

# a long-ish review-ish post about *The Call* by Peadar Ó Guilín

## Out with the Bathwater

The psychospiritual perils of displacing a whole people along with their mythological heritage

*In this reading of Peadar Ó Guilín's The Call, I wonder how Australian perceptions could shift to make room for truth in our history.*

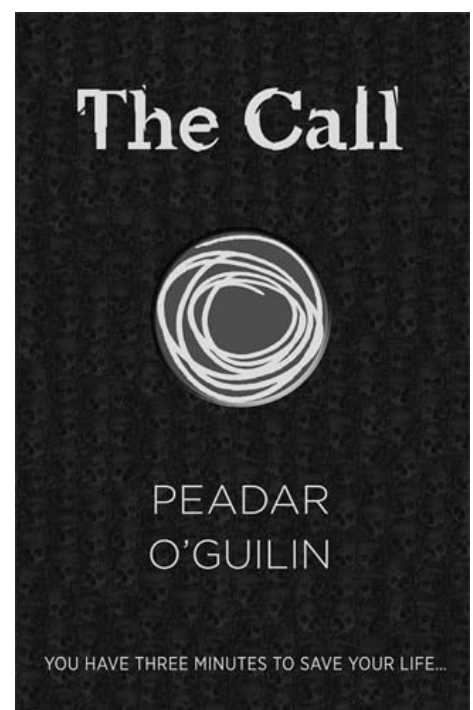
*That said, DISCLAIMER: I ended up writing more than expected about the parallels between The Call and the black history of Australia. It may need to be stated up front that I am as white as it comes, so I recognise the awkwardness of me speaking about the experience of First Nations people. Their experience is not my story to tell. That said, my experience of Australian culture without the inclusion of First Nations people is something I can speak about. I wish our history hadn't gone down the way it did, and I live with a longing that our communities were informed by the wisdom of our indigenous elders.*

*You can [read this review online](#) if that's how you (sc)roll.*

Ó Guilín, P. (2017). [The Call](#). David Fickling Books.\*

Sometimes oppo finds end up being among the best books I've read. Mostly not. I was saying to a friend the other day that sourcing your books almost exclusively from op shops is a gamble. Oppo books are, come to think of it, the books that others have discarded. So Nikki and I are thinking of dropping this practice – life is just too short to spend hours over months wading through the dross in the hopes of finding a gem.

We often dropp \$30 or \$40 at the oppo and come home with maybe fifteen books, which sit on the shelf for a long time because we know mostly they are long shots. I'm reading only fifteen or twenty books a year at the moment, so we're accumulating a lot of books that



we may never read if we do this even four or five times a year. And we have plans to live in a bus one day, so gathering books at this rate is just no longer practical.

But getting rid of unread books is difficult. I bundled up five beer cartons recently, all set to take them back to the oppo or spread them among book exchanges across Brisbane. First they sat in the cupboard for a few months. One has now been moved to the boot of the car, where it is easily forgotten until we need to put shopping in there. And one box we took to our local cafe, but there, as always, before wholesale disposing of those books, I rifled through them and kept some aside – plus I grabbed a few from the cafe’s exchange. I estimate that in the process of despatching five boxes I will rifle through and keep around one box. We’ll be down four out of five boxes, which is better than five boxes in the cupboard.

As for buying new books, we’re thinking: instead of dropping \$40 on fifteen books at a time, we could spend the same amount on a single book that we’ve researched through reviews and other recommendations. We’ll be spending the same amount, but more likely to get a quality book each time.

We won’t be *not* buying books from oppos. There’s a lot of joy to be had from scouring the dross to find an unlikely gem. I don’t want to forego the chance we’ll find books like *The Call*, which is what I came here to write about.

*The Call* is something like an Irish Hunger Games, which sounds crap I know. It even has the cover line: “You have three minutes to save your life ...”, which turns out to be a furphy. And the blurb is not much better, but Nikki read this first and my guinea pig didn’t die.

We have a coding system we use to mark oppo finds, and *The Call* has this:

NCWCOPS08/20COVID-19BRAIN<sub>DI</sub>

which means, “Nikki’s Choice, Windsor Church Op Shop, August 2020, bought for iso, Bodhi Read After [If Nikki <sub>Digs It?</sub>]

So off I went, reading a genre thriller because Nikki said it was good, and she was right.

