



LOST AND FOUND: Looking back at *Wake in Fright*

In 1970, *Hilton Ambler* attended one of the first screenings of Ted Kotcheff's *Wake in Fright* – the story of a young schoolteacher trapped in a nightmarish version of the Australian outback. With the film now restored and re-released after decades in its own wilderness, Ambler looks at the cultural milieu that gave rise to this curiously hybrid film set in Australia.

DURING the waning years of the 1960s, film studios and distributors over-invested in British film musicals in the false belief that they were magic money-machines.¹ Simultaneously, another false belief drove British and American producers to waste readers' and script editors' efforts at the London offices of the big American studios, with proposals for uncommercial art movies. International exchange rates aggravated cash-flow problems – the mighty dollar had lost ground to the pound sterling. London had become too expensive, so in July 1969 five of the big American studios rationalised their operations and closed their offices there. Jobs were lost and with many out-of-work film technicians migrating to Australia, London's misfortune became Australia's gain.

In this milieu, Ted Kotcheff, the director of *Wake in Fright* (1971) set out from Wardour Street² and inadvertently helped to fertilise the ground for the 1970s revival in the Australian feature film industry. However, the very same milieu in which *Wake in Fright* was created needs to be carefully considered before entering the film into the national canon of revival cinema. While it looks and sounds Australian, it had a Canadian director working from a screenplay by a Jamaican scriptwriter, Evan Jones, and the production was financed by EMI – a British company. George Willoughby, its producer, was a Norwegian with Australian and British business holdings, but his film production career had been focused mostly in the United States. Yet, strangely, these details have failed to detract from the status of *Wake in Fright* as a divergent and original Australian cultural product.

Writing Australian gothic

Wake in Fright is a cinematic adaptation of a book of the same name from Australian novelist Kenneth Cook. It tells the story of John Grant, a young teacher in outback Australia on his way home to Sydney. Missing his train, he becomes stranded in the rough mining town of Bundanyabba. Greed leads him to gamble and lose all of his holiday money in one throw of two-up; the hotel evicts him and confiscates his luggage when he can't pay his bill. Taken in by an alcoholic and disbarred doctor, Grant partakes in myriad debauched activities that lead to his inevitable physical degradation and psychological breakdown.

Australian intellectual precursors of the novel *Wake in Fright* are hard to find. 'Social critique' is an inadequate term to describe this city-dweller's view of Australian outback culture; in any case it is only the frame for another kind of picture. Cook had no ideological axe to grind: the attraction of his book as a film story was its genre – the uniquely Australian literature of fright that the academic critic Ken Gelder calls Australian Gothic, where wandering from the beaten path can be a nightmare in which failure to pay attention is life-threatening. The genre embraces a wide range of cultural texts, including almost the entire cinematic output of George Miller, Fred Schepisi and Peter Weir during the 1970s.

However, it is impossible to deny that British literary fashions had a generational influence on the content of Cook's novel. In the writing of coeval British social realists Margaret Drabble and John Braine, socio-political critique underpins stories about common folk leading average lives. The related kitchen-sink fiction was similarly rooted in the expectations of low-profile citizens among whom the rich would have appeared like members of a little-known and degenerate species.³ In *Wake in Fright*, Cook's protagonist is a young man cynically disaffected by the society in which he finds himself; so is Joe Lambton, the hero of John Braine's novel *Room at the Top* (1957). These generational attitudes were not mere fashion accessories, and they can't be ignored.

While John Braine was still learning when he wrote *Room at the Top*, Kenneth Cook's writing in *Wake in Fright* displays the fluent skills of a professional journalist. He gives us essential information when we need it, just enough, in lucid and economical prose; he presents

his characters with enough personal history to enable us to visualise them as more than cardboard cutouts. This is a polished mode of writing, adept at the techniques of compression essential to journalism, short-story writing or in screenplays, but thumbnail brevity is not usually admired as a virtue in the writing of novels. As in a film scenario, his text describes the settings for its action. However it is neat, workmanlike and devoted to events – not to character, or deep introspection – with much contrivance in the manner in which the hero, John Grant, makes the acquaintance of the people who are needed to flesh out his narrative. The people in this tale come to us with very small histories. When John Grant needs a gun to shoot himself with, some miner – who has previously made no effort to disguise his disdain for the young nerd – has given him one, plus a pocketful of ammunition. This sleight-of-hand is the mark of an angry young man's allegory. His narrative has no obligations save the one: to simulate moral outrage by whatever means the author thinks best. The moral high ground belongs more to the author than to John Grant, who only comes across as weak – not a man's man. Any thin-skinned urbanite might feel threatened by the 'drunken bums'⁴ Cook so damns for their awfulness in *Wake in Fright* but they also have a mystical dimension. The phantasms and physicality of an allegorical text such as this one are not best conveyed in realistic imagery. This place sits on the perilous border between dream and reality, a mining town called Bundanyabba,⁵ described in a string of images that dwell on its desolation, the train station as the blessed point of exit, its multiplicity of pubs, the profanity of its denizens' behaviour and language, and their seemingly non-stop drinking.

