

# "my place" – sally morgan, australian ab. lit. essay sample

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## **“ My Place” – Sally Morgan, Australian Ab. Lit. Essay Sample**

Sally Morgan was born in the Perth suburb of Manning in 1951. Despite her disinterest in school (1) and the lack of appreciation of her artistic talents, she completed secondary school and went on to the University of Western Australia. She gained a Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in Psychology and completed post-graduate diplomas in Counselling and Computing and Library Studies. While at the University she married Paul Morgan and had three children. Prompted by the discovery of her Aboriginality she began writing her life story and the life stories of her uncle, Arthur Corunna, her mother, Gladys Corunna, and her grandmother, Daisy Corunna, stories which were published as *My Place* in 1987. The book was reprinted three times that year and the mass paperback edition four times in 1988 and 1989.

Morgan has also published numerous childrens stories, an illustrated version of *My Place*, another novel, *Wanamurraganya: The Story of Jack McPhee* and a number of plays. Despite her success, Morgan has become disillusioned with writing and has turned instead to art. Her paintings hang in the National Gallery of Australia, the Robert Holmes a Court Collection and many other public and private collections. Her art has also been exhibited in many countries, including the United States. Sally Morgan has received many awards, including the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission Award for Literature in 1987 and the Western Australian Citizen of the Year Award for Arts, Literature and Culture in 1989.

Her work is featured on the cover of the edition being used for the South Dakota Reading Series. The publisher offers this explanation of the painting: " The white house in the lower lefthand side of the cover illustration of My Place, represents Corunna Downs Station (Ranch) where Sally's grandmother, Daisy Corunna lived. Following the arrows you see the boat " The Mindaroo" which was used to take Gladys, Daisy's half caste daughter away to Parkerville Children's Home, the next building in the painting. The baby being nursed and the child in the upper right show Gladys growing up. The next section is Daisy and Gladys at Ivanhoe (where Daisy now worked). Then we see Gladys with a soldier, her future husband, Bill Milroy, Sally's father. The group in the lower right hand corner include Nan, Gladys and her children. One of them is obviously Sally. The las image of the bird is when Nan (Daisy) died. The arrows continue back to Corunna Downs depicting Sally's journey back to the family home." (Graeme Morrison, Penguin Australia)

Sally Morgan, My Place ( 1987)

My Place was first published in 1987, one year before Australia's Bicentennial celebrations. For many Aboriginal people the celebration of Captain Phillip and the First Fleet's arrival at Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788 as the originary moment of the founding of the nation could only be an irrelevant insult. The arrival of the First Fleet may have been a momentous event in white history, but Aboriginal people had occupied the land for thousands of years. The most widely accepted theory about the origins of the Aboriginal people is that 40, 000 to 50, 000 years ago, the ancestors of the Aborigines

moved across the Indonesian archipelago and into the continent which then stretched from New Guinea in the north to Tasmania in the south. The period up to 1788 is for Aboriginal people the time of the " Dreaming," while the period from 1788 to 1967 (i. e. the year of the Referendum granting Aboriginal people citizenship) is the period of outright oppression which in turn gave way to assimilation. In short, 1788 marks for Aboriginal people the beginning of colonialist invasion and a violent destruction of Indigenous culture.

In a more positive way the Bicentenary was used by Aboriginal writers and activists as an occasion for a public assertion of pride in their heritage. For example, Kath Walker, the first Aboriginal poet to be published in English returned her MBE of 1970 in protest against the Bicentennial celebrations, and in the following year she discarded her white names - Kathleen Jean Mary Walker - and proclaimed herself Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal. Colin Johnson, author of the first Aboriginal novel in English, *Wildcat Falling*, reverted to the Aboriginal name of Mudrooroo Narogin. The late 1980s also saw the publication of a number of significant autobiographical narratives by Aboriginal women, including Ruby Langford's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988) and Glenys Ward's *Wandering Girl* (1987). I briefly map this context to make the point that Aboriginal writers in English are a relatively new force in Australian literature.

While younger Aboriginal writers in English, such as Sally Morgan, assert a new found pride in their Aboriginality, by contrast *My Place* tells the moving story of part-Aboriginal women such as her grandmother, Daisy Corunna,

and her mother, Gladys Milroy, who spent the larger part of their lives feeling ashamed of their heritage. To understand their attitudes we need to consider the social conditions of Aboriginal people in the periods covered by the three stories contained in Morgan's book, that is, the stories told by Arthur Corunna, Gladys Milroy, and Daisy Corunna. Daisy's dates are 1900-1983; Arthur's are 1893-1950 and Gladys' story spans the years 1931-1983, which means that the book surveys approximately 100 years of Australian race relations, specifically race relations in Western Australia where the stories are set.

