

# A Few Right Thinking Men by Sulari Gentill

Crime Fiction Related Text

*M.G. Blenkins*

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## Overview

Crime Fiction remains a particularly popular genre and appeals to readers of all ages. As a genre it continues to evolve in accord with new values and concerns of readerships. Texts written in the Crime Fiction genre have the capacity to embody and reflect the social, historical and cultural contexts in which they are set.

Secondary students find the Crime Fiction genre appealing and engaging – whether in the medium of prose fiction, short story or film.

New South Wales' HSC Extension I English candidates studying the genre elective of Crime Fiction are required to familiarise themselves with the textual and stylistic conventions of this popular genre and its distinctive sub genres. The students consider and critically appraise these conventions in light of the prescribed texts and other texts, which they appraise through wide reading and reflections. Students are also required to consider the conventions used by the composers of crime fiction, and develop their capacity to represent the Crime Fiction genre in their own composing.

## Considerations

Students may consider how Sulari Gentill's *A Few Right Thinking Men*—the first in the Rowland Sinclair series—adheres to the popularly accepted conventions of Crime Fiction, viz: a complicated plot structure; a crime; an investigation; clues and violence. Moreover, students may appraise the text in terms of the various sub genres of Crime Fiction. *A Few Right Thinking Men* set in Australia during the inter-war period arguably possesses many of the attributes of an Intuitionist or Classical Crime Fiction work; although on occasions the characters are engaged in action and violence that readers more readily associate with the Hard-boiled Crime Fiction sub genre.

## Plot Overview

*A Few Right Thinking Men* follows the exploits of Rowland Sinclair, an amateur sleuth, as he tries to solve an ugly, perplexing crime: the murder of his elderly Uncle Roland. Rowland, or Rowly as he is affectionately called by his friends, is independently wealthy by virtue of his family's pastoral empire in rural New South Wales. He is derived from the conservative elite, is a graduate of Oxford and the Ashton Art School, and has found fulfillment and purpose finessing his artistic expression. Significantly, the benevolent Rowland has adopted a band of left-wing Bohemian friends who effectively juxtapose the conservatism and respectability of his wealthy family.

The novel's plot involves Rowland's quest to discover the truth about his uncle's demise after the initial police inquiries seem to lose momentum. In the course of a complex plot – which

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includes Rowland's discovery that he has inherited his uncle's share in the morally dubious 50-50 Club in Sydney's seedy Darlinghurst - Rowland interviews a string of shady characters. He completes an undercover stint, posing as a portrait artist for the coveted Archibald, to gain the confidence of the New Guard's inner sanctum, and also works cooperatively with police who seem to have had only limited success with their own line of investigation.

The novel takes the reader through both the privileged and destitute suburbs of Sydney. Its plot negotiates twists and turns, introduces a number of red herrings until the crime's perpetrators are exposed and the logic of the crime's real motive is also disclosed. Significantly, the crime investigation in *A Few Right Thinking Men* is conducted amidst the tensions between the extreme right and left of Australia's political spectrum in the 1930s. The reader is introduced to a notable characters from the period - including New South Wales' controversial Premier J.T. Lang, the Commander-in-Chief of the New Guard Lieutenant-Colonel Eric Campbell DSO and Sydney underworld identity Phil 'the Jew' Jeffs. The protagonist's investigation reveals much about his late uncle's rather risqué business interests and much speculation therefore abounds about the motive behind his bloody murder.

## *Setting – Context*

*A Few Right Thinking Men* is set in the complex political and social tensions that consumed Australia during the Great Depression. The city of Sydney is braced for the completion and official opening of the Harbour Bridge - which to many is seen as a wasteful indulgence. The economic climate provides a crime novel setting in which social disorder and manifestations of criminal activity seemingly go hand in hand. The hyperbole and banter of extremists at venues such as Hyde Park's Domain fuel suspicion and unease on a grand scale - and it is this unease which provides a tangible rallying point for Campbell's New Guard's quasi-military and often violent activities.

