

# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



**Thomas Keneally**

1935-  
Writer

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 9 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

**Australian Biography: Thomas Keneally**

**Director/Producer** Rod Freedman

**Executive Producer** Mark Hamlyn

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Also in Series 9: Betty Churcher, Marjorie Jackson-Nelson, Bill Mollison,  
Bernard Smith, Charles 'Bud' Tingwell, Joan Winch

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## SYNOPSIS

Thomas Keneally is one of Australia's most popular and prolific writers, having published more than 30 novels, dramas, screenplays and books of non-fiction. He is also one of its most distinguished. He has twice received the Miles Franklin Award and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times before winning for **Schindler's Ark**, later made into an Academy Award winning film. His novel **The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith** is an Australian classic.

Born in 1935 into an Irish Catholic family, Tom spent his early years in country towns of northern NSW before moving to the Sydney suburb of Homebush. He wanted desperately to be good at sport but, as an asthmatic child, spent much of his time on the sidelines reading. As a young man, he studied for the priesthood for six years but left just before ordination, suffering a nervous collapse. From 1960, he worked as a schoolteacher, coached football and studied law part time. His first novel was published in 1964, yet only after his third novel **Bring Larks and Heroes** did he see writing as a full-time career.

Married with two children, Tom is also widely known as the founding chairman of the Australian Republican Movement and as an obsessive rugby league fan whose conversation is punctuated with a rich and memorable chuckle.

Describing himself as a free-thinking hedonist, garrulous to a fault, in this interview Tom talks about his childhood, the church, sex and the seminary, and what it means for him to be a writer.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, English Literature, Media Studies, Personal Development, Australian Studies and Australian History.

## ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

### The Film: Story of a Life

- Did you know anything about Thomas Keneally prior to watching this film? If so, has watching this film changed your opinion of him in any way?
- Does your impression of Tom shift over the course of the film?
- Does this film leave you with any questions about Tom?
- The filmmakers intercut shots of Tom responding to questions posed by interviewer, Robin Hughes, with occasional photos and archival footage. Choose four family photos from different periods of your life and use them to construct a series of autobiographical snapshots. Who is in each photo? Who took the photo? Where were you? What was the occasion? What was the mood? Does the photo correspond with your memory of the time? What has happened to the other people (if any) pictured in the photo? How have you changed since then? Do you like the photo? Why/why not?
- Tom shares a number of anecdotes from his life. Choose one of his stories and explain what it tells us about him. Imagine you could tell just one story from your childhood to convey a sense of you and your family. Write this story and then at the end, note what you think it reveals about you.

### Thomas Keneally: Garrulous to a Fault...

- Choose six adjectives to describe Thomas Keneally.
- List three qualities you like about him.
- Make a list of three questions you would ask Tom if you had the opportunity to interview him.
- There is a fundamental sense in which Tom's self-image is conflicted: 'I wavered between being a wimp and a muscular Australian. I was also a brat'. He admits that, above all, he wanted to be good at sport. He wanted to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, but he also wanted to be a champion rugby player. For Tom, 'Sport is the hero system with which I grew up, and I never got beyond it'. Does this passion for sport surprise you in a writer? Is sport important to you? Describe one of your sporting heroes. What is the social and cultural function of a hero? What do our heroes reveal about us? Who are some of your heroes?
- Thomas Keneally has been known as Michael, Mick, Thomas and Tom. What do all these names suggest about his identity? Do you have a nickname? How did it come about?
- Tom describes one of his earliest memories: riding on his grandfather's locomotive. What is your earliest memory?
- Tom speaks of 'that Jack Lang Labor tradition in me'. Who was Jack Lang?
- Keneally has been a member of the Australia Council Literature Board, a President of the National Book Council and a Chairperson of the Australian Society of Authors. He was also involved in establishing the Australian Republican Movement. What do you think these roles would have involved? What does his involvement in these various bodies suggest about his character?

### On Family and School

- Much of Tom's humour is self-deprecating. He speaks of being a premature baby and how his father, not a wealthy man, insisted on a private hospital for his delivery because of rumours that babies were being switched in the public hospitals. He laughs that perhaps it would have been better for his family if he had been swapped. Imagine you were exchanged with another baby at birth. Describe the family you grew up with and your 'real' family. What factor do you think plays a more important role in the development of character: nature or nurture?
- Tom's parents both left school after sixth grade. His mother felt deprived of further education and valued reading. She used to say a child with a book is never bored. Did either of your parents read to you as a child? What are your memories of this? Do you like to read now? What sort of books do you enjoy?
- Tom describes his father as a very loving man, an affectionate father and a splendid footballer, with a disposition towards fieriness. He says that temperamentally they were very different. How would you describe your father? Are you more like your mother or your father? In what ways?
- How does Tom describe himself and all the other children who had to endure their fathers' absences during World War Two?
- Tom enjoyed primary school but lists a number of problems: with ink, concepts, wheezing and nasal discharge—'There's nothing that can evoke the contempt of a smart five-year-old girl with neat homework like a continually running nose—I was a mucous licker!' What are your memories of primary school?