The consequences of the ongoing racism of whites towards Indigenous Australians embrace a range of discriminations, including endemic poverty, dispossession of land, poor educational opportunities, marginalisation, and the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women. In this respect My Place is a record of human rights abuses as dramatised in the personal stories of Morgan's family, including Arthur's story. Arthur's history (173-234) is obviously one of severe hardship and economic exploitation, but there are significant differences between his story and Nan and Gladys's stories. Like Arthur, Nan and Gladys cooperate with whites in order to survive, but one striking difference between their narratives and Arthur's is that Arthur speaks relatively easily whereas Nan and Gladys want to remain silent about the crimes committed against them. This is partly because the women are shown to suffer additionally by virtue of their sex, and there are historical reasons for this. Central to the story of My Place is the history of Australia's

policies concerning miscegenation, and particularly relevant here is the practice of removing children from their natural mothers (2).

Sally Morgan was born in 1951, the year that Paul Hasluck became Minister for Territories and set about developing the government's program of assimilation. He defined the policy in these terms; " it is expected that all persons of aboriginal or mixed blood will live like white Australians do" (Stone 196). This policy was founded on the concept of " the Australian way of life" which preached the virtues of a common culture and demanded that all racial minorities conform by adopting this as individuals and by abandoning their difference, which was closely linked to their identity as part of a community.

These circumstances help us understand why Morgan and her family suppressed their Aboriginal background. You need only read the testimonies in *Bringing Them Home*, the Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (Sterling P) to understand that one of the effects of the practice of removing indigenous children from their families was that the children suffered contempt and denigration of their heritage, their own nature, and often the presence of Aboriginality was denied (3). The forgetfulness and denial of identity that is thematically central to *My Place* was the objective of assimilationist and separatist policies; the aim of the policies, whether benevolently intended or not, was to absorb indigenous children into white society, to force them to forget and deny their Aboriginal heritage and to

bring about, within a few generations, a form of breeding out of indigenous characteristics.

It is the direct and indirect effects of these policies that led Gladys and Nan to deny their children knowledge of their Aboriginal background; if the children knew and word got out, the family might be torn apart. As mothers they feared that their children might suffer the same fate as Arthur, Daisy and Gladys, all of whom had been uprooted and exploited by whites for no other reason than they were Aboriginal. In an interview with Mary Wright, both Sally Morgan and her mother, Gladys, comment on the persistence into the 1960s of this very real fear in their own lives:

Gladys, speaking of double lives, you were concerned about how your family was perceived, weren't you? There was a facade . . .

G: . . . I was worried people would find out I was an Aboriginal.. . . I was very scared of authority. I was always scared I might have the children taken away. That would have destroyed me.

So that law (that children fathered by white men couldn't be looked after by their Aboriginal mothers) still operated? In suburban Perth of the 60s?

G: They'd only need some small thing. I was always frightened to bring any attention to us. I always kept a low profile. If the kids had gone, they probably would have been taken to separate places.

S: I've met people who were taken away in the 60s. It wasn't enforced as rigorously as it used to be, but it was still in place, and it still frightened people.

So all that reinforced your need for the facade.

S: Yes, to live a lie, to be something you weren't, just to survive. (Wright 197)

Morgan's novel maps her family's attempt to recover and celebrate their Aboriginal identity against the official white version of Australian history, and as such, is usefully thought about as a form of counter history. Thus the contrast between speaking out and remaining silent becomes an underlying structure of the book. In writing her personal history Morgan is also writing the history of untold numbers of Aboriginal families in the years covered by the book. To some extent Morgan is writing within the conventions of the traditional European genre of autobiography, but it is important to think about the ways in which her individual story becomes collective story-telling or communal history.

Sally's uncle Arthur states in the novel that by telling their stories the family is "talkin' history" (160). If we agree with Arthur that Sally's book is a form of "talking history," it is certainly not the sort of history that Australians were used to reading. Rather, this history is about the emotional and spiritual lives of those who do not usually appear in the pages of history books; about those who have traditionally been victims rather than the agents of history. Within *My Place* itself, Gladys explains to Nan that



Sally is writing the book as a form of counter-history: " There's been nothing written about people like us, all the history's about the white man. There's nothing about Aboriginal people and what they've been through" (159). My Place can be read as counter history or counter memory because it is a record of displacement and deculturation in opposition to official Australian accounts of white " settlement" and accepted ideas about what constitutes " civilisation" (Wright 108).

