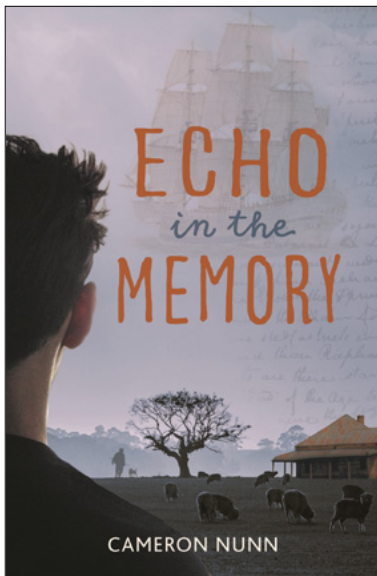


BOOK CLUB NOTES

ECHO *in the* MEMORY

CAMERON NUNN



FOR READERS AGED 13+
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PAPERBACK

What if memories never die? An evocative Australian YA novel about family, place, and how history has a way of weaving itself into our present.

What if memories never die? When fifteen-year-old Will is sent away to stay with his grandparents in rural New South Wales, he finds the isolated farm strangely familiar -- except the memories he's channelling are not his own. So whose are they? And what does his grandfather know? As two stories unfold, nearly two hundred years apart, two boys exiled to what feels like the end of the earth struggle to find their identities and voices in the face of abandonment and tragedy. A page-turning YA novel that explores the darker moments of our convict past and how they resonate today.



About the Author

Cameron Nunn is an English and History teacher in Western Sydney, where he lives with his wife Belinda. He has a PhD from Macquarie University in child convicts and was awarded the NSW Premier's History teacher's scholarship to research child convicts in the archives in London. *Echo in the Memory* is the result of that research. Cameron's first novel, *Shadows in the Mirror* is also available from Walker Books.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Echo in the Memory is told through two different voices, one in the past through first person narration, and one in the present told through third person. How did the different perspectives affect you as a reader? How did the writing style change? Did you find yourself connecting to one character more than another? Why or why not?

The novel begins with an epigraph from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quarters*. How does this quote relate to the events of *Echo in the Memory*, and why do you think Cameron Nunn borrowed from it for the title of the book?

How are right and wrong presented in the novel? Are some characters presented purely as 'good' or 'bad' or are there shades of grey in everyone? Did you find yourself forgiving some characters for their actions easier than others?

Although in completely different eras, both main characters are at a crossroads in their lives. What's similar or different about the issues they face in the novel and how each of the boys approaches solving them?

In the present timeline, what narrative and textual strategies does Cameron Nunn use to weave the fantastical element of Will's memories in with reality?

How does *Echo in the Memory* shine a light on the convict experience? Did you learn anything that surprised you?

The attitude and actions towards Aboriginal people in the past timeline can be confronting to read. Do you think it's important for us to know and understand how Aboriginal people were treated in the past? Why or why not?

Both timelines are primarily set in the same location: Bymedura. In what ways is the land important to each of the protagonists and why?

There are many moments of sadness and loss in the novel – including Will leaving behind his home in the past and the deaths of Will's mother and grandfather in the present. How do different characters in the novel work through their grief? Is there a right or wrong way to process it?

How does *Echo in the Memory* explore the topic of mental health? What impact does his family's struggles with mental health have on Will?

What did you think of the ending? Were you surprised that Will and his grandfather were connected to the memories of their relative? Why or why not?

Q&A WITH CAMERON NUNN

What was your research process for writing the book? Was it challenging to write authentic dialogue for characters like the unnamed boy and Amos?

When I first wrote the book, the convict voices bore no resemblance to the way nineteenth-century Londoner's spoke, so I began to search for information and that led me to 'accidentally' starting a PhD on child convicts. I received a scholarship from the NSW Premier to research in the archives in London. There I came across a whole series of interviews that had been taken down in the 1830 by a magistrate who wanted to understand why so many boys were committing crimes. Their stories were fascinating but one of the things that interested me the most was the way they spoke, their slang, their word choice, the way they formed ideas and their imagery and expressions. I read them aloud over and over, until I felt I could hear their voices and the way they spoke. That became the basis for my characters. The more I learnt, the more I realized how un-historical the book had been. As soon as I finished my PhD, I rewrote the whole novel with as much detail for history as the story allowed. The decision to make Amos a storyteller was a device to enable the boy to express ideas with more metaphoric language and imagery than convict boys would have used.

Why do you think it's important for kids to read stories set in the early days of Britain's colonisation of Australia? Where would you suggest young readers go to read and learn more about Australia's past?

Our colonial history is both rich and dark. It is a time of extraordinary endeavour and deep shame. I set my novel, not just in the time of convicts but at a time when Europeans were reaching into the interior and dispossessing aboriginal people. I wanted to explore that dark paradox. I am of Irish descent. My ancestors decried the English who

dispossessed them from their land. We came out to Australia and used the same arguments to dispossess aboriginal people. Members of my family are also Wiradjuri, the people whose country my ancestors took. I think there was a large part of me that wanted to tell that story.

History in school is often about dates, and wars and explorers and prime ministers. But I believe history is more about the ordinary people whose names will never be remembered but whose genes we carry in us. I am fascinated with how they lived, what they thought, what they hoped to achieve. This is the wonderfully rich history of ordinary people who create an extraordinary nation. If you want to know more about the past, start with your own family. Listen to their story. Grandparents and great-grandparents are living stories of the past. Their lives are often much richer than any history textbook.

What attracts you to the idea of writing a coming-of-age story?

Coming-of-age stories are at the heart of all YA literature. Literature always reflects on our own journeys and hopes. We read vicariously through the experiences of others. I teach Will Richards in my class and my pastoral care group every day; teenagers who are struggling to work out who they are, discovering deep friendships and building resilience during the toughest of times.

Names hold a special significance in this book. What makes names so important (to the characters as well as to readers)?

Names define so much of who we are. My name is part of me. Yet there are a handful of others across the world who share my name. There's a kind of bond, even though we've never met. The original idea for the book came about after seeing my son's name on a list of convicts who were sent on a particular ship to Australia. I began to play around with the idea that maybe names also link us across time. I also

chose names deliberately in the book. Will suggests determination but it's also a document that we leave behind when we die. Joy is the most bitter character in the book. Dot is a very large woman. In the Bible, Cain murders his brother Abel out of envy.

Your protagonist, Will, has a tough relationship with both of his parents. Why do you think it's important for young people to read about families that aren't picture-perfect?

I'd love to think that nobody experiences the dysfunction and upheaval that Will and Rosie experience but I know from 35 years in teaching that children often have to work through the most harrowing experiences of abuse and death. I don't think there's much that's redeeming about Will's dad, other than we can see that he's a product of Pa's mean-spiritedness. However, Will rises above the cycle of bitterness and at least brings some redemption to Pa at the end. By contrast Will's Dad avoids and blames and as a result never changes. I don't think any family is perfect and there are elements from my past that I used to highlight the sense of abandonment that Will felt. My message isn't that all families are broken but rather there is hope in love and dignity in standing up against abuse rather than retaliating. There are two turning moments in the novel. When Will finally stands up to Pa but then shows grace and the moment that Pa says sorry after the broom incident. Even in the most dysfunctional families there is hope for change.