

Australian rules

By PETER ELLINGSEN

This article appeared in The Melbourne Age
Saturday Extra Section on 10/08/2002

It's the story about two boys growing up in a small country town. But is it Dumby Red's or Blacky's? And does it matter?

Even when he was a child growing up beside the ocean on the windswept plains of South Australia's remote Yorke Peninsula, Phillip Gwynne wanted to be a writer. It was an ache he nursed by leafing through the books he found in the local library. He would sit there for hours devouring stories from exotic places. No one read at home. Well, mum read a bit, mainly Womens' Day. Dad never did. Gwynne never stopped. From the age of six, when his parents packed their seven children into an old red truck and left Daylesford to drive halfway across the country to Port Victoria, 200 kilometres west of Adelaide, he had his nose in a book. By 14, when the family left "Port", he had read Dostoevksy, but was not yet a writer. That would not come for another 20 years, and when it did, Gwynne would find himself recording his childhood in a shabby fishing village on the South Australian coast.

He would write about girls, gauche adolescence and coping with an abusive old man. But mostly, he would write about playing footy with the black children from a nearby mission. He would call it "the Point", but Port Victoria people would know it was Point Pearce, the Aboriginal community 10 kilometres up the road. Gwynne would be "Blacky", the gangly white kid who makes friends with "Dumby Red", an Aboriginal so gifted he could dawdle on the flanks, and still win the match. Blacky and Dumby Red would grab the premiership for the town, but while the white kid would be rewarded with a trophy, the black kid would not. Blacky would discover racism. He would fall out with his dad and side with his black friend.

The story would not be true in every detail - Gwynne's peak footy experience would be drawn from his games with Woodville, in the South Australian league, not Port - but it would be close enough for the locals to know. And while that would not bother the critics who praised the book, nor the Sydneysiders who rushed to film it, it would shatter many of the Aborigines Gwynne knew.

There would be tears and death threats, families and communities bitterly split, and by the end of it, Gwynne would not want to write about Aborigines again. "It's been incredibly traumatic," he says. "I've had to question, to the core of my being: 'Am I racist?'" Resting the leg he broke fishing off rocks near his Coogee home, Gwynne, 44, says he is not a racist, but he was naive. He does not repudiate Deadly, Unna? (Cool, Isn't it?), which won a swag of prizes, including the 1999 Victorian Premier's Award, and sold 60,000 copies. It is just that, by using real nicknames and drawing on a real incident in which two Point Pearce youths were killed by a white publican in a 1977 pub shooting, he has crossed a line. He wrote his story, a story that he insists he has the right to tell. But it was someone else's story too, and that has prompted a backlash from which he is still to recover.

He is not the only one. The film version, Australian Rules, which closes the Melbourne International Film Festival tomorrow, has left its makers and backers, notably SBS and the Adelaide Festival, facing claims of racism. It has exposed gaps in how films and books touching indigenous issues are made. Penguin, for instance,

which published *Deadly, Unna?* in 1998, saw it as fiction, and did not check it for cultural sensitivity; neither, in any effective way, did those funding the film. The Australian Film Commission is now developing protocols for indigenous films, but even if they had been in place last year, they would not have been binding on the film makers. Their movie, *Australian Rules* could still have pitted grief, in this case, Aboriginal grief, against artistic freedom.

This is the story behind Gwynne's story. At one level, it is about reconciliation, the theme those who commissioned the film claimed to embrace. Gwynne, who co-wrote the screenplay, director, Paul Goldman, and producer, Mark Lazarus, all believed they were helping the cause. But the past is a tricky place, particularly when it is transferred to celluloid. Gwynne and the others insist that theirs is a work of fiction. But what happens when fiction mirrors fact?

GORDON Weetra's eyes fill with tears as he digs out a faded photo of his son. "Been trying to get that movie stopped," he says. "We done everything, but they wouldn't listen." The framed photo shows a slim boy holding a football. In the fashion of the '70s, he wears his hair long and straggly. He looks full of life, but is about to die. Shortly after the photo was taken, 15-year-old Gordon Ross Weetra was shot dead by Antonio Armiento, manager of Port Victoria's hotel.

