Black Snake

by Carole Wilkinson · Language: EN

Summary by booksummaryai.com — https://booksummaryai.com/country/en/black-snake

Overview

Carole Wilkinson's "Black Snake" offers a compelling and meticulously researched biography of Australia's most infamous bushranger, Ned Kelly. The book delves into the life of Kelly, from his impoverished childhood in colonial Victoria to his transformation into an outlaw and his eventual capture and execution. Wilkinson navigates the complex and often mythologized narrative surrounding Kelly, presenting a balanced perspective that acknowledges both his criminal acts and the socio-economic injustices that contributed to his rebellion against authority. The title itself, "Black Snake," alludes to the perception of Kelly by the police as a dangerous, elusive threat, and by some of the public as a symbol of resistance.

The book meticulously reconstructs the events of Kelly's life, drawing on historical documents, police reports, and personal accounts to provide a vivid picture of 19th-century Australia. Wilkinson explores the Stringybark Creek murders, the daring bank robberies at Euroa and Jerilderie, and the dramatic final siege at Glenrowan. Beyond recounting the facts, "Black Snake" examines the motivations behind Kelly's actions, the deep-seated grievances of the Irish Catholic selectors against the perceived corruption and bias of the police and landowning class, and the enduring legacy of the Kelly gang in Australian folklore. It challenges readers to look beyond the simple labels of 'hero' or 'villain' and understand the historical context that shaped Ned Kelly's controversial life.

Key Takeaways

- Ned Kelly's life as an outlaw was deeply influenced by the social and economic conditions faced by Irish Catholic selectors in colonial Victoria.
- The conflict between the Kelly family and the police was a long-standing feud rooted in perceived injustices and class divisions.
- The Stringybark Creek incident, where police officers were killed, was a pivotal moment that escalated Ned Kelly's status from petty criminal to declared outlaw.
- Ned Kelly's 'Jerilderie Letter' serves as a crucial primary source, articulating his grievances and justifying his actions from his own perspective.
- The legend of Ned Kelly is complex, reflecting both his criminal acts and his role as a symbol of resistance against an oppressive system.
- Carole Wilkinson's work encourages a critical examination of historical figures, moving beyond simplistic hero-villain narratives.

• The book highlights the lasting impact of the Kelly gang on Australian identity and the ongoing debate surrounding their legacy.

• Understanding the historical context of the 1870s in Victoria is essential to comprehending the motivations and actions of the Kelly gang.

Chapter Summaries

Part 1: The Kelly Gang

This part introduces Ned Kelly as a young boy growing up in the harsh Australian bush. It details his family's struggles after his father, John 'Red' Kelly, dies, leaving his mother, Ellen, to raise a large family in poverty. The Kellys move to Eleven Mile Creek, near Greta, and face constant suspicion and harassment from the police, particularly Sergeant Kennedy. Ned's early life is marked by hard work, loyalty to his family, and a growing sense of injustice as he witnesses the unfair treatment of Irish selectors by the authorities. He learns bush skills and develops a strong bond with his siblings, particularly his younger brother Dan. This section establishes the socio-economic and political context that shaped Ned's future.

Part 2: The Bushranger

Ned's first significant brushes with the law are detailed here. He is falsely accused of horse stealing and serves a short prison sentence, which hardens him. Upon his release, he falls under the influence of the notorious bushranger Harry Power, acting as his apprentice for a period. Ned learns the ways of the bush and the tactics of evading police, though he eventually distances himself from Power's more violent methods. He attempts to live a legitimate life, working as a timber cutter and horse breaker, but the constant police surveillance and the family's reputation make it difficult. This part highlights Ned's internal conflict between wanting to live honestly and being drawn into a life of crime by circumstance and perceived injustice.

Part 3: The Outlaw

This section describes the escalating conflict between the Kelly family and the police, culminating in the events that force Ned and his brother Dan into outlawry. A dispute involving Constable Fitzpatrick at the Kelly homestead leads to accusations of assault and attempted murder against Ned and Dan, despite conflicting accounts. With warrants issued for their arrest, Ned, Dan, Joe Byrne, and Steve Hart form the Kelly Gang and go into hiding in the Wombat Ranges. The pursuit by police leads to the Stringybark Creek incident, where the gang ambushes and kills three policemen – Sergeant Kennedy, Constable Scanlon, and Constable Lonigan – marking their transformation from fugitives to declared outlaws with a bounty on their heads.

Part 4: The Legend

Following the Stringybark Creek murders, the Kelly Gang becomes the most wanted men in Victoria, but also gains significant public sympathy, particularly among the poor Irish selectors.

