



# The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith

*Thomas Keneally*

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## **The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith** Thomas Keneally

When Jimmie Blacksmith marries a white woman the backlash from both Jimmie's tribe and white society initiates a series of dramatic events. As Jimmie tries to survive between two cultures, tensions build reaching a head when the Newbys, Jimmie's white employers, try to break up his marriage. The Newby women are murdered and Jimmie flees, pursued by police and vigilantes.

Author Biography: Thomas Keneally was born in Sydney Australia in 1935. He studied for the Catholic priesthood before he abandoned this vocation in 1960 and took up school teaching and writing. He is the author of numerous works of fiction and non-fiction including *Shindlers Ark* which won the Booker Prize in 1982 and was made into the successful film *Schindler's List*.

## **The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith Details**

Date : Published December 1st 1973 by Penguin (first published 1972)

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Author : Thomas Keneally

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# From Reader Review The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith for online ebook

## Marianne says

The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith is the 7th novel by Thomas Keneally. Set around the time of Federation, it tells the story of half-caste Jimmie Blacksmith, initiated into tribal manhood by his aboriginal elders, he was, at the same time, taught by a Methodist minister. Under the minister's influence, his criteria denoting the value of human existence were home, hearth, wife and land. And a white wife, say a farm girl, would mean his offspring would be quarter-caste, theirs but an eighth. Jimmie works hard to achieve his goals, but fails through no fault of his own, and the situation becomes explosive and violent. Keneally tells a great yarn, and manages to deftly convey the forces that battle inside Jimmie, as well as the attitude of whites to blacks and of blacks to whites at that time in Australian history. The story is told mainly from Jimmie's perspective, but also from the view of the Methodist minister, the hangman, Jimmie's maternal uncle Tabidgi and the fiancé of one of Jimmie's victims. The debate about Federation rumbles in the background. Excellent prose, vivid descriptions, characters of depth and authentic dialogue. It is no wonder this tragic tale has become an Australian classic.

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## Judy says

I have been sitting for quite a time trying to order some words for a review of this.

I have not read any Keneally before. I have many on my To Read.

A brutal story. A peep at the brutality of colonial occupation of this continent and airing of attitudes toward the original peoples. Attitudes that I so wish were ones we could say were well in the past. But sadly no, talking with many people in daily life makes me sadly aware of attitude to race in modern Australia.

I am glad I read this title via audio book medium as I know I would have stopped turn pages in a paper book and put it aside pretty early, but it is easier to press on when someone else is reading it to you.

And I would not have put it aside because of disquiet at the brutality or the story itself, that brutality was a part of daily life in that time and this and many other places. But rather, because each word just screamed at me that so little has changed in so many ways in people's mind set. How we still do not acknowledge the true manner of settlement, how we still try to bury the full history of land wars, murder, massacre and brutality, how the common narrative is that "the natives are a primitive Stone Age culture" even though all the modern research is full of information about a truly amazing and complex society managing a fragile land with great care.

Mr Keneally's writing is incredible. He is a prize winner for very obvious reasons. Hence my 4 star rating.

In many ways I wish I had not read this, but I have. One of those classic titles we are told we must read I guess.

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## Geoff Wooldridge says

This is a fine classic Australian story, based on true events, set mostly in rural New South Wales in 1900, just before the States of Australia agreed to federate into a common nation.

The story of Jimmie Blacksmith is based on the exploits of Jimmy Governor, an aboriginal man, who

brutally murdered a number of white people, including women and children, and who was hunted down for almost 100 days before he was captured.

Keneally has changed the names and many of the details, but has remained true to the general themes and issues that are common to Governor and Blacksmith.

Blacksmith was an educated half-caste, who had an aboriginal mother and white father. He had the patronage of a missionary, the Reverend Neville, who encouraged Jimmie to aspire to the fruits of hard work, including the prospect of land ownership and even a white wife.

Jimmie struggled against the systemic oppression and overt racism directed to aboriginal people, doing his best to earn a living and progress his station in life despite the numerous barriers placed before him and his kind.

When he married a simple white girl, who Jimmie believed was carrying his child, it created difficulties amongst both his extended aboriginal family and the local white settlers.

A series of discriminatory events led Jimmie to a point where he snapped and, aided by an uncle and his brother, they brutally murdered several white women.

On the run from the law, several more people were ruthlessly murdered, including more women and a nursing baby, because the passion for revenge had completely overtaken Jimmie's sense of reason and sense of human decency.