The novel is short and the loose behaviour described in its pages made it an obvious choice for a film that showed the renowned larrikin nature of Australia. Its real subject, underpinning the whole structure of the narrative, was not the horror and fear of the unknown; it was the urban Australian baby-boomer's fastidious dislike of rural jobs. Cook subsequently became an employee of the ABC; he also had his own company, making nature documentaries and children's films and he had served his cadetship as a newspaper reporter in several Australian country towns. This is essential knowledge in appraising his text, as is the knowledge that he was embarrassed by his country.



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Wake in Fright is a tight-lipped critique of a society where it is permissible to corrupt a man's daughter, seduce his wife or vomit on his carpet. Refusal to drink with a man, even when he is paying for the booze, is the only social transgression for which there is no pardon. Social realism has given us a leading man who is bully-bait and a moral weakling. With a character like John Grant as the juvenile lead, Cook's novel reads like box office poison and, furthermore, reduces the likelihood of star-power casting. Cook's novel poses a conundrum for the adapter aiming to maximise their script's profitability. On the one hand, the novel is perfectly suited to work as a screenplay, on the other, its content and characterisation appear unmarketable.

Internationalising the outback

Wake in Fright was first published in the UK in 1961, in interesting circumstances. It was not Cook's first novel. He had written one before this, based on transcripts of a court case, which Hodder & Stoughton were all set to publish when the mayor of Rockhampton threatened them with a libel suit; though it was already printed Hodder withdrew the book. Cook – a young father of four – had given up his day job and left Australia on the strength of this one book contract, to live the writer's life in Europe. He was running short of money and had to write his way out of a hole; with no time for niceties and embroidery, he did it in three

weeks – an eye-witness, close-to-the-bone account of hateful experience. *Wake in Fright* was picked up by another publisher, Michael Joseph, and the American director, Joe Losey, bought an option on the film rights.⁶

Losey, one of the best-regarded American *avant garde* directors working in London, had intended casting Dirk Bogarde as John Grant in his movie and he commissioned a screenplay from Evan Jones. However, Losey didn't exercise his option and the rights reverted to Cook, along with ownership of Jones' screenplay – a considerable windfall. After returning in disappointment to Melbourne, Cook made contact with the very successful author, Morris West, who paid him a small sum for an option on *Wake in Fright*, with a handsome 8.5 per cent of the profits. West promptly exercised the option, then walked around the corner and sold the package to NML – a company in which George Willoughby had an interest.

In a recorded interview with oral historian Hazel de Berg, Cook said he netted only about \$6000 out of the sketchy memorandum of agreement he'd signed with Morris West, and West had pocketed \$50,000 for doing nothing.⁷ EMI bought the package from NML, and commissioned the film under the chief proviso that it should have an international star in a leading role, to attract an international audience.⁸ They chose the British actor Donald Pleasance to play the role of the sinister and reprehensible 'Doc' Tydon, and this casting was only the first of many alterations that would inevitably compromise the movie's power as an introspective critique of Australian society. The entirely foreign creative production team engaged in the making of this film refashions the novel's original intentions and *raison d'être*. Ted Kotcheff had been commissioned to make a movie-length feature with UK and American television rights in mind and that's what he did. A Canadian who had left home to further his career in film, Kotcheff was one of the most bankable young directors in London by the time he took on directing *Wake in Fright*. But in order to slant the story for its intended market, the Sydney character John Grant was changed into an Englishman, gaining teaching experience at a school in the remote outback. Kotcheff cast a good-looking, well-made young English-

ALL IMAGES FROM *WAKE IN FRIGHT*

man in the role of the Aussie man-boy of the book. This transformation – wimp to handsome hunk – distorts the author’s intention, but in movies commercial good sense comes first. Interestingly, although perhaps not surprisingly, Cook didn’t like Gary Bond in the role of John Grant. The casting represents the kind of hard-nosed decision producers and directors must make in adapting a book for the screen. And while the two leading roles were awarded to foreigners, it feels like the Australians cast – including Jack Thompson and Chips Rafferty – were only there as local colour, literally, because they could speak the language.

While *Wake in Fright* has been praised for its uncompromisingly honest view of outback people, the film is more suggestive of a foreigner’s perspective than of Cook’s own national critique. One explanation could be that this is due to the fact that neither the author of the screenplay nor Ted Kotcheff, as the director of the film, had the interest of the Australian society, or its domestic audience at heart. Kotcheff’s creative team were viewing Australia from the outside, professionals with no links to a place where they were going to shoot a movie on location.

