

The Representation of Aboriginal People in *Cloudstreet*

One reading of *Cloudstreet* is that it reflects its late twentieth century political context in according greater respect for Aboriginal culture and highlighting the need for reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Arguments for this view would include the following.

- The novel can be read as offering a criticism of the treatment of Aboriginal people within Australian society through its portrayal of the Aboriginal girls forced to live in the house under the supervision of its first owner. Here the novel can be read as a criticism of the policy of removal of Aboriginal children from their parents and attempts at forced assimilation into an alien culture: The old lady ‘read aloud to them from the novels of Walter Scott and locked the house at night’. ‘The mission girls climbed into bed with one another at night and cried. They had been taken from their families and were not happy.’
- The novel can be read as portraying Aboriginal people as more spiritually aware than white Australians: the Aboriginal man immediately recognises the existence of evil in the house, something the Lambs and Pickles are unaware of and he later stands outside trying to ward off the evil in the house. In addition, the Aboriginal man appears at times of miracles such as when Quick’s boat becomes loaded with Fish
- The novel can be read as an endorsement of Aboriginal culture for its greater awareness of the importance of family and place. For example the Aboriginal man is constructed as being on ‘family business’, directing Quick back to *Cloudstreet* on a number of occasions: ‘Go to your home mate’ he says. It is the Aboriginal man who convinces Lester not to sell the house: ‘Places are strong, important ... Too many places busted’, he tells him.
- The novel draws on biblical allusions and imagery to construct the Aboriginal man as akin to an angel.
- The novel suggests that white Australians can learn from Aboriginal people. For example, When Quick is disturbed by the actions of the Nedlands monster and his own actions in moving away from Cloudstreet, he searches for the blackfella to talk. In addition, it takes the Lambs and Pickles the whole course of the whole to learn something the Aboriginal man has been trying to tell them from the beginning: places are important, family is important.

But *Cloudstreet* can also be read as marginalising Aboriginal people, stereotyping them, constructing them as ‘other’ and endorsing European displacement of Aboriginal people:

- The novel is silent in respect to real Aboriginal people living in Western Australia at the time it is set: they appear only as figures from the past (the girl) or as unreal magical characters, like the Aboriginal man, who does not ironically actually belong anywhere – he simply appears and disappears.
- The novel is silent regarding the fact that the house is actually built on land originally owned by Aboriginal people; the emphasis on the house as a place of belonging for the Lambs and Pickles families actually justifies white expropriation of Aboriginal property.
- The novel is silent on or marginalises the real social conditions of Aboriginal people during the period of its setting, such as the reasons why an Aboriginal man is selling or

why Aboriginal people cannot vote. Lester's comment on the latter, 'Jesus that's a bit rough. They need a union' and Rose's laughing response can be seen as trivializing the oppression of Aboriginal people.

- The novel's investing of the Aboriginal man with superior spirituality means that he is not 'real' like the Lambs and Pickles.
- The only space for Aboriginal people in the novel is as ghosts or angels.
- The Aboriginal man's disappearance at the end of the novel can be read as endorsing the displacement of Aboriginal people by white people.