

Why Greer is wrong on Australia

- **Marcia Langton**
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Nicole Kidman and Brandon Walters, who star in Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*.

GERMAINE Greer should catch up on Australia's "history wars". During the past decade, nitpicking writers persecuted and pilloried historians of the tragedy that befell Aborigines. The denialists must be rubbing their hands with glee at the claims made by Greer, especially her inaccuracies, in her castigating and misleading assertions about Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*.

Her attacks on me are partly in response to my own review of the film in *The Age*. I was a senior consultant to the television series *First Australians* and worked with often distressing historical records for almost seven years; nine months after the apology to the stolen generations by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, I was thrilled with Luhrmann's compassion and good humour, and his visionary way of overcoming the guilt complex that poisons our national debate, and, as we have seen, Greer's view of her homeland and Aboriginal people.

The film is a romance, not a documentary. Greer wants to have it both ways, dismissing it with standards applied to documentaries and Tory history, and describing the plot as "Mills & Boon".

Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman depict the unlikely attraction between an English lady and an Australian drover, each widowed. The love story hinges on the racial prejudices of the frontier: The drover's wife was an Aboriginal woman during a time when liaisons

between white and black were outlawed in Australia. In order to win the army contract for live cattle, Lady Sarah asks the drover to lead a drove more than 1000 kilometres across the rivers and plains between Faraway Downs and Darwin. These awe-inspiring landscapes provide the setting for yet another love story. Lady Sarah develops a strong maternal relationship with the orphaned Aboriginal boy, Nullah, and it is this element of the plot that raises Greer's ire.

She claims that "Lady Sarah is no more likely to raise Nullah herself than she is to do her own housework". She is wrong. Many Aboriginal children were raised in loving homes by white people in the outback. Not all children removed from their homes suffered the terrible fate of the stolen children.

She claims that Luhrmann has sugar-coated the history of Aboriginal-settler relations in the northern cattle industry and concocted the end of child removal and assimilation. The last card in the movie states very clearly that the assimilation policy did not finish till the early 1970s.

Australia is a "fake epic", she opines in high dudgeon; it "shows Aboriginal people as intimately involved in the development of the Lucky Country", referring to the book by Frank Hardy, who wrote about the Gurindji "walk-off" in *The Unlucky Australians*, published in 1968, following his travels across the inland and period of living with the Gurindji. The strike by Aboriginal workers occurred close to the setting of *Australia*, where the absentee landlord Lord Vestey of Britain exploited the Gurindji people in slave conditions at his Wave Hill Station until 1968, when they went on strike, never returning to work for him, and instigating the long campaign for Aboriginal land rights.

They were indeed intimately involved in the evolution of the nation. *Australia* is set in an earlier period, and cleverly brings together several of the themes of the dark history of Australia's settlement. Whereas Greer claims that none of the dire conditions and poverty of station life are shown in the film, the first close encounter between Lady Sarah and Nullah takes place in a typical makeshift "humpy" in a native camp scene, where Lady Sarah sings to Nullah a few lines of *Over the Rainbow* to give us the hint that Dorothy has left Kansas and arrived in Oz. I lived in just such a place in my childhood and attended cinemas such as the one hilariously depicted in Luhrmann's wartime Darwin.

Fortunately, most Australian readers of her article will not be fooled by Greer. During the month before the release of *Australia*, an estimated 400,000 Australians were glued to their televisions watching the seven-part television documentary series *First Australians*. Directed and produced by the award-winning indigenous filmmakers Rachel Perkins and Darren Dale, the series has caused a tsunami of critical discussion across the nation for its candid, complex account of several slices of Australian history. It begins with the events that followed the landing of the First Fleet at Port Jackson in 1788 and concludes at the end of the long struggle for the recognition of native title with the famous Mabo case in the High Court. So much for Greer's claim that until there are Aboriginal filmmakers the truth will not be told.

Contrary to Greer's assertion, during World War II, the Japanese flew 64 raids on Darwin and 33 raids on other targets in northern Australia. It is believed that between 900 and 1100 people were killed. The "Mission Island" of the film is Bathurst Island, and it was bombed before the onslaught on Darwin.

I found particularly distasteful Greer's comments about Brandon Walters, the charismatic Aboriginal child who plays Nullah and carries the film. Greer writes ominously of young Brandon, aged 12: "We can only pray that Walters will escape the fate of other Aboriginal stars."

Intimating that like two other Aboriginal actors, he will fall victim, inevitably, to alcoholism and depression, and spend time in prison, she seethes about his success: "We can only hope that Luhrmann's production company has grasped the complexity of the issues that will now face their child star, but the omens are not good."

This is vintage Greer: Aborigines are doomed to failure, to misery and to the situation she left here as a young woman. I know that many thousands of Australians are praying for a bright and happy future for Brandon. I also pray that he does not suffer any more of Greer's cleverly disguised contempt for Aboriginal people, her desperate need to stereotype Aboriginal victimhood and nefarious white Australian attempts to oppress us.

And, yes, I do congratulate Baz Luhrmann for his film.

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