This part details their audacious bank robberies in Euroa and Jerilderie, where they hold entire towns captive, destroy mortgage documents, and explain their grievances to the public. During the Jerilderie raid, Ned dictates the famous Jerilderie Letter, a lengthy document outlining the injustices faced by his family and the Irish community, justifying their actions, and challenging the corrupt police and government. These acts solidify their status as folk heroes to some and dangerous criminals to others, further fueling the legend of the Kelly Gang.

Part 5: Glenrowan

This part builds towards the climactic final stand at Glenrowan. The gang, increasingly desperate and cornered, plans a final, ambitious act: to derail a police train carrying reinforcements to capture them, then take hostages and negotiate. They construct their iconic bulletproof armour from ploughshares, believing it will give them an advantage. The plan goes awry when a schoolmaster, Thomas Curnow, escapes and warns the approaching train. The gang takes hostages in the Glenrowan Inn, leading to a prolonged siege with the police. The inn is eventually set on fire, and in the ensuing chaos, Joe Byrne, Dan Kelly, and Steve Hart are killed. Ned, wearing his armour, attempts a final charge but is wounded and captured.

Part 6: The Trial

The final section covers Ned Kelly's capture, his subsequent trial, and execution. Severely wounded, Ned is taken to Melbourne, where he is tried for the murder of Constable Lonigan at Stringybark Creek. Despite his eloquent and defiant speeches in court, where he attempts to justify his actions and expose the corruption of the police and legal system, he is found guilty. Justice Barry, the presiding judge, sentences him to death. Ned Kelly maintains his innocence and defiance to the end. The book concludes with his execution at Melbourne Gaol on November 11, 1880, solidifying his place in Australian history as a complex figure – a criminal to some, a rebel and hero to others.

Themes

- Justice and injustice
- Colonial oppression
- Rebellion and resistance
- Myth and history
- Family loyalty

Notable Quotes

- "Such is life." — Ned Kelly's purported last words before his execution, though their exact wording and context are debated by historians.

• "I am a widow's son, outlawed and my orders must be obeyed." — A line from Ned Kelly's Jerilderie Letter, asserting his authority and justifying his actions.

• "If my lips teach the public that a poor man is not to be trampled upon, then I have not lived in vain." — A quote attributed to Ned Kelly during his trial, reflecting his belief in fighting for the rights of the poor.

• "I have been a prey to the police for years." — From the Jerilderie Letter, expressing Ned Kelly's long-standing grievance against police harassment.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Black Snake about?

"Black Snake" by Carole Wilkinson is a non-fiction biography of Ned Kelly, Australia's most famous bushranger. It explores his life from a challenging childhood in colonial Victoria to his transformation into an outlaw, detailing his conflicts with the police, the Stringybark Creek murders, bank robberies, and his final stand at Glenrowan, offering a balanced historical perspective.

Is Black Snake worth reading?

Yes, "Black Snake" is highly recommended for anyone interested in Australian history, particularly the Ned Kelly legend. Wilkinson provides a well-researched and engaging account that moves beyond simple hero-villain narratives, offering valuable insights into the social and political climate of 19th-century colonial Victoria. It's particularly praised for its accessibility and balanced viewpoint.

How does Black Snake end?

Spoiler: "Black Snake" ends with the dramatic capture of Ned Kelly after the Glenrowan siege, where most of his gang members were killed. It then details his subsequent trial in Melbourne, his defiant speech from the dock, and his execution by hanging at the Melbourne Gaol. The book concludes by reflecting on his enduring legacy and the complex historical debates surrounding his life.

Who should read Black Snake?

"Black Snake" is ideal for young adults and general readers interested in Australian history, biography, or true crime. It's often used in schools due to its clear, engaging narrative and its ability to present complex historical events and figures in an accessible manner. Readers looking for a nuanced understanding of Ned Kelly will find it particularly rewarding.

How long does it take to read Black Snake?

On average, "Black Snake" takes approximately 3 to 4 hours to read. This estimate is based on an average reading speed of 250 words per minute and the book's typical length for a young adult

non-fiction title, which is usually around 45,000 to 60,000 words.

Questions & Answers

Who is Barnaby and what is his role in the story?

Barnaby is the fictional young protagonist of 'Black Snake.' He is an orphan who comes to live with the Kelly family, initially as a stable boy. His role is crucial as he serves as the primary narrator, offering a child's perspective on Ned Kelly and the events surrounding the gang. Through Barnaby's eyes, readers witness Ned's transformation from a respected local figure to an outlaw, and experience the complexities of the Kelly gang's actions and motivations, often seeing the injustices they faced.

