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Week 9 Reading

APA referencing

Grenville, K. (2008). *Searching for the secret river* (pp. 10–25). Text Publishing.

Referencing for family history

Grenville, Kate, *Searching for the secret river*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2008, pp. 10–25.

Walking for Reconciliation

about treaties and land rights?

The Bridge straddles Sydney Harbour, its northern foot a short walk from the house where I'd grown up, its southern foot beside Sydney Cove where the city itself had begun. In 1788, Captain Arthur Phillip, in charge of a fleet of ships full of convicts, had dropped anchor in that cove, run the Union Jack up a flagpole, and declared Britain the owner of the whole lot.

The Bridge had come to stand for Australia, the icon that identified us around the world. Traditionally much of what mattered in Australia had come from Britain. We were proud of the fact that the engineer in charge of building the Bridge—a great technical feat—was an Australian. We knew the history of its opening day in 1932. The premier was lifting the scissors to cut the ribbon when a man called de Groot, who disapproved of the premier's politics, galloped up and slashed the ribbon with his sword. It was a swashbuckling story that gave the Bridge a personality.

So the idea of having the Reconciliation Walk across the Bridge—with all its affectionate associations—was a potent one. The walk itself promised to be another big symbolic thing. Its aims were large and vague enough to make us feel cosy in spite of the bitter westerly wind. Everyone was smiling. We were all pretty pleased with ourselves.

We—myself and a friend and our children—strolled along the roadway with the crowd. I was thinking more about Mum than about reconciliation. She'd often told me her own story about the Bridge. She was a young pharmacist when it was to be opened, and had been given the afternoon off—a rare treat—to join the crowd walking across it. She claimed to have seen de Groot ride up on his horse with his sword held aloft.

May in Sydney is a cold windy month, and the morning of 28 May 2000 was colder and windier than usual. On that day, the Sydney Harbour Bridge was closed to traffic and, along with 200,000 other people in beanies and scarves, I walked across it to show that I supported the idea of reconciliation between black and white Australians.

I'd have been hard pressed to say exactly what I thought reconciliation meant. It had something to do with what had gone on in Australia over the last 200 years: the violence, the taking-away of Aboriginal children from their parents, the fact that we descendants of Europeans lived on land that had once belonged to other people. Beyond that it was all uncertain: should we feel guilty, should we be talking compensation, what

She'd always said, though, that she might just have seen the picture in the paper the next day.

Almost at the end of the walk, on the southern end of the Bridge, I noticed a group of Aboriginal people leaning against the railings watching us. A couple of men with hats and spreading beards, two or three women with their skirts pressed against their legs in the wind. At the end of the row, a tall handsome woman frankly staring, as if to memorise each face. Our eyes met and we shared one of those moments of intensity—a pulse of connectedness. We smiled, held each other's gaze, I think perhaps we gestured with our hands, the beginning of a wave.

It should have made me feel even better about what I was doing, but it sent a sudden blade of cold into my warm inner glow.

This woman's ancestors had been in Australia for a long time. Sixty thousand years was the current figure. Her ancestors might have been living on the shores of Sydney Harbour when the First Fleet sailed in.

The blade I was feeling was the knowledge that my ancestor had been here too. Solomon Wiseman hadn't arrived on that first convoy, but he'd arrived within twenty years of it. His ship would have anchored in this bay. He'd have come ashore right underneath where an Aboriginal woman and I were exchanging smiles.

And what if *my* great-great-great grandfather had glanced up, and seen *her* great-great-great grandfather standing on a rock watching the new arrivals? I didn't know much about what had gone on between the Aboriginal people and the settlers in those early days. And yet I was sure that Solomon Wiseman wouldn't have smiled and waved at any Aboriginal man watching him come ashore.

I hadn't thought for years about that out-of-focus visit in my childhood to Wiseman's Ferry. Now, for the first time, I wondered what had happened when Wiseman had arrived there and started the business of 'settling'. Until this moment it had never occurred to me to wonder who might have been living on that land, and how he'd persuaded them to leave it.

In that instant of putting my own ancestor together with this woman's ancestor, everything swivelled: the country, the place, my sense of myself in it.

The wind had got stronger and colder as we'd walked. It was ruffling the harbour the wrong way, making the water a hard dull metal. I wanted to get away from it all now: the smiles, the benign feeling of doing the right thing, the shuffling crowd of people whose pleasure in the moment hadn't been sliced open.

I urgently needed to find out about that great-great-great grandfather of mine. I needed to know what he was like, and what he might have done when he crossed paths with Aboriginal people.

Until I knew that, it felt like nothing but wilful blindness—even hypocrisy—to go through the symbolic motions. The imagery of our walk, across a bridge, suddenly seemed all too easy. We were strolling towards reconciliation—what I had to do was cross the hard way, through the deep water of our history.

This is the story of what happened when I took the plunge and went looking for my own sliver of that history.

When the Reconciliation Walk took place, I'd just published my fifth novel, *The Idea of Perfection*. I hadn't yet started another.

This was unusual for me. In the past, the end of one book had always overlapped with the beginning of another. I had a horror of a gap, as if fearing that if I stopped writing I might never start again.