In terms of its structure and by virtue of the fact that it is a mixture of different literary forms - novel, autobiography, biography, and history - My Place is not immediately identifiable as straight history. For one thing, it moves outside the conventions of continuous narrative that have governed most historical narrative. Histories are usually written by a single author, and proceed to map the cause and effect of event in a logical and chronological progression. By contrast, Morgan's book is the product of a number of different narrators or story tellers and draws on a modern form of oral transmission. We are told in the book that Sally taped the stories of her mother, grandmother, and Uncle Arthur and then transcribed them. In interviews about the process of writing of My Place, Morgan has stressed that the stories are transcribed as told by their tellers, but she also tells us that she researched her material, edited it, and at points in Nan's story, felt impelled to write what Nan could not express. For example, Morgan has chosen to respect Nan's silence on the painful issues of the loss of her first child and the conception of Gladys (Wright 108).

For Gladys and Nan the secrets Sally wants to uncover are the source of profound shame and the most difficult secret Sally and Gladys are forced to confront is the possibility that Howden Drake-Brockman may be the father of both Nan and Sally's mother, Gladys (in which case Drake-Brockman is guilty of incest with his own daughter). Nan's silence can be understood as a response to shame and fear, for as Roseanne Kennedy has argued, Nan's story is "the portrait of a survivor," and as such her testimony is an analysis of trauma comparable to the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. (Kennedy 235-60).

There is, however, another side to Nan's reticence. The secrets are for Nan a source of power within the family group: she is respected as "owner" of that knowledge in the Aboriginal way, and her right to this knowledge must be respected by her granddaughter. From the point of view of traditional Aboriginal ideas about the transmission of knowledge, the shift in the novel from the principal narrator, Sally, to her grandmother bears further consideration. According to traditional Aboriginal custom, narrators can only be partial holders of traditions and are required to defer to others who hold the rest of the sequence. Sally's story creates a context for the stories of Arthur, Gladys, and Nan to be told, and because they are the rightful custodians of the story, their stories appear in a sequence which represents the deferment of narrative authority. Thus the book quite rightly ends with Nan's story (317). Again, this underlines the communal aspect of the work.

My Place is organised by the classic theme of the quest, a journey that is represented as both physical (literal) and symbolic. Morgan's quest for the

key to her personal identity through the establishment of genealogy and inheritance is also a quest to find an authentic sense of self. This quest begins with a need to find answers to three main secrets - Sally's Aboriginal identity, the identity of her white great grandfather, and the identity of her grandfather. Many critics have called *My Place* a detective story; and one can understand why this analogy readily comes to mind, because the book is written in such a way that the reader shares the author's quest for the truth about her ancestors. We look eagerly for clues, and struggle to assess the different accounts, for example, of who fathered the author's mother and grandmother. Was it Jack Grime, Maltese Sam or Howden Drake-Brockman?

As the story develops, this fact finding mission becomes a spiritual and psychological search for wholeness. In chapter 28, significantly titled "Return to Corunna," Morgan writes:

It was as though we'd all been transported back into the past . . . We'd suddenly come home . . . We had a sense of place now, . . . of belonging . . . We were different people now. What had begun as a tentative search for knowledge had grown into a spiritual and emotional pilgrimage. We had an Aboriginal consciousness now, and were proud of it . . . How deprived we would have been if we had been willing to let things stay as they were. We would have survived, but not as a whole people. We would never have known our place. (223, 227, 229, 230)

At Corunna Downs she discovers "her place," that is to say, her place within her extended family and in connection with the traditional tribal territory and

with her grandmother's country. This place is simultaneously "our place" and the shift to the plural possessive pronoun announces that the autobiographical account of growth and self knowledge is to be read as joined to the liberation of the race, or at least the family. The journey of self discovery is also an Aboriginal coming to consciousness. Furthermore, in *My Place*, the confessional autobiographical style harmonises with a discourse about the search for and ultimate attainment of spiritual revelation as the ethical grounding of this new found selfhood.

