

Water Wars - Sample Chapter

They approach from the west in the darkest hour. Their headlights snake across the flat, flashing skyward whenever they hit a bump. Behind them the trailer bounces and rattles along never giving an inch – I'm still here, bloke; you'll have to do better than that. The passenger looks back at the dinghy then glances over at the driver. He says nothing and the driver answers in kind. They keep coming, past a burnt-out log, under a startled curlew taking flight, over a steel grid in a fence line peeling off into the darkness, the vegetation changing as they draw nearer the river, thickening, rejoicing.

Directly they reach the riverbank and begin their little routine that could have been choreographed by old George Balanchine himself. First the passenger jumps out on the fly while the driver turns the wheel and engages reverse gear so seamlessly you wouldn't think it went in the opposite direction to forward. As he backs the trailer down the slope the passenger walks briskly alongside, releasing the couplings. Then a touch of the brakes and the dinghy slides off into the water with hardly a splash, the whole performance as smooth as the finest adagio.

The driver parks and walks to the water's edge. He is a thickset man who carries himself with an air of authority. His name is Noel and he knows this country well. He looks upriver in his unhurried way, then back to his feet, and spits on the dry, cracked mud.

The other man says nothing. He knows what the gesture means and it's best left alone. He holds the dinghy steady for his skipper and pushes off when the motor fires, briefly planking on the bow before swinging his legs in. Then he busies himself sorting butchers' bones and hessian bags in readiness for the traps coming over the side. When he's done he watches the passing parade of river gums and casuarinas growing along the bank, now perfectly mirrored in the dawn-still water. He follows the passage of two ducks lifting off and disappearing around a bend, leaving only ripples and the whistle of their wings behind. This man's name is Nigel.

As light floods the river course Noel's knuckles can be seen bloodless on the throttle. He's contemplating why the level hasn't risen after the much-publicised environmental flows were released upstream. Was the land so parched it was drinking faster than usual? Was it being diverted into some unknown anabranh? He's clutching at straws. Deep down he knows the reason.

Anger turns his features to granite. He has a broad face with a flattened nose. Curly black hair announces him from a distance and his eyebrows are heavy and

wild, like two rogue caterpillars about to crawl off his forehead at any moment and start eating the leaves off the trees, the very trees themselves if left unchecked. On a good day his eyes are shiny crystals of haematite, full of canny and light. Today they are flat black, set deep against the morning air and his darkening thoughts.

Nigel gestures up ahead and Noel beelines towards the first trap. Throttling back, he slows enough to grab the rope below the plastic bottle and hoist the trap over the side. It is alive with yabbies, scuttling and crackling like a bag of potato chips. Nigel takes it and tips the contents into his plastic bin, and with a few deft movements fixes a fresh bone to the trap with a rubber band and hands it back to his skipper who drops it in the water before throttling on to the next pot. Between pots Nigel sorts the catch according to size, consigning the keepers to the dampened hessian bag at his feet and tossing the undersized crustaceans back in a line of plops and splashes that trails in their wake. His hands are almost a blur, and by the time he finishes sorting one batch another trap is being lifted over the side.

By mid-morning six half-bags of yabbies sit upended at the bow of the dinghy. It's been a good run, and at this point they'd usually pull into the bank and have smoko before turning for home. Today, though, Noel keeps heading upstream, well beyond their normal range. Nigel questions him with a look, but the set of his skipper's jaw makes him think twice about speaking. Instead he opens his tucker box and takes out a sandwich and a banana. He knows what his boss is doing, what he's looking for.

Shortly they reach a barbed wire fence stretched across the river. In the middle of the span is a sign, warning trespassers they will be shot if caught. Noel throttles back and with each in turn lifting the strands up they glide the dinghy under. Neither mentions the sign.

They pass a pumping plant sat up on the left bank. Noel recognises the diesel pump and large diameter pipes running directly into the river. He knows it's a system designed to draw a lot of water, but it is silent for now, as it should be during a pumping embargo. In any case he doubts a plant of that size is to blame this time. Irrigators had been manipulating these pumps for as long as he could remember, jamming flow meters, running bogus logbooks. There had to be something more.

By now the sun is high and Nigel is concerned. He makes a motion with his thumb and forefinger to question whether they have enough fuel to continue. His skipper nods and gives the tank a rap with his knuckle to confirm it. Nigel looks ahead and squints into the onrushing air. A darter drying its wings on a

branch abandons its perch and rushes ahead, all insult and bother.

Then there is a change in the vegetation. The right bank continues on as ever – steep sloping sides, black box saplings and casuarinas here and there, red gums with roots like mad scaffolding clinging to the rim– but the entire left bank has been cleared and a levee pushed up along the watercourse.

After escorting the men upriver for a few hundred metres the levee peels away and the vegetation returns. Here Noel noses the dinghy into the bank, jumps out and strides up the levee to its crest. Before him is a vast holding reservoir stretching almost to the horizon. From the air this would look no more sinister than regulation earthworks, laser levelling in readiness for a crop. Yet Noel knows by the unbroken perimeter that he's looking at a water storage facility of considerable capacity. He spits once more.

Sitting in the dinghy Nigel is beside himself. He has a fair idea what they are looking at and can't imagine its makers would be pleased to find a couple of yabby fishermen snooping about. When his captain returns to the dinghy he almost claps his hands.

His glee is short-lived. Before Noel has even started the outboard a man appears from nowhere with a rifle levelled at them.

What are youse doin' here? the man snarls.

Fishin.' Like we're entitled.

Throw 'em back.

They are less than twenty metres apart. Close enough for the fishermen to see the rage in the man's eyes, the hollow black core of the barrel. Nigel is paralysed with fear. Noel is defiant.

We're not puttin' nuthin' back.

They're my yabbies. Throw 'em back or I'll put a bullet in youse.

Nigel is greatly disturbed by the plurality of terms, his inclusion in negotiations. He'll gladly throw the yabbies back if that's what the man wants. But Noel is of a different mettle.

It's me job, mate. I'm licensed to catch 'em. I'm not throwin' 'em back.

The man with the rifle considers this for a moment before speaking again.

Then I'll shoot youse for trespassin.'

We aint tresspassin,' Noel stares him down. Nobody owns the river.

Didn't you see the sign?

Nobody owns the river, mate, he repeats before calling his bluff. But you go ahead and do what you gotta.

Nigel is now officially mortified. The other two men are glaring silent, sizing each other up. Throughout the exchange the dinghy has been slowly drifting away from the bank, widening the gap between them. Suddenly the man raises the gun to his shoulder and looks down the barrel at the men in the dinghy. An involuntary squeak escapes Nigel's mouth. He can't believe his ears when his skipper doubles down.

Go on, mate. Shoot if you're gunna.

After the longest five seconds of the Nigel's life the man lowers the rifle and disappears back into the scrub.

He was never gunna shoot us, Noel says as he starts the outboard.

No, agrees Nigel, unconvincingly. Probly not.

When they return to the boat ramp they find their vehicle rammed almost into the water. The far side is crumpled and dinged as if T-boned by another vehicle and the trailer is crossed up behind the ute. Skid marks show its sideways path to the water's edge and it looks like one more push would have rolled it over into the river. Noel spits for a third time.