After several narrow escapes, the wounded and deliriously ill Jimmie was eventually captured when he took refuge in a rural convent.

Keneally wrote this popular and acclaimed story in the early 1970s, reasonably early in his prolific career. In the 2013 edition I read, there is a note from the author effectively apologizing for having written much of the story from an aboriginal perspective. Cultural appropriation has become a hot topic in literary criticism recently and perhaps Keneally felt a degree of sensitivity around these issues.

But I believe he has done a fine job in writing a powerful story, keeping it reasonably simple but adequately nuanced, thought-provoking and evocative.

By writing at least some of the story from Jimmie's perspective, Keneally has been able to present the profound sense of injustice and discrimination faced by aboriginal Australians, without in any way condoning or excusing the excessively violent and horrific crimes committed by Jimmie and his family members. The profound provocation in no way justifies the crimes committed.

Keneally has also cleverly woven into the narrative issues around the imminent Federation of Australia in 1901 and even themes relating to the Boer War that was being fought in South Africa at the time.

This is a very fine piece of work that has stood the test of time.

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## **Lisa says**

A tragic novel and yet so good at integrating the way racism In Australia paralleled some of what was going on in the Empire at the time Federation, or Australian independence, was being achieved. Just so hard for people of color to ever get ahead even when they are trying to play by the rules.

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## **Luke says**

Based purely on how he seems to come across in interviews, I'd avoided reading any Thomas Kenneally. I had always suspected that his books would be a little too smug, too self-satisfied for me to handle.

Thankfully, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* proved me wrong.

The novel - now a curriculum staple - is a fictionalised tale of crime and punishment, but mostly is about the interaction between Caucasian and Aborigine circa Australian Federation. The titular character is a half-caste, so not at home in black or white worlds - and this frustration leads to murder and evasion.

It's a risky plan, attempting to write black history from a white perspective. Kenneally himself admits he wouldn't think himself so bold to be able to do the same today. Still, for the indelicacy of the approach, there is a real sense of the spiritual rubbing against the colonial - of the yaw and pitch of the country of the time.

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## **Kokeshi says**

Riveting. Powerful. A great book. Loved it. 5 stars

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## **Tim Edison says**

"And here the history of mean death and lust for booze and acquiescence to the white phallus, gun, and sequestration and all the malaise of black squalor, here it was, legible in the fracture lines of soft stones."

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## **Cate says**

It would be fair to say that the majority of the Book Club I belong to (ie everyone but me) hated this book - the violence, the narrative, the characters. It met with near universal approbation. At the time of Book Club, I hadn't finished it but was enjoying it - enjoying the metaphor, the story and I generally like Tom Keneally's writing. I thought his forward to this most recent edition was suitably modest. Then we hit the last 3 chapters and the book really fell away. The enormity of the story just got lost in sheer tedium. I really came to the book knowing nothing of it but vague awareness of it as an "Australian Classic". I had thought it had a contemporary setting: that's how ignorant I was. It is set at the time of Federation so there is a rich vein of racism that is tapped into. I think Keneally does a superb job of writing the mounting rage that grows in Jimmie with each successive beating down of his aspirations. I thought the violence was well written. The

characters for the most part are well constructed although the criticism of one-dimensional is pretty valid. But that does suit the story, which is a narrative of oppression at its heart. The final hiding out goes on for way too long, the tension between Jimmie and his pursuers isn't fully exploited, the whole "mystical" Mr McCreadie & the scene with the "henge" (for want of a better word) is clunky and the ending just peters out. And what's with those letters, Jimmie reads at the school? I'm just not sure what purpose they served. It is an ambitious book and a serious attempt at giving voice to an Aboriginal perspective and turning a light of the dark stain on our National identity. I wonder if TK would embark upon such a task now?

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### **Mary Byrne says**

I read this book many years ago and have watched the movie several times. On rereading this book remains remarkably powerful and still one of my favourite novels. The relationship of Jimmy to people around him, the white pastor and wife who raised him, the farmer settlers, his uncle and especially his full-blood brother Mort are all passionately presented with the racisms subtly interwoven into plot. A cry for the past, a cry for respect and recognition, the ceremonial site vandalised, the loss of a culture. Mort paints his face terrified of what he has done. Jimmy is a confused mix, rationalising his murderous actions but without a place to settle, not with tradition and not with the whites. Important reflection on the problems for aboriginals.

