



English Passengers: A Novel

By Matthew Kneale

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Meanwhile, an aboriginal in Tasmania named Peevay recounts his people's struggles against the invading British, a story that begins in 1824, moves into the present with approach of the English passengers in 1857, and extends into the future in 1870. These characters and many others come together in a storm of voices that vividly bring a past age to life.

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English Passengers: A Novel By Matthew Kneale Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Christopher Columbus was looking for a passage to India when he ran full-tilt boogie into the Americas. One of the narrators of Matthew Kneale's ambitious historical novel *English Passengers* has more modest aspirations: Captain Illiam Quillian Kewley wants only to smuggle a little tobacco, brandy, and French pornography from the Isle of Mann to a secluded beach in England. Yet somehow in the process, he and his crew end up weighing anchor for Australia. Worse, they're forced to carry three temperamental Englishmen bound for Tasmania on a mission to discover the exact location of the Garden of Eden. The year is 1857, and the study of geology is beginning to make serious inroads into areas of religious doctrine. When the Reverend Geoffrey Wilson runs across a scientific treatise that puts the age of Silurian limestone somewhere in the neighborhood of a hundred thousand years, he is scandalized: "This was despite the fact that the Bible tells, and with great clarity, that the earth was created a mere six thousand years ago." His many attempts to prove the Bible's accuracy lead, eventually, to a scientific expedition comprising himself, Timothy Renshaw, a dilettante botanist, and Dr. Thomas Potter.

Now jump back 30 years, to 1828, when a revolution of sorts is stirring on the island of Tasmania. Over the years, white settlers have been encroaching on aboriginal land and relations have deteriorated into violence. At the heart of the action is Peevay, a young half-breed abandoned by his aborigine mother, who had been kidnapped and raped by a white escaped convict. Now his vengeful mother is leading a war against the whites, and Peevay, desperate to win her love, has joined her. Chapters from the past narrated by Peevay and augmented by letters and dispatches from white settlers alternate with the sections told by Kewley, Wilson, Renshaw, and Potter. Eventually, of course, the two time lines intersect with momentous results.

War, mutiny, shipwreck, and not a little farce make *English Passengers* a gripping read, but it is Matthew Kneale's literary ventriloquism that renders it remarkable. In a novel with so many different points of view, the individuality of each voice stands out. There is, for instance, the mutinous Dr. Potter, whose descent into paranoia and egomania results in diary entries reminiscent of a 19th-century psychotic Bridget Jones: "Manxmen = *treacherous* even to v. last. Self heard Brew (lashed to mainmast as per usual) instructing helmsman to steer *N.N.W.* When self questioned he re. this he claiming we = carried into *Bay of Biscay* by difficult sea currents + must set course to avoid Breton Peninsular. He pointing to distant point of land to *N.N.E.* claiming this = *Brittany*. Self = doubtful." But perhaps the most compelling voice in *English Passengers* belongs to Peevay, who paints a vivid picture of aboriginal life in a foreign tongue he nonetheless makes his own:

When we sat so in the dark, after our eating, Tartoyen told us stories--secret stories that I will not say even now--about the moon and sun, and how everyone got made, from men and wallaby to seal and kangaroo rat and so. Also he told who was in those rocks and mountains and stars, and how they went there. Until, by and by, I could hear stories as we walked across the world, and divine how it got so, till I knew the world as if he was some family fellow of mine.

By the close of this epic tale, the world Peevay had known is gone forever and the lives of the Manx sailors and English passengers have been irrevocably changed. Based on real events in Tasmanian history, Matthew Kneale's novel delivers a home truth about Australia's brutal colonial past, even as it conveys the wonder and allure of the age of exploration. --Alix Wilber

From Publishers Weekly

The brutal hand of British imperialism provides the foundation for this broad historical swashbuckler about the English colonization of Tasmania in the early and mid-19th century. U.K. author Kneale debuts stateside with this lengthy novel of hapless smugglers, desperate convicts, simpering bureaucrats, mad vicars and displaced aborigines. The English passengers are the Reverend Wilson, a vicar determined to prove that Tasmania was the site of the original Garden of Eden, and Doctor Potter, a ruthless scientist equally determined to prove Wilson wrong and gain fame in the victory. They're on their way to Tasmania aboard the good ship *Sincerity*, commanded by Captain Iliam Quillian Kewley, a high-seas smuggler and rascal of renown. This is an unpleasant voyage for everyone, especially Kewley, for he has been forced to charter his ship in order to escape punishment for dodging customs duties on his illicit cargoes. Storms, pirates and foul tempers, however, are just the prelude to the hardships that await everyone when they land in Tasmania. British self-righteousness in forcing civilization and Christianity on the aborigines causes wholesale slaughter and subjugation of the islanders, and the natives are more than just restless. Wilson and Potter's overland expedition is guided by Peevay, a wily aborigine not about to knuckle under to the white man. Of course, the expedition is a bloody disaster. Murder, madness, betrayal, mutiny and shipwreck spice up the action and provide intricate plot twists with surprising and satisfying resolutions, particularly for Captain Kewley. This rich tale is told by 20 different voices skipping back and forth across the years, but somehow Kneale manages to keep the reader from becoming confused. Kneale's careful research and colorful storytelling result in an impressive epic. BOMC featured selection. (Mar.)
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From Library Journal

It is 1857, and Reverend Geoffrey Wilson sets out on his mission to prove scientifically the literal historical truth of the Bible by locating the Garden of Eden. However, the Reverend has placed Eden in Van Diemen's Land or Tasmania, a British prison colony. This sets the stage for Kneale's Whitbread-winning examination of mid-19th-century British colonial life. The work mixes a wide range of participants with their own agendas, e.g., the ship's captain, who attempts to sell his contraband cargo of tobacco and brandy while dealing with his passengers, and Peevey, a mixed white aboriginal who bridges the gap between the two worlds. *English Passengers* is further highlighted through the use of seven readers (Ron Keith, Simon Prebble, and Davina Porter, among others) to tell the story from multiple perspectives. Kneale's deeply researched work provides an excellent window into the British colonization of Australia and the savage treatment of the natives. Recommended for all audio collections. Stephen L. Hupp, West Virginia Univ. at Parkersburg Lib.
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Mandy Conway:

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