Much of the novel is set in the wealthy suburb of Woollahra - the Sinclair family's Sydney residence, *Woodlands House*. This grand home served as the Sinclairs' city residence when they were not at their vast grazing property near Yass. Tellingly, the opulent abode, supported by an array of loyal staff, remains detached from the economic crisis that has left so many people impoverished. It is noted in Chapter I "*It was hard to believe that so many struggled and despaired under the weight of the Great Depression; the leafy streets of Woollahra seemed beyond the reach of the economic crisis.*" The novel's unfolding plot also takes the reader to *Oaklea* the Sinclair family's grazing property. The staid and conservative world at *Oaklea* seemingly contrasts the disorder and informality which characterises *Woodlands* where Rowland is the master.

The composer has reiterated the novel's context through the inclusion of newspaper extracts at the outset of each chapter. These capture the atmosphere of late 1931 and the tensions within New South Wales and Australian society. The social and political mood of fear and pending crime waves is mentioned - "*Burglaries from the person, often with firearms and violence, are now daily events, with the meanest classes of thefts reported from all quarters.*"

The responder notes that the grand home of *Woodlands* has become the refuge for Rowland's Bohemian friends - intelligentsia, artists and poets. His friends, Edna, Clyde and Milton are unlikely social peers for a young man raised in a privileged family governed by conservative

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traditions and values. Rowland's conservative brother, Wilfred, the family's array of loyal servants, and the police all view Rowland's friends with suspicion and reservation.

## *Characters*

The novel is underpinned by effective characterisation. The plot revolves around an array of primary, secondary and tertiary characters and their interactions. Key characters include:

**ROWLAND SINCLAIR (THE YOUNGER):** an unusual protagonist and accidental investigator keen to establish the reason for his uncle's murder. He possesses vast personal wealth and seems content to occupy himself finessing his artistic skills. His gentlemanly attire of expensive tweeds and suits is often splattered with paint and smells of artists' turpentine. He is a young man, has traveled abroad and has studied at Oxford University - where ironically he found himself looked down upon by the British. Due to his age, Rowland did not serve in World War One with the 1<sup>st</sup> AIF. The war, and the untimely death of one of his brothers in France, are important influences on Rowland and his family. His character views the world with dry humour, and since his is the primary point of view, Rowland's acerbic observations set the tone of the narrative.

Significantly, Rowland works in constructively with a young and capable police officer, Delaney, who does not immediately dismiss Rowland and his artist friends. As the plot develops a mutual respect is cultivated between the wealthy young artist and the astute police officer.

**ROWLAND SINCLAIR (THE ELDER):** the victim of the novel's major crime which becomes the focus of the subsequent investigation. He is a jovial, single gentleman who also resides in Sydney: "...a large man whose body and features spoke of years of indulgence." He is described as "...an aging playboy" and dines regularly at the fashionable Masonic Club. Rowland can relate to his young nephew as a fellow "black sheep" in the conservative Sinclair family. In the initial stages of the novel he does not appear to have an enemy or concern in the world; however, as the plot unfolds it is suspected he had definite connections with Sydney's criminal element, sly groggery and prostitution. Rowland is known rather affectionately as "Sinkers" at the 50-50 Club.

**WILFRED SINCLAIR: ROWLAND'S OLDER BROTHER:** Wilfred, as head of the Sinclair family, is a pragmatic and politically astute member of the squattocracy. He oversees the family's pastoral empire and business affairs. Wilfred epitomises Australia's colonial roots and reflects a time when Australian men considered themselves British. He disapproves of his youngest brother's lifestyle and friends and at times their relationship seems to be more that of father and prodigal son, than fraternal.

**EDNA HIGGINS:** A femme-fatale and Rowland's *Beatrice*, Edna is a sculptress and nude model. She sits for Rowland and other artists and is fiercely committed to her own art and

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ambition. Spirited and passionate, Edna is Rowland's muse, his support and his friend. Although she clearly has feelings for Rowland Sinclair, she refuses to accept him. Edna is unwilling to risk any compromise to her art and her freedom. She seems unaffected by conservative expectations though she is able to fit in seamlessly at upper-class social gatherings.

**CLIVE WATSON-JONES:** The fellow artist whose name Rowland borrows to pull off his subterfuge. Although a member of Rowland's Bohemian band of friends, Clyde is conscientious and steady. There is an old-fashioned decency about him and he often serves as Rowland's voice of caution.

