

'The Dickens Boy' tells the tale of Charles Dickens' youngest child

By Pamela Miller
Star Tribune

The great Australian writer Thomas Keneally, now 86, has published more than 30 novels, most notably "Schindler's List" and "The Daughters of Mars." Each of his works of historical fiction embodies hundreds of pages with not a word wasted. All are meticulously researched and flawlessly written. His 34th novel, "The Dickens Boy," is no exception.

It's the story of Edward "Plorn" Dickens, Charles Dickens' youngest child, who as an unremarkable 16-year-old was pushed by his famous father into emigrating to Australia in 1868 in hopes he would find his way — while staying out of his father's way.

Plorn is a compelling narrator, an endearing mixture of youthful innocence and cocky courage. He has a cool-headed ability to observe and describe other people, social situations and the natural world. He is determined to learn the business of raising sheep in the sprawling wilds of Australia, to soak up

all he can from savvy colonials and to skirt the noxious ones (there are plenty).

He quickly develops respect for the immigrant Irish, often convicts or the children of convicts, and for the "darks," the aboriginal people who even then were marginalized and sometimes murdered by Brits who were sure this vast land was theirs to possess and "improve."

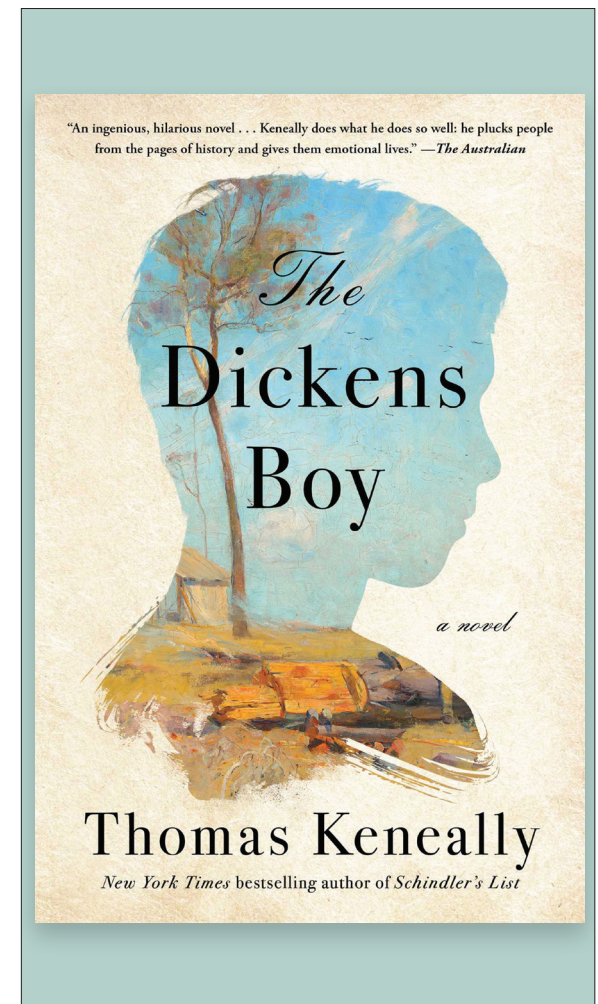
Plorn and his adventures, be they blundering, buoyant, tragic or romantic, provide the novel's chief thread. But woven into the boy's story is that of his father, who is revered by even the isolated, bedraggled herders his son encounters in the outback. Young Plorn does not view his father as a legend, but rather as a flawed, mysterious papa who sent him away, just as he had earlier banished the mother of his 10 children after falling for a 19-year-old Irish actress who would be his lover for the rest of his life.

That's a sore point for Plorn and his siblings. They love their pa, they love their ma, they love their Aunt Georgina, their mother's sister who raised them

after their mother's banishment. But they've never met the dark-tressed Irish spoiler, and never will, and so their experience of her is simply in their judgment of their enigmatic father. The real-life Dickens family was complicated, and Keneally mines that intrigue for all it's worth.

Most profoundly, beneath the lively stories of Plorn, his family and his Australian odyssey, this novel is about British colonialism, on which modern Australia was founded. It's about the Brits' repression and poisoning of aboriginal culture, as well as the heady, complicated ways in which they shaped a nation's character, culture and economy. That's no small feat for a novel, especially one by a writer in his 80s.

And that is Keneally's gift — to create historical fiction with every shred of fact available, while rounding it out with a powerful narrative that, eerily enough, could be exactly what happened. Here's hoping this is not this exceptional writer's last offering to his beloved Australia, and to those of us worldwide who appreciate his one-of-a-kind gift.



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