It is worth noting too, that although the kitchen-sink and social realist schools of writing were the reigning fashion in the UK at that time, the novel *Wake in Fright* was prickly and unusual in both a British and an Australian context. Although Willoughby had done a great deal of his work as a producer in the US, a movie of the kind that came out of Kenneth Cook’s novel, with its harsh criticisms, would have been seen as unpatriotic, and a financial gamble. Indeed it was. Kenneth Cook depicted in this work a candid loathing for outback culture⁹ and Australians did not like it. The film was not a commercial success in Australia and NML went broke.

Masculinity, sexuality and censorship

Men behaving badly in country Australia is a theme that crops up again and again; for example, we see it once more in Jack Thompson’s starring role in the feature film *Sunday Too Far Away* (Ken Hannam, 1975), and yet again in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliot, 1994). In David Williamson’s vernacular plays it was always hard to find any urban man behaving well. A cast member in *Don’s Party* (Bruce Beresford, 1976) said that when Williamson came along, Australian actors had to get

used to performing with a beer in one hand. It is inferred that all the blokes at this party will shed their pants eventually in a game of wife-swapping, out of boozy bravado if not lust.

The sexual content of *Wake in Fright* involved tricky aesthetic decisions for the filmmakers. Kenneth Cook’s novel follows the demure literary conventions of the time: a model of clarity when describing horrible events and reprehensible behaviour, but so elliptical in the way it skirts around non-erotic and brutish sex activity in private that it is a wonder anybody could ever work out what happened. In the novel, Cook uses coy, opaque and circumlocutory language to describe and disguise Grant’s sexual encounter with Doc Tydon:

That was terrible. It should not have happened ... Tydon was a foul thing. But so was John Grant. Oh God, that light! ... And it went out. But what had happened before was terrible. It should not have happened ... It had happened twice.

and, two short paragraphs further down the page:

Then the tortures began to happen to him, approaching stealthily, penetrating deeply and swelling.

Nakedness and profanity were always easier done than said. This is true of mealy-mouthed language of the book but in the movie they did do it, wordlessly. Once unravelled and committed to celluloid, the rumpled passages quoted above turned into a scene that cut few corners. With its head-on approach to a taboo subject – male homosexuality – this full-frontal nude scene in the movie *Wake in Fright* was a frank and honest portrayal unusual to English-language, mainstream, commercial cinema. Without a hope of decoding the book’s account of the scene, the screenwriter and director had drawn inferences from the novel’s text and they put up on the screen as much as they dared of the homosexual rape.

However, what separates *Wake in Fright* from the other 160 films of the 1970s Australian revival, and suggests its status as a transnational (or perhaps even British) film, is the relative freedom the film experienced relating to censorship in *Australia*. That is, the majority of the ‘revival’ films convey an experience that suggests an overall picture of high-minded bureaucrats bucking show-

business trends, at odds with the nation’s artists and intellectuals. This is hindsight but not an entirely false view. For example, only two years earlier, the Gorton government banned *The Set* (Frank Brittain, 1969) Australia’s first gay movie, for export. This fact, while seemingly unrelated, contributes substantially to considering the nationality assigned to *Wake in Fright*. Much though they might have wished to do so, Australian censors would have been powerless to ban the export of this film. Although filmed in Australia, post-production in London suggests the film was wholly foreign owned and thus protected from Australian distribution laws.

A European perspective governed this project, arguably yielding both positive and negative results. While it meant that an account of Cook’s gothic-like tale of outback Bundanyabba could be produced on screen in a way that was as transgressive as the novel itself, the movie *Wake in Fright* subverts and distorts many of the key tropes that can be found in the novel – tropes that are essential for its qualification and inclusion into the national canon.

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Endnotes

- ¹ *Half a Sixpence* (George Sydney, 1967), *Dr. Dolittle* (Richard Fleischer, 1967), *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (Ken Hughes, 1968) and *Star* (Robert Wise, 1968).
- ² The centre of London’s film industry. Tony Richardson came from London, at the same time, to film his *Ned Kelly* starring Mick Jagger, but used an otherwise entirely local cast and crew.
- ³ Braine’s novel *Room at the Top* had sparked an iconoclastic left-wing arts movement. Ted Kotcheff was wired into this circuit and, significantly, he had directed the sequel to the movie version of *Room at the Top*, called *Life at the Top*.
- ⁴ His own words – from an interview with Cook recorded in April 1972 by Hazel de Berg, now in the archive of the National Library of Australia. The interview can be sourced from the National Library of Australia, <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/624025>.
- ⁵ Broken Hill, but remembering the threat of libel that shipwrecked his first novel, he changed the name.
- ⁶ Cook interview, op. cit.
- ⁷ *ibid.*
- ⁸ See *Wake in Fright*’s IMDb entry <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt006754>>. Go to User Comments for information from George Willoughby’s son.
- ⁹ Cook interview, op. cit.