**MILTON ISSACS:** A self proclaimed poet, Milton Isaacs is a slightly dubious but nevertheless endearing character. Through his connections, Rowland gains an audience with the worst criminal elements. Indeed the author hints that Milton himself has a past that is much less than respectable. He acts as provocateur throughout the novel, encouraging Rowland into risky schemes, often devising those schemes. Initially Milton's motives seem a little suspect but by the end of the novel his loyalty is clear.

**THE POLICE:** The protagonists deal with various police including Peters and Delaney: sincere and competent. These contrast the comical Inspector Bicult. The senior police officer charged with monitoring the actions of the New Guard in the early 1930s, Superintendent Bill McKay, is also featured in Rowland's investigations.

## *Language & Stylistic Techniques*

Dialogue is important in this novel. Gentill effectively elicits the register and restraint of the 1930s using language to evoke the era for the reader. Mention is made of Rowland's "posh accent" and it is something which becomes the subject of good natured parody amongst his friends.

*"When you're out with Campbell," and at this point Milton adopted a very British accent, "it will be I who is Rowland Sinclair, gentleman and all round good chap. I'll be here, smoking pipes and drinking brandy with all the other jolly good fellows ... pip-pip and all that." p171*

On the other hand, Wilfred chastises Rowland for the "common way in which he used the King's English". p105

Whilst the distinctions between the dialogue spoken by Rowland and his friends are subtle, Phil "The Jew" Jeffs is markedly more colloquial. Again Gentill uses this shift in register to recreate the atmosphere of the seedy nightclub in which Rowland meets the underworld figure.

*Then Jeffs grinned. "Sinkers wasn't stupid ... 'Spose I shouldn't be shocked that his nephew isn't either. First tell me, Sinclair, why'd you think I'd even have a clue about what happened to Sinkers?" p233*

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Gentill also employs a technique of using nicknames only in dialogue. The characters refer to each other with these shortened forms (Rowly for Rowland, Milt for Milton, Ed for Edna, Wil for Wilfred etc) but the only full names are used in the third person narrative. This creates an inherent intimacy in the dialogue without overt statement.

## *Adherence to the Crime Fiction's conventions*

The responder will note that the text presents a fresh context for the crime fiction. The 1930s Australia is an exciting backdrop that allows suspicions to be cast in various quarters.

### **Ineffective Police**

The text introduces the conventional police as incompetent or at least uninterested – and this is indeed common to many of Agatha Christie's novels in which the police seemingly overlook clues and fail to make deductions and inferences. Similarly, the HSC text *The Skull Beneath the Skin* by P.D. James depicts police who are seemingly inferior to the text's protagonist, Cordelia Grey.

The accidental sleuth works with police whom he trusts. This trust and confidence is important to the crime being solved. In *A Few Right Thinking Men*, the protagonist establishes a rapport with Detective Constable Delaney, who risks the ire of his superiors to help Rowland, who is essentially a well-dressed vigilante.

### **Forensics**

The story takes place essentially before "the lab" became a feature in crime investigation. In the style of classic crime-fiction the protagonist questions, eavesdrops and deduces his way to the crime's resolution.

### **Suspicion of Servants**

The novel commences with the police's initial suspicion of the servant class. This observation is often evident in Christie's novels and is subsequently satirised in Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*. Noteworthy, is the fact that Rowland's Sinclair is cast as a defender of the persecuted servant class. His kindness to the aged Mrs Donnelly is endearing to modern sensibilities at least.

*"Don't worry, Mrs. Donnelly," he said a little tentatively. "You can stay on here, for as long as you want. We won't be selling the house." Wilfred usually made such decisions, but Rowland resolved to talk to him. If worst came to worst, surely his uncle's staff could be retained at Woodlands House. The Sinclairs had always been good employers. p42*

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*He suddenly realised where the Inspector's questions were leading. "I say, you don't think Mrs. Donnelly had anything to do with it? That's preposterous!" p54*

## Plot structure

The novel is characterised by a complex plot structure and the introduction of many major and minor characters ranging from elderly chauffeur, Johnston, to the Premier of New South Wales J.T. Lang and the charismatic Commander and Chief of the New Guard, Eric Campbell.