It doesn't have the deep, overtly literary magic I love in a book, but it's not genre-thriller trash either. It has some really cool dark-fantasy elements, and a low-lying subtextual commentary on the moral perils of colonialism – or the cultural hazards of denying our mythological heritage, if that's the way you want to read it. The language is good, clear, concise and evocative in a subtle, suggestive way.

But what's it about!?

Everyone wants to know what a book is *about*. No one ever asks what it's *around*, though the words could be interchangeable: language can only ever *refer to*, or point at the subject it describes, as the finger points at the moon. With especially difficult subjects – either complex or heavy or potentially triggering – I find the best authors, including Ó Guilín, do their grappling with metaphor. In this way the book does have a certain literary charm – it doesn't beat you over the head with too much theme exposition. It reads like Ó Guilín was confident in the metaphor, in my reading about colonialism and its destruction of mythological heritage.

And it does this by being about teenagers who must defend themselves against the murderous attacks of the Sidhe, fairies seeking vengeance for the treaty that condemned them to exile and eternal suffering in the Grey Land.

Now, I'm an Australian reading this book, and it would be remiss of me to not mention that these themes brought to mind my dim awareness of our own black history on this continent. I say "dim" because I'm aware of the atrocious nature of the colonisation that's been done here, but not of the details or of the full extent. A report is being developed about the [200 years of injustice](#) committed against the First Nations people of Australia in the spirit of empire building here, so we'll see what that reveals. Meanwhile, a book like *The Call* might help us get in touch with the pain and sorrow of a whole people displaced by the force of an invading power that writes its own laws to justify the continuing occupation of a stolen country.

And I mentioned earlier the cultural hazards of denying our mythological heritage. There is something subtle (almost unspoken) about this in *The Call* that parallels our contemporary

experience of colonial invasion in Australia. In *The Call* it is not expressly stated what Ireland is missing (out on) as a result of having dispossessed the Sidhe from the Many Coloured Land into the Grey Land. But there are allusions: the country is running out of resources because a supernatural barrier has cut off trade with the rest of the world by; there is no benevolent exchange between Ireland and the Grey Land – there is no access to the beauty and fun that exchange with the fairies might bring to Ireland; the country is bankrupt, both economically and culturally.

It might be said that Australia is not bankrupt, that our economy is doing just fine, thank you very much, and this would be debatable. The whole Western economic system is groaning under the weight of its own definitions of growth and progress. And our culture is certainly suffering as a result of having displaced one of the most ancient populations of the world, along with the wisdom that accumulates after millennia of continuous culture that recognised our symbiotic interconnectedness with our planetary habitat.

The difference between *The Call* and Australia is that we managed to achieve in 200 years what it took Ó Guilín's fictional Ireland 2000 years to achieve – and the displaced have not yet risen up to take back their country. The First Nations people of Australia do not have the malevolent streak depicted of fairies in *The Call*. And their powers are ones of perception rather than projection. If you're reading *The Call* in Australia, there might be something to be gleaned about how our own perceptions could shift to make room for a more comprehensive representation of truth in our history.

2000 years ago, the Sidhe were exiled by Ireland, and now they are “calling” the nation's youth to the Grey Land. In preparation for being Called, children as young as 10 are raised in survival-college boarding schools. On their first night at school, first years are drugged and left naked to wake up in the woods, because this is how they will find themselves upon being Called. They can take nothing with them across the threshold between



worlds, and they can bring nothing back except their Testimony. Brings a whole new level to the bushwalking principle of taking nothing but photos and leaving nothing but footprints.