In the quotation above the phrase "a whole people" is an interesting notion, and the book suggests that by affirming her Aboriginal heritage, Sally finds psychic health and spiritual wholeness. Indeed the act of writing the book is represented as a healing process, both for herself and her extended family. In contrast to the sense of community offered by the Corunna Downs people, Sally's father, Bill Milroy, the primary link to her white inheritance is the most fragmented and unhealthy character in the book. As a violent alcoholic, a consumptive whose mind has been permanently shattered by his experiences in a Nazi prisoner of war camp during the Second World War, Milroy is not only a victim of the destructiveness of white society, but in many ways is a symbol of its craziness.

Morgan suggests in the book that her Aboriginal inheritance is not only genetic, but also, that the link between her present and past is primarily spiritual. In terms of defining Aboriginality, the point stressed in the stories of the three women is that there is a spirit world which has been passed down through the generations. All three women share with their

Aboriginal ancestors a belief in the spirit world in which there is no distinction between human beings, other living creatures, and the earth itself. It is a vision of wholeness and the unity of all life. This inherited spirituality is finally symbolised in the bird call in the last chapter, when Sally hears the song of the Aboriginal bird, and we are meant to read it as symbolic of Nan's spirit in her heart.

Morgan tells us in the book that she was bought up entirely as white, and wasn't aware that she was of Aboriginal descent until she was an adolescent. Some Aboriginal writers and readers have had difficulty with the fact that in their view Morgan isn't really Black, that she hasn't "lived Black." They therefore find her confidence that she does have access to her Aboriginality, especially its spiritual dimension, irritating and false. Jackie Huggins has said that Morgan doesn't understand Aboriginality and that *My Place* is based on the proposition that "Aboriginality can be understood by all non-Aboriginals" (Huggins 460). Mudrooroo argues that Morgan "was an outsider approaching the Indigenous communities and from a personal rather than a political space. . . . What was more, any politics of difference was played down and the Australianness of everyone was emphasised" (Museoeeoo 193-94). *My Place* is, he concludes, "a text of Australian nationalism and identity, rather than a text of Indigenality, and this explains its great success" (197).

It is true that *My Place*, which has enjoyed phenomenal success with a predominantly white reading audience - the cover of the latest paperback edition announces that it has sold over 400, 000 copies, continues to pose problems for Aboriginal writers concerned about the popular reception and

consumption of Indigenality. Perhaps the difficult issues raised by Mudrooroo's criticisms cannot be confidently answered by white readers: How Aboriginal is Sally Morgan's book? In what does Aboriginality or Indigenality consist?

In this regard I would offer two points for your consideration: firstly, any argument which suggests that there is a notion of "authentic" Aboriginality against which the text can be measured is dangerously close to suggesting that the critic knows what it is to be Aboriginal and Sally Morgan doesn't. Secondly, there are dangers in defining Aboriginality too narrowly, and of defining *My Place* in terms of its "authenticity" instead of judging the text in terms of what it has set out to do as a literary project.

Even though the history related in *My Place* is identifiably personal, it does, as I have been suggesting, have a strong political dimension. The book, however, is not overtly political. Arthur, for example, touches on the issue of Aboriginal land rights when he says that "[we should get] our land rights" because we were here "longer than them," before "this country was invaded" (146, 209); but Morgan does not include long polemical passages calling for Aboriginal landrights as she might have done. Rather Morgan's strategy is to present white injustice and inhumanity in such a way as to force readers to recognise the extent of this injustice - and she does this most forcefully by asking us to confront the suffering of the Aboriginal characters - Arthur, Nan, and Gladys - from their own point of view, rather than from the point of view of an outsider whether white or black.

Sympathetic involvement in the story may allow readers to self-righteously condemn white injustices and comfort themselves that, unlike their ancestors, they are not tainted by racism. At the same time, white Australian readers are implicated in the cause of that suffering by virtue of the fact that their white ancestors tried to violently impose their idea of "civilisation" on Aboriginal land and culture. I would therefore suggest that *My Place* is a less comfortable book for white readers than implied by the criticisms of Mudrooroo and Huggins.

Within the framework of public consumption, *My Place* may well lend itself to co-option, but crucially it is a text which has raised important questions about how to talk about writing that explores Aboriginal history within white settler culture. In the final analysis Morgan has written a collective history which counters the silence of official history about important aspects of race relations in Australia, and as such has taken an important step forward in confronting the public embarrassment and private shame from that part of Australia's colonialist history, a history in which the personal and the political cannot be easily separated.