characteristics of Jones’ style contribute to the meaning of the text.

SAMPLE ESSAY

“IS IT UP TO ARTISTS TO APOLOGISE WHEN GOVERNMENTS WON’T?”

Using the transcript of Kevin Rudd’s speech as a Related Text, as well as Gail Jones *Sorry*, consider some aspects of this question.

In his first act as Prime Minister, on February 13, 2008, Kevin Rudd delivered a formal apology to Indigenous Australians. Gail Jones' novel had been published the year before, and, in many ways, it delivers an apology, in fictional form, to the same group addressed in the famous February speech.

The title of the novel emphasizes the importance of statements of public regret about past wrongs. Just as Peter Garrett's rock group wore "Sorry" suits during their performance at the Closing Ceremony of the Sydney Olympics in 2000, so Gail Jones presents a public and personal apology about the injustices of the past and the impact of those unacknowledged injustices on the present. The word "sorry" is repeated a number of times throughout Rudd's speech to emphasise the depth of his apology. At the end of her novel, Jones adds *A Note on 'Sorry'* and begins it with the statement: "The word 'sorry' has dense and complicated meanings in Australia."²

It is appropriate that Jones novel should be complex in its examination of the history of mistreatment of Indigenous Australians. She, like Rudd, has a particular focus on families and the way in which they were destroyed. For example, the Trevors' cook, sixteen year old Martha, is repeatedly raped by Nicholas Keene who "liked to pull her head back so that he hurt her." (Page 29). When she is found to be pregnant, Martha is sent south "with few questions asked." The casual discarding is the victim is a poignant example of the "suffering" described in the speech.

There is an example of an indigenous man breaking white law to try to keep his family together. Towards the end of the novel, Perdita meets a group of Aboriginals living beside the Swan River in Perth. Joey has a permit to live in the city because of his job as leech-gatherer for the Royal Perth Hospital. His family is not supposed to live with him but they naturally want to. Their solution is to "stay hidden" (Page 147).

Rudd also mentions the "indignity and degradation" that indigenous Australians have suffered. Mary, Perdita's "sister", protects her as well as Perdita's damaged mother, Stella. She claims to be guilty of the murder of her rapist, Nicholas Keene, and is sent first to a juvenile detention centre and then adult prison. When Perdita recovers her memory and realises it was she who stabbed her father, Mary explains that she was stronger than Perdita or her mother. She tries to comfort Perdita by saying "I'm useful here. I have my friends, my place." (Page 203) The discomfiting fact is that Mary's place is a prison.

Rudd's speech describes what is to be hoped will happen after the speech has been accepted by Indigenous Australians: "A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility." In contrast, Jones presents that situation of an individual who recognizes too late that she should have apologized. It is only after Mary's unexpected and premature death, that Perdita realises the enormity of her debt:

"There was a flood of hot tears, and a sudden heart breaking.
I should have said sorry to my sister, Mary. Sorry, my sister, oh my sister, sorry."

If these had been the final words of the novel, Jones might have been suggesting despair is the only possible reaction to the situation in 2007. However, there is a closing, redemptive chapter that suggests that the shared humanity of the characters will ensure ultimate reconciliation.

Both Jones' novel and Rudd's speech suggest positive possibilities for the future relationships between all Australians. Neither text suggests that a public apology is a solution but that it is a vital part of beginning to create a genuinely civilised society. Jones' work contains the warning of what could occur if such an apology had not been made. Artists must make us uncomfortable by asking awkward questions and, at times, providing challenges to those with power but little integrity.

² Jones, Gail, *Sorry* (Vintage, 2007), Page 215.

RELATED TEXTS

Western Australia has provided all sorts of inspiration for many writers. The list below provides students with the opportunity to explore further many of the themes considered in Gail Jones' novel.

Drama

Dallas Winma *Aliwa!*

This play tells the true story of the Davis family. It takes place at the same time as the novel. Part of the script is made up of actual letters from the Aboriginal Protector who is outraged by a widowed woman asking for milk for her baby. The same woman makes a heart-breaking sacrifice to avoid her youngest child being taken away from her by the Aboriginal Protector.

Memoirs

Rosemary Hemphill *The Master Pearler's Daughter*

Like Gail Jones, and at about the same time, Rosemary Hemphill grew up in Broome. She was sent to boarding school in Perth but her descriptions of her joyous returns to Broome indicate the power the place has on all its inhabitants. This memoir offers a different perspective on Broome and its inhabitants.

Ruth Hegarty *Is That You, Ruthie?*

Ruth Hegarty was one of the Stolen Generation. She describes in stark detail what the training was like, to prepare the girls for lives of unquestioning domestic service.

Claire Henty-Gebert *Paint Me Black*

Henty-Geber's mother did in fact paint her tiny daughter black in a futile attempt to prevent her being taken from her. The author writes with a great deal of affection for the Methodist missionaries who cared for her on Croker Island but she also grieves for her lost mother.

Novels

Craig Silvey *Rhubarb*

His novel is set in modern Perth. It is populated by quirky, endearing people living in a city which is not only beautiful but also nurtures its eccentrics.

Randolph Stow *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*

An unclaimed gem of a novel, set in the same time and place as *Sorry*. Stow lived most of his adult life in England and, from that distance, could write about his glorious childhood which ended with the imprisonment of his favourite cousin in Changi.

Film

The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith

This film was made in one of the Australian film industry's great flowerings in the 1970's. Thomas Kenneally wrote the novel on which the film is based. It tells of the tragedy of an aboriginal boy who was "civilised" by well-meaning settlers but who found himself rejected by both indigenous and European cultures.

The Rabbit Proof Fence

Set in Western Australia, this recent film recounts the desperate trek of three Aboriginal children who flee to their family from the "Training School" in which they have been placed.

Speech

In December, 1992, Prime Minister Paul Keating delivered a stirring speech to mark the beginning of the International Year of Indigenous People. Part of that speech reflected on the cost to non-indigenous Australians of failing to acknowledge the wrongs committed, especially against the Stolen Generations. The content of the speech links very clearly with the closing chapters of *Sorry*.
www.abc.net.au/m/features/speeches