It was early one February morning in 1977. Weetra and another Point Pearce youth, Derek Sansbury, 18, died after Armiento fired an automatic shotgun at them and three other Aboriginal youths attempting to rob his hotel. A coroner's inquest was told one of the party had a .22 rifle. Armiento said he believed his family was at risk, and he only had one chance, "shoot or get shot". "I just put my finger on the trigger and she went," he said.

He was not charged, and left the state. Before he went Armiento, 37, told a local newspaper that "the robbery gone wrong" was the result of a "degrading bludge system white Australia developed for Aboriginals". His life, he said, was now "in ruins".

The film portrays the killing of the boys. It is pretty true to life, except that, for dramatic effect, the shooter shifts from being the publican to Blacky's dad, and the main victim is Blacky's Aboriginal mate, Dumby Red. In real life, Dumby Red - who has left the area and was happy for Gwynne to use his nickname - was not involved. Gwynne, who was not in Port Victoria at the time of the shooting, says he drew on the incident, but as with other aspects of the story, not exactly. In the film, for instance, the youths are not armed.

It is, Gwynne says, a writer's right. As he explains: "When the truth didn't serve my purpose, I made it up. I wanted to capture the essence of a town that was redneck and racist. I included the names and aspects of reality. But it was naive of me not to disguise it enough."

Naive is not the word Gordon Weetra uses. Rubbing his hands to ward off the chill in his house 15 minutes drive from where his son was killed 25 years ago, he says, "this is nothing but pain. How could they do it? They never asked my permission". He shakes his head and looks at the floor. "It is the white man's way," he shrugs. "I told them to take that shooting out of the movie, but they wouldn't." According to family friend Ida Wangeneen, the film, which insiders say cost about \$3 million, has "appropriated without permission" the local Narrungar language, and ignored the "traditional practice" of first seeking approval from the family.

She was so offended by Gwynne's book she took a copy the local school had in its library and refused to return it. "They've charged me \$30, but I won't take it back," Wangeneen says. "I read it, and it's revolting." Like a number of local Aborigines,

she is angry that Gwynne has used words like "boong". Even though it is part of his attempt to capture the speech of racists, she says any use of the word is degrading. Gwynne may have been striving for authenticity, but she sees it as an insult. Not only that, since the book arrived, the word has been more common among the white children in Maitland, the two-pub town near Point Pearce where Gordon Weetra now lives. "Lots of racism here," Wangeneen says. "It's as bad as ever." Racism, and the hurt it brings, is at the heart of the story. When David Wilson, 40, an Aboriginal film maker, who has led opposition to Australian Rules, was born, his mother had to bypass Maitland hospital, where blacks were unwelcome, for Wallaroo, an hour up the road. He says the film will do nothing to change attitudes. "You don't get rednecks to change by depicting their behaviour on the screen," he says. "That just reinforces the prejudice. The film is supposed to be about reconciliation, but it has actually damaged people."

Wilson, who is developing his own version of the saga, a documentary called, Australian Rules (Deadly Unna): The Aboriginal Story, carefully lays out the documents and arguments he says prove the bad faith of the film makers. There is an edge to his voice as he clears a table in his Adelaide office, and says he was asked to assess the script by one of the funding bodies, the Adelaide Festival. They, and the other main funding body, SBS Independent, bypassed his advice, he claims.

Brigit Ikin, now an independent producer, was the SBS executive overseeing the film when it was prepared in early 2001. She says the script was presented as fiction, and by the time she realised it drew on fact, it was too late to address the issues that were raised. She is credited as one of the executive producers, but she says she had no authority over the script. That was the domain of the film makers. "I would have done it differently," she says. "It's a good film. It's not racist, but it didn't leave enough time (for consultation with the Aboriginal community)." Ikin says she wanted to follow "protocols", including getting the permission of the dead boys' families. "I agree with protocols, but I had to shut up," she says.

Peter Sellars, former director of the Adelaide Festival, accuses the film makers of "violating" protocols. Sally Riley, the manager of the indigenous unit at the Australian Film Commission, agrees. She says the film makers should have got permission from the dead boys' families and allotted more time for Point Pearce people to weigh their reaction to the script. "They consulted too little too late," she says. "By the time they talked to the community, the wheels were turning, actors were hired. They could've helped the community get over the pain and anger of the deaths. Something good could have come out of it, but they didn't."