## Red Herrings

The composer has utilised several red herrings. The looming financial predicament makes financial gain an obvious motive. This is complicated further when it is revealed that the elder Rowland Sinclair held interests in a dubious night club connected with Sydney's underworld. As the chief beneficiary of his uncle's will, Rowland encounters the dangerous men with whom his uncle was in business. A pair of fishnet stockings found at the victim's home also introduces the possibility of an illicit liaison and a crime of passion. Furthermore, Wilfred Sinclair, initially at least, is not above suspicion. On a number of occasions he speaks of his late uncle as an object of frustration and embarrassment.

*"Yes." Wilfred exhaled with vexed disapproval. "I don't want to speak ill of the dead, Rowly, but it would be just like the old bugger to have some harlot on the side." p69*

Throughout Gentill adheres to the convention of playing fair with the reader. All the facts are presented giving the reader the information necessary to resolve the crime himself.

## Intertextuality

Gentill peppers the text with literary references which reflect the popular fiction of the time – Milton's love of Conan-Doyle's Sherlock Holmes for example - and provide an interesting interplay between the characters (ie: Milton's tendency to appropriate the works of English poets and Rowland's ability to identify and attribute the verse). Reference is made to various newspapers, both conservative and left-wing. Many of the chapters are preceded by a relevant extract taken from an actual newspaper article of the time. There is even a somewhat ironic allusion to D.H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo*, which was written when Lawrence was in Thirroul and featured clandestine armies in NSW. Rowland dismisses the novel as "a little far-fetched".

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## Discussion & Text Analysis: Focus Questions:

1. To what extent does Gentill's *A Few Right Thinking Men* adhere to the recognised conventions of the crime fiction genre? Into which sub genre of crime fiction would you classify the novel? Justify your response with evidence from the text to substantiate your arguments.
2. Discuss this supposition: Rowland Sinclair's character is atypical of the conventional investigator, yet in many ways is typical of amateur investigators depicted in crime fiction texts.
3. Consider the parallels between Gentill's *A Few Right Thinking Men* and P.D. James' *The Skull Beneath the Skin*. In your response consider the depictions and functions of the investigators, police, victim, and context or setting.
4. What elements of *A Few Right Thinking Men* do you feel are explored and possibly satirised by Tom Stoppard in his play script *The Real Inspector Hound*?
5. How effectively has Gentill established a particular time and context in *A Few Right Thinking Men*? Is context significant to the text's overall representation or is it irrelevant to the actual crime investigation?
6. Explain the function of three (3) characters in the novel apart from the central protagonist Rowland Sinclair. Ensure that your explanations are supported with valid textual evidence.
7. Crime fiction is said to too often exploit particularly complex plot structures. To what extent is this true of Gentill's *A Few Right Thinking Men*?
8. As crime fiction readers are we satisfied that social and moral order has been restored at the novel's conclusion? What, if any, questions are left pending?
9. What values and attitudes are represented in and through the novel *A Few Right Thinking Men*? In what ways are those values and attitudes inconsistent with the reader's contemporary world?
10. One common criticism of crime fiction is that many characters lack depth and dimension. Which characters appear to lack depth?

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## *Composing – Creative Writing*

1. In Chapter 4 of *A Few Right Thinking Men* Constables Peters and Delaney call to *Woodlands House* in the early hours of the morning. Imagine their first impression of Rowland and his house guests Milton, Clyde and Edna. Compose the dialogue between the two police officers as they travel back to their station. Base this exchange on their observations and initial suspicions at the outset of this criminal investigation.
2. In Chapter 6 the reader is introduced to the somewhat comical Inspector Bicult as he interviews Rowland about his uncle's house and staff. Write a series of notes that Bicult would have recorded in the course of his interview with Rowland.
3. As the criminal investigation unfolds the reader is introduced to a number of dubious characters including Phil "the Jew" Jeffs, Dr Reginald Stuart-Jones and Herbert Poynton. List the characters that you as a reader find suspicious within the context of the novel. For each of these characters suggest what they contribute to the novel.
4. Compose a letter to the novel's author in which you critically appraise the character of Rowland Sinclair and one other central character in the novel.
5. Compose a letter from Mary Brown to her sister, which explores what Rowland Sinclair's housekeeper may think of her employer, his friends and the goings on at *Woodlands House*.