But this time there was no new novel on the horizon. I wondered if I'd written all that I had in me to write.

When I decided to look for Solomon Wiseman and his dealings with the Aboriginal people, I thought there might be a non-fiction book of some kind in the material—perhaps something like a biography of Wiseman and a portrait of his times. I didn't know what, if anything, I'd find, or whether there would be enough of interest for a book. This would be something I would do just for myself, because I needed to know.

Whenever Mum had told me the family stories about Solomon Wiseman and his descendants, I'd hardly listened, could never get the generations straight in my head, forgot the details.

But something of her passion to keep those stories alive must have conveyed itself to me, because a few years before the Bridge walk I'd sat down with her and recorded the stories into my cassette player.

When our two children were babies, Mum minded them a couple of days a week so that their father, Bruce, and I could work. They loved going to her place because she truly believed in children *playing*, in them finding their own play. One day either Tom or Alice got hold of a roll of toilet paper and when I came to pick them up it was everywhere, looped around the backs of the chairs, winding in and out of the stair-*rails*, out the window and back again. Mrs Next-Door had visited, apparently, and was scandalised.

'But,' Mum told me, 'I said to her, what toy could you ever buy that would keep a child so interested?'

I'd arrive at her house in the morning, and she'd have made me sandwiches and a thermos, as she did when I was at school. I'd drive off, park in a quiet spot overlooking the harbour, and get into the back seat with one of the children's keyboards across my lap by way of a desk. It was a fine way to work: the children happy with their Granny, the thermos and sandwiches a comfort, and that stunning view. I did some good work there.

The children were unpredictable sleepers, and when I got back they'd sometimes be napping in the pram that Mum called The Magic Box. Mum and I would have a cup of tea while we took it in turns to wiggle the pram and keep the baby asleep. Now and then I'd get out the little cassette recorder and ask her to tell me the family stories again.

She was unafraid of the machine, unself-conscious about being taped. She spoke easily, telling those well-worn stories one more time. I got her to tell me about Solomon Wiseman, and then about the generations between him and us. For each generation there were a few vivid stories: the newly arrived Cockney boy who had to drive three rams from one end of Goonoo Goonoo Station to the other—'without a dog!'; Granny Davis, who always had a gun loaded in the corner of the hut on account of the blacks: 'not to use it, just to show them she had it'. Auntie Rose, who had shared one pair of boots with her four sisters 'so they could never all go into town at the same time'.

About her own life she was less comfortable. There were regrets, mistakes, loneliness, deaths and divorces. Her voice lost its confidence, the words grew dull. I had to prompt her

with questions, but she didn't always want to answer. 'I don't really remember,' she'd say, and we'd move on.

I'd never played those tapes back, but a few days after the walk I got them out and began to listen. Mum was older and frailer now: the tapes reminded me how strong she'd once been. In the background a child would grizzle from time to time and I could be heard going *shhh, shhhhh*. It was good to hear Mum laugh as she told the story about herself as a girl, putting castor oil on her eyelashes to make them grow.

You could hear in her voice the pleasure she took in telling the Wiseman story once more, knowing that this time it was being recorded. Hearing it again, I realised that, although I thought I'd forgotten every detail, at some level I knew it by heart:

Solomon Wiseman was born in London and worked on the docks. He married, and for some offence we don't know of, he was transported to Sydney, arriving in 1806 on the *Alexander*. I've heard that he was a smuggler, but I don't know for sure. His wife accompanied him, which suggests money. He was not only freed but given a grant of land at what is now called Wiseman's Ferry. He started the ferry, made money, built the hotel that's still there—the two lions at the gate were brought especially for the house from England. His first wife died and he married a local girl and had a number of children, one of whom was called Sarah Catherine, my great-grandmother. Strong rumour was that he killed this first wife by throwing her down some stairs. Her ghost is supposed to haunt the place.

Solomon Wiseman was said to be an extremely cruel man. He had a number of assigned convicts to work for

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him. It is said he had a big rock on his property, which was called Judgment Rock and he used to sit there in judgment on offenders. Even in a harsh and cruel age perhaps he was cruel—the fact remains he was hated and feared. Not that that prevented a rather flowery obituary from being published.

Sol had a number of children by his second wife and by this time he would have been well off, sufficiently so to give his daughters a riding master. My Auntie Rose—and I think my mother too—told the story of one of these girls being seduced by the riding master, becoming pregnant and being thrown out of the house. They thought both she and the baby died and you could hardly marvel at it—what would a girl do in those terrible days?

This story had been passed down the family from Granny Davis, through Granny Maunder and Auntie Rose and at last to my mother. Mum always used exactly the same phrases each time she told it. The story was like a little sealed capsule that couldn't be jarred open with questions.

I was glad it was there, though. It was like Grandma's sideboard that had sat out in the hall in our house throughout my childhood. Its drawers smelt of mothballs, the top was marked with a blue stain in the shape of Tasmania, its wooden handles were cracked. But when I looked at it I saw a penumbra of associations, memories, stories. That was what made it precious. Mum's version of Solomon was solid like that sideboard, even though its details could seem foggy and unreal. It gave me a sense that my ship was anchored to the past by ropes of story.

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