

## Topic Page: [Keneally, Thomas \(1935 - \)](#)

Definition: **Keneally, Thomas Michael** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Australian novelist. He drew on his training as a Catholic priest in early novels, including *The Place at Whitton* (1964). In *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967), he turned to historical fiction. *Schindler's Ark* (1982), won the Booker Prize, and formed the basis of Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* (1993).

### Summary Article: **Keneally, Thomas**

From *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Literature: The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*

Thomas Keneally is a prolific and popular author of fiction and history, much of it about his native Australia. Convinced that history “is a parable for the present” (1975a, 29), he is best known for his historical novels. Two of his earliest novels, *Bring Larks and Heroes* and *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*, received the Miles Franklin Award for the best Australian fiction of the year, while three subsequent and very diverse novels were shortlisted for the Booker Prize: *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972; filmed by Fred Schepisi in 1978), about the persecution and murderous rampage of the son of an Aboriginal mother and a white father; *Gossip from the Forest* (1975b), about the signing of the armistice at the end of World War I; and *Confederates*, about the American Civil War. In 1982 he won the Booker for his meticulously researched *Schindler's Ark* (filmed as the Academy Award-winning *Schindler's List* by Steven Spielberg in 1993), about an epicurean German businessman who saved the lives of more than 1,000 of his Jewish workers during the Holocaust. Keneally has spent time in England and the United States, but he lives in and writes mostly about Australia, and he is a strong republican. He received a New South Wales Premier's Literary Award in 2008.

Keneally was born on October 7, 1935 in Sydney, where his family returned in 1942 after seven years in the north coast of New South Wales. His enduring interests in war originated in the stories that he heard from uncles who had been wounded or gassed in World War I, and from his father's service in the Australian Air Force in World War II. In *Homebush Boy: A Memoir* (1995a), he writes of his youthful admiration for the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and his uneasy discovery after reading Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* that modern literature was not always approved by the Catholic authorities. To the surprise of his family, he decided in 1952 to train for the priesthood, but after “something very close to a crack-up,” he left the seminary in 1960 just before being ordained. “I had the sort of absolutist tendencies which led me to become a writer, I suppose,” he told Ray Willibanks, and so he turned to writing “almost immediately” (Willibanks 132).

His first novel, *The Place at Whitton* (1964), is a mystery in which the murderer is one of the men studying at a monastery to become a priest, while his peers try to cope with the strain. Confronted with one who believes that he communes with Joan of Arc, Father Onions responds, “The glory of the Church is mysticism, but the secret of the Church is administration” (101). Here is the birth of one of Keneally's great themes: the fate of the good but wayward individual in such overwhelming institutions as the church and the army. In his fourth novel, *Three Cheers for the Paraclete* (1968), Keneally writes with more sympathy of the religious life that he abandoned. The story of Father James Maitland's struggle to balance his priestly duties with the humanism that leads him to quote the likes of Nietzsche and Pound in his sermons, it displays what Graham Greene calls (on the back of the Penguin edition) “the rather awful comedy inherent in a priest's life.” When asked by his superiors to comment on an

unsettling book called *The Meanings of God*, Maitland fails to admit that he wrote it under a pseudonym, thereby compounding his error. When he is punished for having avoided Catholic censorship, he consoles himself by remembering that none of the book's Catholic reviewers found it heretical. Finally he realizes that he is “an institutional being” (233) who must find a way to adjust to the church that he does not want to leave. In *Blood Red, Sister Rose* (1974), his eighth novel, Keneally combines his interest in Catholic history with his growing interest in war. Jehanne (as he calls Joan of Arc) and her key adviser Yolande, queen of Sicily, duchess of Anjou, and mother-in-law of Charles VII, are the strongest female characters in Keneally's predominantly masculine early work. Not afraid to stage-manage the miraculous, the indomitable Yolande arranges funds for Jehanne's staff and for the Orleans expedition and ensures that Jehanne is successfully examined at Poitiers. In this way, Keneally differs from previous versions of the legend, which tend to contrast Joan with the powerful men that surround her. By depicting her as dependent on Yolande, Keneally neither refutes nor endorses Jehanne's claims to supernatural inspiration. He leaves the reader to weigh the secular, occult, and Christian explanations of this mysterious woman.