She and others objecting to Australian Rules did not want the film scrapped. Their key demand was for more consultation. This meant giving Point Pearce longer to digest the script than the short time allowed by the film makers. It also meant that the 1977 Port Victoria pub shooting, depicted in the film, should not have been included unless the parents of both dead boys agreed. This objection, ignored by the film makers, centred around the distress caused to the families by having the incident re-created, and Aboriginal sensitivity to portraying the dead.

Other objections included the use of racist language, words such as "boong", and real nicknames. Some names were changed when David Wilson - belatedly according to the film makers - raised the alarm. But there was no change on the inclusion of the killings.

Director Paul Goldman says he and the others argued for a weekend about whether to scrap the film altogether, but opted to go on. "It's been very, very difficult and very emotional," he says. "These are very complicated issues."

He regrets the grief Gordon Weetra suffered. "But I'm not contrite," he says. "Some of the criticism of the film is a bunch of horseshit spread by people who haven't even seen it."

Both Goldman, now shooting a big budget film on Frank Sinatra, and producer Mark Lazarus, reject the notion that film makers need to comply with indigenous protocols. "If you ask me, 'should we have consulted earlier?' The answer is 'yes'," he says. "If you say, 'should the killing have been left out?' The answer's 'no'. Ultimately, you're talking about censorship. Cultural protocols would mean there would have been a good chance the film would not have been made." Goldman, 40, says he spent several years and a "fair amount of money" preparing the film, his first feature. He did not think he was telling a true story, and while he is sorry about the pain families have endured, it is, "not enough to not make the film".

Lazarus loved Gwynne's book, and was desperate to turn it into a film. As the child of a Holocaust survivor, he says he is familiar with "outsider cultures". But that does not mean he accepts cultural protocols. "No way," he says. After complaints from Wilson, Weetra and others, he considered dropping the shooting scene, but did not. "That wasn't what the movie is about," he says.

Because *Deadly, Unna?* had, after winning the 1999 Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Award, become a text in some South Australian schools, Lazarus assumed there was no problem. "We didn't feel what we were doing was wrong," he says. He claims Point Pearce was given a false sense of the film. He is angry that the film, a finalist for a humanitarian award at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival in the United States, is attacked as racist in Australia. Like Gwynne, it has left him wary. Asked if he would do the whole thing again, he says: "Life is too short to make Aboriginal films."

POINT Pearce, the first Aboriginal community in Australia to be self-managed, is a few streets of low slung, dark brick houses with tin roofs. At one end is a new administration centre funded by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission; at the other, a war memorial where Australian and Aboriginal flags flutter side by side.

Point Pearce began as a mission in 1868, 66 years after explorer Matthew Flinders named the land it sits upon after a bureaucrat in the British Admiralty. It is home to about 200 people, around a quarter of the area's Aboriginal population of 150 years ago.

Most of the community was present and vocal when the film makers visited last year. No one agrees on precisely what happened, but feelings were running so high the Sydney contingent had to be moved. Insults were thrown, threats made, and, by the end of it, Lazarus felt he was in a Salem witch trial. He should not have been surprised. As local elder, Alice Rigney, who chairs Narrunga Nations, the group that represents Aborigines on Yorke Peninsula, says, death in her community should not be spoken about, let alone re-created in film.

At one level, Gwynne understands this. Having grown up in the area, he knows Aborigines have a history of being "ripped off" by white overseers. It even happened in footy. Point Pearce had such an unbeatable team in the 1950s, the local league found a reason to kick them out, he says. "Aborigines have to show solidarity. You can't blame them. They've been hammered for 200 years," he says.

The problem is that, when his film was mooted last year, Point Pearce did not stay solid in its opposition to it. One of the families of the five youths involved in the

robbery gave their OK. This fractured the community but, according to Rigney, this did not constitute a green light. Because Gordon Weetra and the parents of the other dead boy disagreed, the film should have stalled, she says. "Only one gave permission and that's not enough, especially when someone has died," she says. "Non-indigenous people are good at finding weaknesses among us."

Like other Aboriginal communities, Point Pearce has had its problems, notably joblessness and domestic violence, but according to local policeman, senior constable Brian Partridge, crime levels are not high. And yet, racism remains.