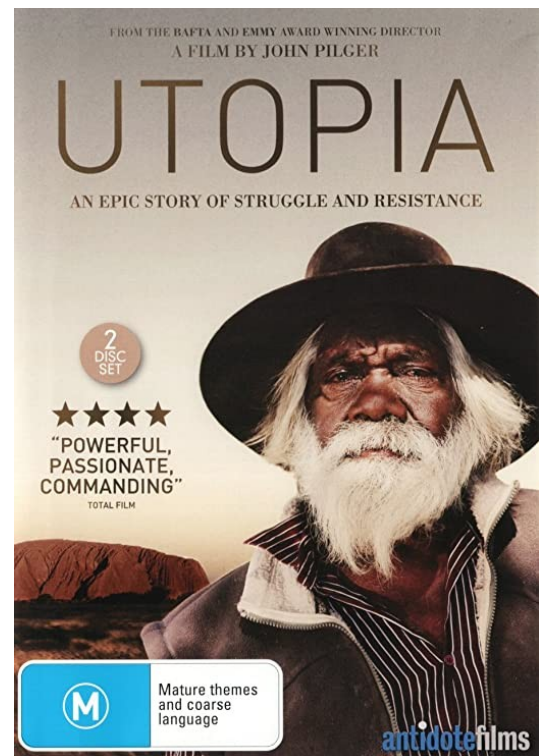
When they are Called, the kids have 24 hours of Grey Land time to escape the Sidhe, who hunt and torture the kids in the most fantastic and grotesque ways. If they evade capture, the kids return to Ireland, usually not unscathed – often mutilated both physically and psychologically.

The depictions of these grotesqueries are as tasteful as they are horrifying, and their proximity with the real-world setting of Ireland gives them a distinctly magic-realist vibe. I celebrated this literary approach when I wrote about *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* by Shokoofeh Azar. Magic-realist metaphor is such a beautiful and effective way of leavening difficult themes enough that they are digestible for readers, even palatable. Hearing about genocidal atrocities is depressing, but worse, it can be alienating and traumatising. I felt this way about John Pilger's *Utopia* documentary about the plight of the dispossessed First

Nations people in Australia. I applaud the intention to expose difficult truths about Australian history and the doco inspired me to be more conscious of our indigenous heritage, but watching the film was hard going. I imagine it would be disheartening for some viewers.

Not so with *The Call*!

After many of the teenage characters are taken out by the Call and the training college is attacked by the Sidhe, the story ends on a note of optimism for “the Nation”. That’s not a spoiler – the book is the first in a duology, so it’s not much to deduce that the first book will end with some kind of protagonist-triumph cliffhanger.





It's a mixed triumph though, come to think of it: "the Nation" has prevailed against a retaliating enemy hoard, but is that a good thing? Who's the enemy here? The vengeful Sidhe or Ireland the original aggressor?

You'll have to find out by reading the book!

The kicker for me though (a white fella in a country with a black history – a descendent of the original aggressor), is that *The Call* represents the psychospiritual perils of not just displacing a whole people from their homeland but of having to dwell in that country after displacing the whole mythological heritage that was contained in the memories and stories of the displaced peoples. It's very much a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

The Sidhe are fucked, to put it bluntly: their only joy in the Grey Land is mutilating the teenage descendants of the Irish who stole their land. And the Irish are not much better off: they don't even have joy, just a relentless and fearful defence of "the Nation", which is falling to pieces around them; alienated from the mythological richness and wisdom of the Sidhe.

The Sidhe's otherworldly beauty is often described in the book, and this is the key for me reading this metaphor: what beauty are we missing out on as the descendants of violently colonial forebears who pushed all traditional societies aside to make way for the imposition of industrial capitalism and the free market of materialist consumption? The Sidhe represent the mystical and the magical, the other aspects of our (human) being that are derided by the mechanistic reductive narrative as being supernatural and therefore somehow less real. They represent for me all the beauty, wonder and mystery we deny in ourselves, recognised among spiritual traditions for eons, and coming to the awareness now of pioneering scientific and psychological circles – among the new physics and the transpersonal realms of inquiry into the true nature of reality.

We cannot hope to have psychospiritual wellness when the dominant narrative of our culture tells only one side of the story about what it means to be human. It is becoming increasingly obvious to many more people these days that the human experience is about more than just mindlessly hoarding and consuming material wealth, and books like *The Call* can be read as

dystopian warnings, as cautionary tales about the horrors and suffering we can expect to perpetuate if we continue denying the mystical, magical and transpersonal aspects of our being.

Without the mythological heritage displaced all over the world by colonialism and industrial capitalism, a lot of us humans are left feeling like meat sacks, wondering what the point of it all is. The metaphors of myth enable us to make meaning in the world through story, and without these meaning-making traditions we are only half human. Where are you getting your myth in this world? How are you making meaning in our “post”-colonial world?