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### **Max Davine says**

Thomas Keneally is one of Australia's most interesting authors. He breaks the conventional small-town attitude the Australian arts tend to have, in that everything we produce has to have some distinctly Australian flavor, and must of course be set in Australia, most notably with his entirely Aussie-free novel "Schindler's Ark", which Steven Spielberg adapted into his most respected film, "Schindler's List".

"The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith", however, is an entirely Australian novel, and one that should be enforced upon every Australian as early in their schooling as possible, just for the fact that it shows, in vibrant and visceral detail, the full ugliness of racism, the result of attempts at colonization and genocide, as well as the repercussive acts of violence in horrifying, unflinching detail. It stands alone in the annals of tales relating to Aborigines. Jimmie Blacksmith is not some poor victim, some helpless black being tormented and pushed unwillingly into a new world. In fact, he is at first happy to embrace white Australia, to embrace the white-half of his blood and live life as an upstanding citizen, by colonial standards. He even aspires to a white wife, in order to gradually remove the black from his bloodline, in a mirror of the historically legislated "breeding out" of the indigenous features, in which white Australia simply ran a rape campaign in order to create as many half-castes as possible, and so on.

But racism, mistrust, infidelity and the sickening tides of ignorance crushing Jimmie Blacksmith, driving him back when all he wants to do is work hard and move "foreword", eventually cause him to snap, and take brutal revenge upon the whites who wronged him. These are passages that will remain with the reader, long after the back cover is closed.

While "The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith" was inspired by true events, it is important to remember that this is not informative fiction, this is just plain fiction, meaning that Jimmie Blacksmith never existed and his tale sprung entirely from the mind of Keneally, albeit with some prompt from history. Keneally's prose is deeply opaque, where often thoughts or memories overlap the linear narrative, adding a fractured, dreamlike quality.

It truly is written like a Dreamtime chant, and this is where Keneally's power lies; the sheer detail of his research, and implementing it into the story in a manner which never reads like a history lesson. As with "Schindler's Ark", "The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith" feels like a memory, after reading, rather than simply a powerful, unique work of fiction.

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## **Philip says**

The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith by Thomas Keneally is based on the life of an Australian bushranger called Jimmy Governor. Fictionalised as Jimmy Blacksmith, the character takes several steps down the social ladder in terms of his name, but remains at the bottom of the pile in reality by virtue of being not only black, but also an Aborigine. As Jimmy Blacksmith, however, the character is not without skills. He speaks English and can build a uniform fence as strong and even as anyone. He can work as hard and deliver as much as any hired hand, except, of course, by definition.

Thomas Keneally's novel is highly successful in its presentation of white people's assumptions of superiority. Knowing that they occupy a level much higher up the Victorian pyramid of life that has God and The Queen at the top, they can be imperially confident that anything they might think or do must necessarily outshine what the likes of Jimmy Blacksmith can achieve. When reality suggests a contradiction, then their position of privilege allows them to change the rules in order to belittle achievement and deny results.

To label such attitudes as merely racist is to miss much of the point. These whites, always eager to proffer judgment at the turn of twentieth century Australia, did not regard their attitudes as based on race. The relevant word was surely not race, but species, since the indigenous population was seen as something less than human. So even when Jimmy Blacksmith displays complete competence, strength, endurance or cooperation, even if he becomes a Methodist Christian, marries a white woman according to God and The Law, even if he speaks the master's language, he remains by definition something short of human. An ultimate irony of Jimmy's acceptance of his duty to marry the pregnant girl, by the way, is that the child turns out to be white, fathered by another of the girl's recent acquaintances. So, as an oppressed black man, Jimmy Blacksmith is left carrying another white man's burden.

Jimmy reacts against his treatment. His reaction is violent. He takes an axe to several victims, most of them women. He then flees and is joined in crime by his brother, Mort. Together they evade capture, despite being pursued by thousands until an inevitable fate materialises.

Jimmy Blacksmith presents several problems for the modern reader, however. Powerful it may be, but then Thomas Keneally's attempt to render an accent in writing does not work. As a consequence, the dialogue sometimes seems confused and opaque. The author stated some years later that if he were to write the book now he would describe events from the perspective of a white observer. This would, however, render Jimmy an object, and the reader is often surprised by occupying the role of subject in this book.

Thomas Keneally does create some wonderful scenes. Jimmy's shedding of blood is brutal, but is it any less brutal than the slaughter of thousands by the British? And in the end, did those with power treat their working class subjects any better than they treated Jimmy? Was the young white bride Jimmy took any better off than him by virtue of her species superiority?