Keneally established his reputation with his third novel, *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967), the first of several depictions of Australia's convict-colony beginnings. The protagonist is Corporal Halloran, a conscientious soldier who is torn between his oath to serve George III and his growing recognition of the colonial administration's cruelty and injustice. When Ewers, a transplanted forger, is charged with rape, Halloran tries to exonerate him by revealing that he is a eunuch, but Major Sabian is unmoved, and Ewers is hanged. After vivid scenes of flogging and suffering, Halloran and his secret bride are hanged for their roles in an attempted rebellion. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972), based on the Governor brothers' murders in 1900, also ends with the protagonist's hanging, after he and his brother are tracked down for several murders of unsympathetically depicted whites. Jimmie's arrest coincides with Australian federation (1901), and so his hanging is delayed because it would be “too indicative of what had been suppressed in the country's making” (177). Keneally later admitted that “If the novel has a fault it is the young man's tendency to make the settlers appear as malicious as I could make them” (Willibanks 141), but critics have been more troubled by his claims for his understanding of Aboriginal psychology. *A Victim of the Aurora* (1977) is the story of a murder on the New British South Polar Expedition of 1910. Anthony Piers, the 92-year-old narrator, remembers his colleagues, one of them a murderer, as “Men of their age – sublime and ridiculous” (209). After *Confederates* (1979), Keneally moved away from the violence and “alienation” (Willibanks 134) of his early works. A turning point comes in *The Cut-Rate Kingdom* (1980), in which Prime Minister Johnny Mulhall (based on John Curtin) succeeds in keeping his wartime commitments to Australia's imperious allies without alienating too many of his Labor Party followers.

In 1980, Keneally met Leopold Pfefferberg, the first of the 50 Schindler survivors whom he interviewed for *Schindler's Ark* (1982). Collectively they provided extraordinary memories of the enigmatic Oskar Schindler, who could not have saved them if he had not dined and drunk with Nazis who must have appalled him. Nonetheless, Schindler enjoyed his wealth, liquor, and mistresses. As he explains in the preface, Keneally's response to the challenge of writing about such a subject was to use the techniques of the novel to tell a true story. The book's success is indicated by both the Booker Prize and the millions of copies that were sold, but some critics have been uneasy with the prefatory claim and with Keneally's general unwillingness to foreground his own perspective or otherwise qualify his historical understanding (Quartermaine 61–77). As Peter Pierce observes, Keneally is a “conservative” historical novelist who is more inclined to respect than to question his sources (33).

Writing in 1995, Pierce argues that Keneally shifts “from a tragic to a benign view of the European settlement of Australia” (10). Thus *The Playmaker* (1987) returns to the world of *Bring Larks and Heroes* but in a comic mode, as Keneally imagines the first Australian production of a play (George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*) in 1789. He timed the book to coincide with the Australian bicentennial; by contrast, Patrick White deliberately avoided publication that year (Quartermaine 78). *Flying Hero Class* (1991) revises *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* by showing that today's Aborigines resist the stereotypes that once seemed so fierce. *A River Town* (1995b), which Keneally planned as the first part of a trilogy that might become his major work, returns to the time and place of his grandparents (Willbanks 142). The protagonist is Tim Shea, a storekeeper in Kempsey, New South Wales, at the end of the nineteenth century. When his Catholic compassion antagonizes his community, his customers abandon him and his debts accumulate. Through good luck, he escapes the plague, recovers financially, and wins back his customers. With all Kempsey's faults, “democracy did break out everywhere and wasn't punished like at home” (98).

The novels since 1995 are less benign. The most ambitious, *Bettany's Book* (2000), sets contemporary Australia against the crisis in Darfur, while also contrasting Australia past and present. This long novel is one of Keneally's most formally complex, in that much of the narrative is given in an exchange of letters between two sisters, an Australian film producer and a worker for an Australian relief agency in the Sudan. Their correspondence involves the journal of their great-grandfather Jonathan Bettany, a nineteenth-century sheep farmer, and letters from the Jewish convict who became his second wife. His account of the difficulties of pioneer life overlaps with the Australian sections of *The Great Shame: A Story of the Irish in the Old World and the New* (1998), a massive history of the Irish diaspora. *The Tyrant's Novel* (2003) concerns the unhappy fate of a writer under the control of a tyrant in an unnamed country that resembles Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Keneally returned to Australian subjects in *The Commonwealth of Thieves: The Sydney Experiment* (2005), a history of the first four years of the convict colony, and *The Widow and Her Hero* (2007), a novel about the enduring influence of World War II. After more than four decades, he retains his interest in ambitious narratives and commanding perspectives.

**SEE ALSO:** Australian Fiction (WF); Film/Television Adaptation and Fiction (WF); Greene, Graham (BIF); Historical Fiction (WF); Migration, Diaspora, and Exile in Fiction (WF); White, Patrick (WF)

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