All this to think about from an oppo find! and thanks to Nikki being my guinea pig. This is why I'll still be foraging at op shops now and then. Maybe I'll just take a carton's worth with me each time I browse.

Another thing I do that is weird, but with books I have actually sought out and bought new: I put off reading books I feel confident will be good, and prioritise instead allllll the books that I know may not hit the mark, but are worth a punt. It could be called the *Home Alone* mentality.

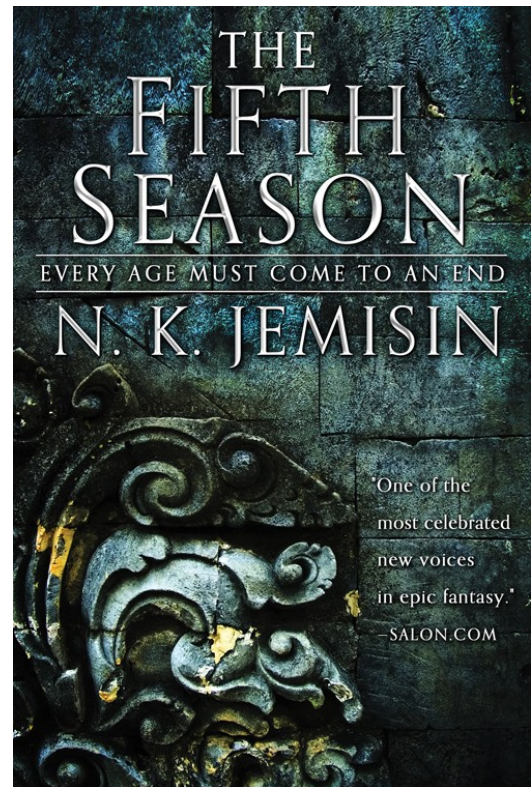
Remember in *Home Alone*, the boy doesn't use the rollerblades he got for Christmas because he was afraid he would damage them and no longer have these pristine rollerblades? I guess it's about preserving anticipation – I've heard anticipation is 90% of why we enjoy (the pursuit of) gratification, though that sounds like a paradox

I always feel better about life – more able to cope, even – when I know I've got a good book to read. This could be a book I am actually reading – the thought of getting back to it in the evening keeps me buoyed throughout the day – or it could be a book on the shelf – knowing I've got a cache of good reading. Geez, it's like I'm some kind of literary prepper, preserving all the nutrient-dense books for when the apocalypse forces us all into bunkers!

No more!

I'm starting N K Jemisin's [The Broken Earth](#) trilogy next, because I am confident it will be good. And we are definitely buying the sequel in the Grey Land duology, as part of our new approach to what merits dropping twenty-odd bucks. I'm going to use one of my brand-new affiliate links for the purchase – get myself a discount!

We read a chapter of Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* at uni a few years back, and I was so taken by the writing and the praise and the premise (*all ages must come to an end*) that I asked our local indie to order in a copy. I paid full price for it, and even found the second in the trilogy at an oppo somewhere, then left them both on the shelf while I read things like *One Big Damn Puzzler* instead, which really was just a drag, though it may have been good for me at a different time of life.



It's weird, this scarcity belief I have about books, like, *Oh no, if I read all the good books there won't be any left!* Well there won't be if I keep relying on op shops as my dealer.

Maybe I'll find it's one of those paradoxes like how you need to spend energy to get energy – there's no better way to get the lethargy than to sit on the couch all day. Maybe I need to read good books to get good books and by not compromising I will attract only the best books.

If you get what I'm saying here, or have any thoughts around these books and ideas, let me know in the comments below.

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\*The affiliate links in case you missed them in the post and would like to purchase anything you've read about here:

[\*The Call\*](#) by Peadar Ó Guilín, an almost literary genre-thriller about fairies seeking vengeance for being exiled from Ireland.

[\*The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree\*](#) by Shokoofeh Azar, a brilliant magic-realist novel about the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and “a family caught in the maelstrom of post-revolutionary chaos and brutality that sweeps across an ancient land and its people”. I have a review I wrote somewhere on another computer, which I will publish here soon.

John Pilger's [\*Utopia\*](#) documentary is not available for purchase anywhere I could find, but can be watched for free online. Oh wait, [I found one!](#)