Elaine Newchurch, an elder who chairs the council that runs the community, says that black and white boys can be mates on the footy field. But off field, it is often a different story. "Racism is here," she says. "It'll be here when we die." Newchurch remembers when a superintendent ran the mission, and children were still taken from their mothers. She recalls the men going walkabout, and the tribe having open access to their traditional Spencer Gulf fishing grounds. Now, a family that can trace back its links to the area 10 generations, must follow rules. "We can't go out with our nets; we need a licence," she says.

Despite the limitations, Newchurch, who had a relative involved in the 1977 robbery attempt on the Port Victoria pub, has high hopes for Point Pearce. Without irony, she gestures out her window towards the cluster of houses that make up the community. "Paradise we call it," she says. "This is our home town." In 1977, at the time of the shooting, the Adelaide Advertiser had a different view. Point Pearce, it said, was miserable. "All but a handful of houses are rundown, salt damp is everywhere. There's nothing for young or old to do. Unemployment is chronic." There was little criticism of nearby Port Victoria, where the killings had taken place, and where racism remained entrenched. Nor was there any real challenge to the decision not to charge the publican who fired five times through a screen door when the boys tried to get him to open the safe. South Australia's self-defence laws have since been redrafted, according to Senior Sergeant Peter Dunstone, acting inspector of the Barossa-Yorke area. But that means little to Gordon Weetra, now 60, for whom it is all too late. He does not want to live in the past; he wants to survive the present by not having to re-experience the death of his son. And there lies the rub. The film makers, like the newspaper writers of 25 years ago, think they know better.

Their bottom line is that they have a story to tell and it is more pressing than any grief or protocol - not to mention what Lazarus dismisses as "nickel and dime sociological theory". Gwynne goes along with this, arguing the real evil is the racism he depicts in his book. And it is not a thing of the past. When he returned to Port Victoria recently, he found "Mabo Money Available. Boongs Only" scrawled on the jetty. This was not the graffiti he has in *Deadly*, Unna? - where Blacky erases the line "Boongs Piss Off" from the jetty - nor is it the image Port Victoria wants to convey. The story it wants to tell is captured on the walls of the century-old pub. In photos and drawings, visitors are informed of the glory days when the town was "the Last Windjammer Port". It is a swashbuckling saga of white sailors, tall ships and the sea, with no focus on the fishing rights taken from Aborigines.

Like the pub, which has been renovated so that it is now hard to see where the killings took place, the past has been touched up. Publican Wayne Davies is not worried. He says the shooting is no big deal. "It doesn't affect the pub," he says. He thinks Gwynne's book is realistic, except for its depiction of Port as racist. "The town's not racist," he says. "We have Aboriginal people here in the pub."

Gwynne just hopes people will see the film and decide for themselves. In one sense, he has already succeeded. His book, and now the movie, have taken his story much further than he imagined.

Despite being 193 centimetres tall, he never made it as a ruckman, a knee injury saw to that; and even though he loved the sea, he did not go on with marine biology, which he studied at university. His ambition was to be a writer and he got there with a story he thinks may make a difference. "I don't say it will turn racists into non-racists, but I believe in it," he says. "If it generates debate about cultural protocols, it's worthwhile. Most movies are trash. There's no debate. You forget them moments after seeing them."

But what of the pain of Gordon Weetra? "I met Gordy, and I know he's hurting, but we still decided to make the film," Gwynne says. "It is all to do with belief. I believed in what we were saying - still do."

Gwynne's new book does not have black characters and, he says, he will never write about Aborigines again. "It sounds a bit gutless, but I've been thinking a lot about it, and this consultation thing means books by committees," he says. For David Wilson, it all seems too easy for Gwynne and the others to head back to Sydney and wash their hands of the the "crap" Point Pearce must deal with.

Gwynne considers this only long enough to dismiss it. "It is not a black story," he says. "It is a white story that intersects 100 per cent with black peoples' lives." By way of illustration, he says the story is harder on his father than any one. Now 70 and living in Melbourne, his dad has not seen the film. When he read the book, his response, Gwynne says, was: "Fair enough. I probably wasn't the best dad."

In reel life, Blacky's dad shoots dead his son's best friend, then flattens him when he attends the funeral. For those watching the movie there will no doubt the father is a racist abuser. But will that be the truth?

C. Peter Ellingsen 2002