Alongside Peter Carey's Kelly Gang and, from a factual perspective, Alan Moorehead's Fatal Impact, Jimmy Blacksmith provides a different and complementary insight. To experience the book's power, the modern

reader has to know something of Australia's history and, crucially, something of the 1970s attitudes that prevailed at the time of writing. Any shortcomings then pale into insignificance when compared with the novel's achievement.

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### **Michelle Heeter says**

If you live in Australia and like literary fiction, you must read this book. As a "new Australian," I was fascinated by the descriptions / explanations of Aboriginal culture. A beautifully written, truly great work.

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### **Lulu says**

This is a really good read and now I understand why Keneally is held in such high regard. The central theme of the novel is war - the whites are at war with the blacks and British rule (Federation looms as the novel's backdrop), whilst the blacks are at war with themselves as their culture is subverted by the dominate white rule. And of course poor Jimmie who is at war with himself. Jimmie is displaced as he neither identifies with his clan nor the whites but not through lack of trying and his ultimate response to this is probably understandable.

Although I'm sure that Keneally isn't an authority on Indigenous culture and beliefs, I do believe that his interpretations are probably quite close to the truth. I particularly like the scene where Jimmie and co come across the ritual 'womb' of another clan and both the blacks and the white (without giving too much away) are strongly affected and try to undo the damage but failed which to me is significant as at the time this novel was published in the 1970s, the Australian Govt was attempting to "undo" the damage that 190 yrs of white settlement had caused but as time would show, all of their strategies and initiatives were as useless as Jimmie & friends trying to restore the ceremonial site. Keneally's novel reflects the truth of the situation, that these two cultures cannot co-exists rather white culture has and will destroy the other.

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### **Liz says**

This book was very impressive. It didn't contain any of the 'poor aborigine' condescencion that usually occurs when a white person writes about the struggles of Indigenous life; the lack of white mans guilt writing was very refreshing.

What struck a chord with me most deeply was the idea that if you are not part of the status quo, no matter how hard you try to fit in, you will never be rewarded with the spoils of the status quo. The ideal life is held out to everyone as what you should aspire to, but the cruel trick is, that life is set aside for the very few. And for those that try so hard to attain, if you are not born into it, or do not fit the part, you will spend your whole life cruelly chasing the carrot, a carrot you shall never possess. And for those that lash out in frustration, they will be punished severely. Although this story was specifically about the plight of a young half caste trying to have the spoils of the white man, this moral can apply to anyone trying to 'rise above their station'



Definitely worth the read, the movie is pretty good too. It has that 1970's Australian charm to it.

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### **Chana says**

Certainly gives a person a lot to think about. The Australian history between the whites and the aboriginals is very painfully tragic and the story of Jimmie Blacksmith lays that tragedy out before us. All sides in this book were both victims and perpetrators. I was struck with sorrow for all of them.

According to the back cover, this book is based on a true incident. Jimmie Blacksmith is a half breed, born of a black mother and white father, a very common occurrence I am sure, as it also was in the U.S. He is raised in both tribal ways through his family and Christian ways through the local minister. Confused, part of both and neither, angry at injustices and demands on both sides he marries a white woman who delivers a baby that is not his.

He works hard and honestly and is cheated of his wages to the point of starvation. What money he does get is claimed by aboriginal relatives to buy liquor.

Jimmie gets murderously mad and he and his uncle commit horrific murders, Jimmie and his brother continue the murders. They are fugitives, Jimmie has declared war.

Very disturbing, heartbreakingly sad.

One of the most affecting scenes is when Jimmie, his brother Mort and the white school teacher that they are holding hostage go to a tribal site of ritual circumcision. How the three of them react, how they try to make repairs and fail; it was for me the saddest and most powerful scene in this book which is full of sad and powerful scenes.

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### **Girish says**

The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith is a slightly fictionalised account about Australia's first Aboriginal outlaw (Jimmie Governor). Kenneally leaves no stone upturned in making a story out of a piece of history- the way he handled Schindler's Ark.

Jimmie Blacksmith is a half-black aborigine whose tribal resignation and faith in Emu-Wren's spirit is outweighed by his Methodist upbringing under the tutelage of Mr.Neville. He harbors the hope of owning land, marrying a white woman and becoming an equal in the 1900 society just around the time Australia became a federation. When he marries a white woman, both the natives and the whites put him down till his spirit can take the injustice no more.