■ At high school, Tom had 'a strange and interesting set of friends', a mix of jocks and intellectuals. What group do you belong to? How easy is it to move between groups?

■ Tom says his friendship with a blind boy during high school was not entirely altruistic: 'Not all is altruism, even for Mother Teresa'. What does he mean? What other forces motivated him?

### The Pale Priest: 'As agnostic as one might be, they're listening you know!'

■ Tom's earliest memories of Catholicism are of the necessity of attending mass and nuns telling stories about going to hell. Have you been brought up in any church? What are your memories of this?

■ Tom says that when he entered the seminary at the age of 16, he was 'unrealistically idealistic'. Explain what he means by this.

■ Priests can be expected to adhere to vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Which one of these vows did Keneally find most challenging and ultimately impossible to respect?

■ Tom began to feel that his world had been too narrow when he made the decision to enter the church. He had a breakdown just prior to ordination, and left the Church feeling guilty and enraged. What in particular provoked this anger? Imagine you are Tom. Write a letter to the rector of your seminary, explaining your reasons for leaving the priesthood, your hopes for your future and your feelings about how you were treated on your departure.

■ After leaving the Church, Tom says that he felt like a fringe dweller. 'I gave up becoming the pale monk and became the free thinker, the hedonist, the garrulous person'. He sees a distinct break in his personality, even citing the year 1973 as a turning point where he began to recognise his true nature as 'Lord of Misrule', a voice for the outrageous. What forces might account for this sense that his 'real' nature had been suppressed? Do you believe in the idea of 'real nature', an authentic core of identity that can somehow be suppressed or misdirected? What is your 'real nature'?

■ Tom cites a joke about Methodists disapproving of sex because it might lead to dancing. Can you explain the idea at the heart of this joke?

### On Marriage and Parenting

■ Clearly, Keneally has a romantic disposition. He suggests that as a young man, he sublimated his sexual energy into something mystical and chivalrous, and that he had a strong sense of a woman out there who would be the other side of his soul. His impulse was to find that woman, and he finally met her over his mother's hospital bed. Her name was Judy and she was 'a very handsome nurse'. They shared similar backgrounds, both devout Catholics with an interest in social justice, both Labor supporters. How important is such common ground in a successful marriage? Do you believe in the idea of a soulmate?

■ Tom and Judy had two daughters soon after they were married. He says he liked parenthood, but it was very difficult. What do you think are some of the difficulties of parenting? He says both he and Judy brought emotional scars to their family life, and that he was haunted by an unalloyed sense of failure. Why might he have felt like this? Do you think we all have emotional scars?

■ On being a father, Tom says children 'will forgive you any imperfection. They just want you to like them'. Do you agree? He says children introduced some sanity into his life. As Tom puts it,

writing is basically an obsessive, solitary activity—the more you do it, the more slightly mad you get'. Why might writing make you go 'slightly mad'? How might children impact on this process?

### The Writer: 'The beginning of a novel is a belief that the world really needs this book'

■ During his childhood, Tom's asthma necessitated spending time on the sidelines, and gave him the opportunity to read. He became hooked on 'the tricks of narrators'. He says, 'Reading is the grand liberator'. What can reading liberate you from? Give an account of a book that has special meaning for you.

■ Tom says that writers look back and usually see themselves as the children on the outer. He remembers himself as a 'weird, eccentric kid'. 'It's the children on the side of the playground who become the dangerous writers. The children in the centre do constructive things'. Do you think Tom really thinks writing is not constructive? Why do you think so many writers perceive themselves as outsiders?

■ Describing himself as 'some yobbo, some failed priest from Homebush', Tom calls his aspiration to write an outrageous, satanic assumption. Why might it have been considered outrageous for someone like Tom to embark on a career as a writer? What stereotypical ideas about writers does Tom challenge?

■ Tom says Catholicism is suspicious of writing, because with free expression comes the threat of heresy. What is heresy? Do you agree with Tom about the threat posed by writing? In what ways might his religious upbringing have shaped his writing? He says that from an early age, he 'believed in the power of the word and the word made flesh'. How does this connect with the teachings of the Catholic Church?

■ As a teenager, Tom was fascinated by the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a former Jesuit. Choose a poem by Hopkins and present it to the class.

■ Tom was drawn to writing and to the church, perhaps because both offered a forum for drama. What other parallels can you suggest between the daily life of a writer and a priest?

■ Tom describes writing as both a release and a means of claiming a place in society. What is it that writing releases? Publication gave him a new sense of social confidence. He speaks of his first novel as being a 'life raft', and he felt a 'weird determination to cling to it'. What do you think writing saved him from? He says, 'I couldn't live without writing. I will always be able to fill the void with it'. What do you think writing gives Tom? Is there anything you feel you cannot live without? What is the void to which Keneally refers?

■ Tom says his early work has a 'haunted quality'. What was he haunted by?

