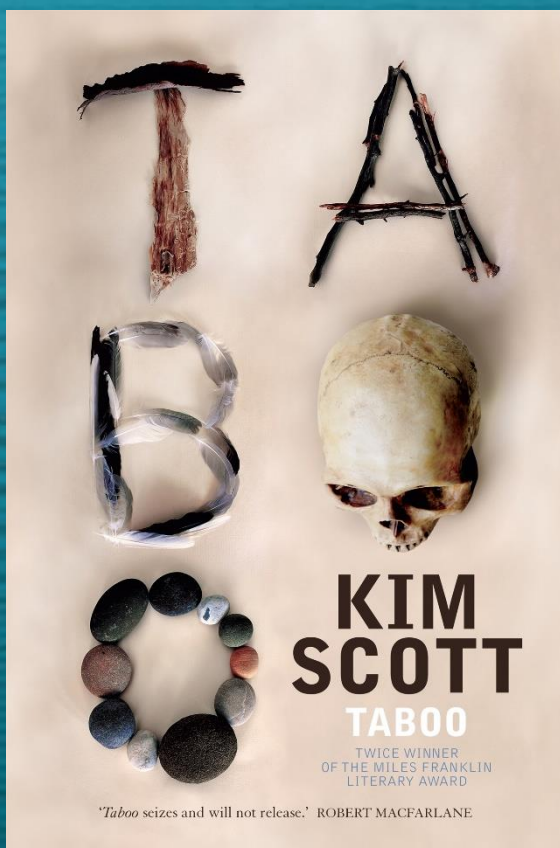


2018
SHORTLIST

MILES FRANKLIN
LITERARY AWARD



PROUDLY MANAGED BY PERPETUAL



EXTRACT



Our hometown was a massacre place. People called it taboo. They said it is haunted and you will get sick if you go there. Others just bragged: we shot you and the hill into town. Some of you may wish to imagine our decaying fleshpoisoned the waterholes so you never come back.

We had heard all this, and we heard it again as we lifted ourselves from the riverbed and went back up, our shuffling tread and a collective moan emanating from our slack jaws – as if we were the undead, indeed. It was never like that, and we are hardly alone in having been clumsy, in having stumbled and struggled to properly speak and breathe and find our place again. But we were never hungry for human flesh or revenge of any kind.

Our people gave up on that Payback stuff a long time ago, because we always knew death is only one part of a story that is forever beginning . . .

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And so this story will start here, where the wind has suddenly dropped and the sun glowers in the eerie red light of a dying sandstorm. The many falling sand grains whisper, thunder crashes and rumbles down the rocky river valley and lightning glitters on the chrome of a semitrailer cresting where the highway chokes to become the plummeting main street of this little town in Western Australia's Great Southern: Kepalup.

The old name means 'place of water' or, perhaps, 'welling', but the signpost points to a cluster of buildings either side of a dry, old creek emerging from a low, near-barren range on Western Australia's southern coastal plain.

The truck driver, surprised by the sudden descent, touches the brake. His foot goes flat to the floor. Tries to change gear; cogs clash and grate.

The truck's chrome glints, tarpaulins tremble, wheels roll faster and faster.

Propelled by tons of wheat, freewheeling down the street, the driver's bowels loosen, his gear stick flops about. The poor man leans on the horn and he, passenger and truck make a wailing chorus.

In the pub, frothy heads of beer shiver with the truck's passing.

The numbers on the speedometer continue to rise.

A little group of people have gathered on a patch of grass beside the Local History Museum. They are here for the opening of a Peace Park.



A large, bald and well-dressed man leaving the edge of the group suddenly sees the charging truck and scurries from its path, arms flailing and little feet a blur. An older man, refusing to be distracted by the tons of glass and metal rushing between them, stares after the bald one but all the other faces, like flowers following the sun, track the vehicle as it thunders by:

Museum
Town Hall
Café
Supermarket
School . . .

No child is harmed. Also unharmed, drunks fall out of the top pub, their gaze (along with that of the Peace Park attendees) trained upon the truck's dusty, wagging tailgate. It seems the runaway vehicle has created a void that vision is obliged to fill.

The driver's eyes, by contrast, dart here and there seeking an exit, an escape clause, some soft shoulder to roll on.

As if tempted by the scent of fuel, the truck veers briefly toward the roadhouse, then weaves back and, departing the other side of the bitumen, snaps a railing and takes down a succession of small trees and shrubs as it bucks and bounces across the flood plain. Slowed at last by deep, coarse sand, it makes one last, dramatic gesture (reminding one observer of a feebly breaching whale) and rises into the air a little, before falling on its side.

Birds flap into the sky, screeching indignation.

The motor hiccups; stops.

Wheels spin on, as good wheels do.

From a distance – the aloof view, say, of those birds – a pattern is dissolving and reforming again: bunches of people at the museum, pub, café, roadhouse, the little park; then all moving together and flowing down the street. A car stutters ahead, pulls up at the road edge of the river crossing.

A bystander – perhaps even you, dear reader – might anticipate an explosion, a great ball of flame. But there is no explosion. Already, the so-recently startled birds are beginning to resettle among the slow and incrementally turning leaves of the patient trees.

A human figure emerges from the window of the truck's cab door. A girl, a young woman perhaps. Standing easily on the side of the cab, she bends to help someone exit. A strong young thing, then; athletic.



The other person seems much older, or injured. Having been helped (hauled) from the cab, he immediately sits down on its still-closed door. Hurt? Tired?

He looks around, back into the cab, and then tentatively makes his way down after the young woman, though less nimbly.

The two of them stamp their feet on solid ground as if reassuring themselves. They listen to the wheels spinning and a luxurious, whispering sound: wheat, slowly spilling from the vehicle.

Come close. Closer.

A small pile of wheat is growing beside the trailer, fed by a thin, grainy spout from the upper corner of the tarpaulin. Golden, it has both the look and sound of great wealth. The tarp slips a little so that the thin stream becomes a golden chute, and then the tarpaulin pulls away like an upside-down stage curtain and a wide, low wave of wheat makes the girl step back once, twice, three times. She stops, transfixed by something in the trailer as the wheat continues to flow around and behind her.

Imagine a figure sitting in a deep and rapidly draining bath: head and shoulders appear, then the upper torso, knees . . . In the trailer, beginning with the dome of a dark skull, a figure is being revealed.

This figure slides a little, shifts.

The tarpaulin slips again.

The golden grain continues to flow across the ground.

The figure begins to rise. It must be the moving grain, but it seems as if the legs lever it upright and it steps from the upturned trailer and stands, swaying with the high weight of its skull. The girl, the figure, they stand facing one another, feet invisible beneath the grain.

The wheat dust, the light of the sandstorm, the after-effects of the accident . . . What is it the girl sees? Something like a skeleton, but not of bone. At least, not only bone. The limbs are timber. The skull is timber too, dark and burnished, and ivory dentures – stained as if by chomping, inhaling, gustatory human life – grin exultation.

A gauze of gold dust and light motes swirls from its broad shoulders and around the rippling cage of its ribs.

Long shanks lever the pelvis, itself a solid thing of smooth river stone and timber glowing at its centre of gravity.

Kneecaps too are smooth stone, but the rest is bone and polished timber and woven grass, seeds and brightly coloured feathers and even fencing wire. Cords of sinew, of neatly knotted fishing line and – is it human hair? – meet moistly at each mobile joint.