Leading to a series of brutal murders, Jimmie Blacksmith along with his poor brother Mort, who is loyal to his half brother as a fellow spirit of Emu-Wren, are constantly ahead of their pursuers making them outlaws with a reward. As a side commentary we also have opinions of the proposed Australian federation, the hangman's position in the society, the Boers war in South Africa and the prejudices and exploitation of the 'settlers' against the natives.

The book takes on an almost non-judgmental tone all through the book and hence we see the moment of

madness with a clarity normally impossible for brutal crimes. One would need a stomach to digest the gruesomeness - not just the murders but the snapping of spirit. Actual snippets from the newspapers of the time describing the sentiments at various stages of the manhunt made for interesting reading.

The book is written in simple English and looking at the number of reviews, a little known treasure.

Gritty read!

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## **Ryan says**

### The Good:

This book is haunting. It's incredibly well written (and here I mean fancy prose) with a desperate cast of tragic human beings and amazing sense of time and place (northern New South Wales around the time of Federation).

### The Bad:

The portrayal of the protagonist is about as apologetic as anyone could hope, yet he still isn't exactly sympathetic. This is somewhat mitigated by the provision of sympathetic peripheral characters. The story also sort of fizzles toward the end.

### 'Friends' character the protagonist is most like:

Jimmie spends his life trying to conform to a prejudiced society only to suffer continued humiliation. He is most like Ross (view spoiler).

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## **Chaitra says**

I've only read Keneally's *Schindler's List* prior to this book. While I like the subject matter quite a bit, it was a chore to read. There was no flow and it was a bit too long. So when I had to read *Chant*, I was understandably wary.

But this is a good one. Both the subject, that of one Jimmie Governor of real life, who went on a killing spree in the early days of the 20th century and the pacing and length. I don't read much by way of Australian fiction, so the subject was new to me. Kind of depressingly familiar given colonialism isn't exactly new to me, but still the specifics of subjugation of the native population apparently varied from place to place.

It also made me slightly sick to the stomach, because Jimmie undoubtedly was ill treated by the ignorant and arrogant white population, but he also went on a murderous rampage, leading his uncle and brother into it. Poor Jimmie, but also not. Also nice that Keneally just finished writing it when he did, because he himself maintains he wouldn't dare to do it now. Good stuff. I'm finally looking forward to reading *Confederates*.

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## **Sarah Josie says**

This book was loosely based on the Breelong Murders. I am a descendant of the Mawbeys aka the Newbys that we're murdered by Jimmy Governor aka Jimmy Blacksmith. I hav done quite a bit of research on the

Breelong Murders and I found this book insulting to my family and to upstanding aboriginal citizens. Jimmy Governor was a violent man and became brain damaged in a pub brawl as someone hit him over the head with a brick. He wasn't torn apart at all. Yes people mocked him not just my family but I too was mocked in my life and it never drove me to murder. I also found the book boring and stupid. I would not read any other of Thomas Keneally's books. He changed the names so he couldn't pay my family royalties and insulted us while doing it. None of the Maybeys appreciate this book.

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## **Zuberino says**

In July 1900, in New South Wales, two aborigines, Jimmy Governor and his brother, violently revenged themselves for injuries done to them by their white employers. With ingenuity and courage, they evaded their pursuers for five months in the mountains south of Brisbane...

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The novelist Thomas Keneally, then still only in his mid-30s and not widely known outside his native land, took this real-life story from the Australian past and fashioned out of it a sweeping epic of vengeance and pursuit. One wonders how it was received on publication, as Keneally holds up an unflinching mirror to white racism and hypocrisy which, to be sure, must have been practically inevitable when confronted with a civilization seemingly as 'primitive' as that of the Aborigines. There is double daring in his inhabiting the cosmology of a half-breed Aborigine as he goes through his wronged life, only to explode in rage in the end, with rifle and axe in hand. Throughout, with his jagged cadences, Keneally evokes the rugged majesty of the Australian landscape, its mountains, forests and plains, defying all the puny attempts of the white settlers to tame it, a land more mythological than real. The narrative voice is oblique, knowing, lurching between irony and pity and outrage, quite defying my flailing attempts at description or classification.

Above all, there is the miraculous sense of compression that Keneally achieves with his many-voiced narrative: how else to explain the fact that a book that comes in at less than 180 pages leaves you feeling like you have tussled with a monumental epic, leaving you with that same feeling of understanding, illumination, exhaustion? I have yet to read his magnum opus *Schindler's List* but on the evidence of this book, there is much to look forward to in his entire oeuvre.

P.S. Here is the controversial movie version by Fred Schepisi:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTMLm...>

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