■ 'The best book is the one I'm writing. It's the one about which you harbour the most delusions', says Tom. To what sort of delusions is he referring?

■ What qualities are evident in this interview that might account for Tom's talent as a writer?

■ In 1977, Keneally was sued for plagiarism by Bill Stratton, who claimed that Tom's novel, *A Victim of the Aurora*, bore a close resemblance to his work, *The Island of Terrible Friends*. What can you discover about this incident?

■ Choose one of Tom's many books, and present a review of it to the class. How would you characterise his style of writing?

- Tom describes himself as a 'journeyman writer'. What does this mean?

### Schindler's Ark

In 1982, Tom won the Booker Prize for his novel, **Schindler's Ark**, which was later made into a film by Steven Spielberg. He says, 'It's not my best book, but it's probably my most famous. In many ways, it's not my most characteristic'. What drew him to the character of Oscar Schindler? Read the book or watch the film and write a review.

- The success of **Schindler's Ark** made Keneally into something of a celebrity, but he says, 'You're not a celebrity to those who really know you'. Imagine you are Tom's wife, Judy. Write an account from her perspective of the impact this public acclaim has had on Tom and their life together.
- Why didn't Spielberg like Tom's screenplay for **Schindler's List**?
- Some critics claim **Schindler's Ark** is 'faction'. What does this term mean?

### Australia: Country of Contradictions

- Tom says that while travelling overseas, he came to mythologise certain aspects of the Australian character. For him, the Australian type is: humorous, forthright, unconventional, strong, vigorous and upright. Make a list of six qualities that you see as key to a particular type of Australian character. Tom goes on to say that this mythologised figure conceals 'dark things', which for him are: an undue reverence for foreign authority; the lack of confidence to have our own head of state; and an essential ambiguity about whether we are robust or vulnerable. What would your list of 'dark things' at the heart of Australian identity include? Do you think Australia should be a republic? Devise three reasons for and three against.
- Tom says that Australia sees itself in two distinct ways. One image is of the rock-jawed digger or lifesaver—young, vigorous, unafraid of foreign tyrants. The other is of a delicate white maiden—timorous and threatened by strangeness, a strangeness embodied by Asians and Muslims who she fears will violate her. Do you agree with these images? Invent two figures that capture a sense of Australian identity as you experience it.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

### Works by Thomas Keneally: Novels

The Place at Whitton, 1964  
 The Fear, 1965  
 Bring Larks and Heroes, 1967  
 Three Cheers for the Paraclete, 1968  
 The Survivor, 1969  
 A Dutiful Daughter, 1971  
 The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith, 1972  
 Blood Red, Sister Rose, 1974  
 Gossip from the Forest, 1975  
 Season in Purgatory, 1976  
 A Victim of the Aurora, 1977  
 Passenger, 1979  
 Confederates, 1979  
 The Cut-Rate Kingdom, 1980  
 Schindler's Ark, 1982  
 A Family Madness, 1985  
 The Playmaker, 1987

By the Line, 1989  
 Towards Asmara, 1989  
 Flying Hero Class, 1991  
 Woman of the Inner Sea, 1993  
 Jacko, 1993  
 A River Town, 1995  
 Bettany's Book, 2000  
 The Tyrant's Novel, 2003

### Works by Thomas Keneally Under the Pseudonym of William Coyle

Act of Grace, 1988  
 Chief of Staff, 1991

### Works by Thomas Keneally: Non-Fiction

Moses the Lawgiver, 1975  
 Outback, 1983  
 Australia: Beyond the Dreamtime, 1987  
 The Place Where Souls Are Born: A Journey to the Southwest, 1992  
 Now and In Time Be: Ireland and the Irish, 1992  
 Memoirs From A Young Republic, 1993  
 The Utility Player: The Des Hasler Story, 1993  
 Our Republic, 1995  
 Homebush Boy: A Year in the Life of Thomas Keneally, 1995  
 The Great Shame, 1998  
 American Scoundrel, 2002

### Works by Thomas Keneally: Children's Literature

Ned Kelly and the City of Bees, 1978

### Works by Thomas Keneally: Drama

Halloran's Little Boat, 1967  
 Childermas, 1968  
 An Awful Rose, 1972  
 Bullie's House, 1981

### Works by Thomas Keneally: Screenplays

Libido, 1973  
 The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith, 1978  
 Silver City, 1984

### Websites

January Magazine Interview—Thomas Keneally  
[www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/keneally.html](http://www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/keneally.html)  
 Keneally discusses **The Great Shame** and **Schindler's Ark/List** in a Q&A with Linda Richards.

### Videos

**The Bookshow: Australian Writers**, written and produced by Andrea Stretton and Dinny O'Hearn, SBS, Australia, 1994  
**This is Thomas Keneally**, interviewed by John Harper Nelson, Perth, Christensen Fund, 1987.

### Other Books

Ian Jack (ed), **Australia: The New World**, Granta, London, 2000  
 Peter Quartermain, **Thomas Keneally**, Edward Arnold, London, 1991