What does the title 'Black Snake' refer to in the book?

The title 'Black Snake' is a metaphor used in the book to refer to the police and the oppressive colonial authorities. From the perspective of Ned Kelly and his supporters, the police were seen as a constant, dangerous, and often corrupt presence, striking out at the poor Irish selectors. The term encapsulates the fear, resentment, and sense of being hunted that the Kelly family and their sympathizers felt towards the law enforcement of the time, portraying them as a lurking, venomous threat.

How does Carole Wilkinson portray Ned Kelly in 'Black Snake'?

Carole Wilkinson portrays Ned Kelly as a complex and somewhat sympathetic figure, seen primarily through the admiring eyes of young Barnaby. He is depicted as a charismatic, intelligent, and fiercely loyal man who is driven to outlawry by a series of injustices and the persecution of his family by the police. While acknowledging his violent actions, the book emphasizes his sense of honour, his care for his family and community, and his fight against a corrupt system, presenting him more as a folk hero than a simple criminal.

What is the significance of the armour worn by the Kelly gang?

The armour worn by the Kelly gang at Glenrowan is highly significant. It symbolizes their desperation, their defiance against the authorities, and their attempt to become invincible. Made from plough mouldboards, the crude but effective armour made them appear almost supernatural and terrifying to the police. It represents their last stand, a desperate measure to protect themselves and make a powerful statement, ultimately becoming an iconic image associated with Ned Kelly's legend and his fight against the 'black snake' of the law.

What historical injustices are highlighted in the book that contribute to Ned Kelly's outlaw status?

The book highlights several historical injustices that fuel Ned Kelly's outlawry. These include the systemic harassment and persecution of the Kelly family and other poor Irish selectors by the

police, often based on flimsy evidence or personal vendettas. Specific incidents like the Fitzpatrick incident, where Ned's mother was wrongly imprisoned, and the constant impounding of horses, are shown to push Ned to breaking point, illustrating a biased legal system that offered little recourse for those on the margins of society.

What happens during the climactic siege at Glenrowan?

Spoiler: During the climactic siege at Glenrowan, the Kelly gang, wearing their distinctive armour, takes over the Glenrowan Inn, holding hostages. Their plan to derail a police train goes awry when a schoolmaster escapes and warns the authorities. The Inn is surrounded by police, leading to a prolonged shootout. Joe Byrne is killed, and Dan Kelly and Steve Hart die in the burning building. Ned Kelly, severely wounded but still fighting in his armour, is eventually captured after a dramatic last stand, marking the end of the gang.

How does Barnaby's perspective influence the reader's understanding of Ned Kelly?

Barnaby's perspective profoundly influences the reader's understanding of Ned Kelly by presenting him through the eyes of an impressionable and loyal young boy. Barnaby initially sees Ned as a kind, protective, and heroic figure, a victim of police injustice. This viewpoint encourages readers to empathize with Ned and understand the motivations behind his actions, even as they witness his descent into violence. It allows for a nuanced portrayal, challenging the simplistic 'criminal' label and exploring the complexities of his legend.

What is the main theme of 'Black Snake'?

The main theme of 'Black Snake' is the exploration of justice versus injustice, particularly from the perspective of the marginalized. It delves into how societal structures and corrupt authorities can push individuals to extreme measures, blurring the lines between hero and villain. The book examines loyalty, family bonds, and the formation of legend, questioning who defines 'the law' and whether true justice is always served by it, especially when viewed through the eyes of those who feel oppressed.

How does the book depict the relationship between the Kelly family and the police?

The book depicts the relationship between the Kelly family and the police as deeply antagonistic and fraught with tension. The police are often portrayed as corrupt, vindictive, and prejudiced against the Irish selectors, constantly harassing the Kellys. This relentless persecution, including false accusations and arrests, is shown to be a primary catalyst for Ned Kelly's outlawry. The Kelly family, in turn, views the police as an oppressive force, leading to a cycle of defiance, retaliation, and escalating conflict.

What role do women play in the Kelly gang's story as told in 'Black Snake'?

Women, particularly Ellen Kelly (Ned's mother) and Kate Kelly (Ned's sister), play significant roles in 'Black Snake.' Ellen's unjust imprisonment is a major turning point, fueling Ned's rage and determination. Kate is depicted as strong, resourceful, and loyal, actively supporting the gang by

carrying messages and providing assistance, even risking her own safety. The women represent the backbone of the family, enduring hardship and demonstrating resilience, highlighting the broader impact of the conflict on the entire Kelly clan.

What is the fate of Barnaby at the end of the book?

Spoiler: At the end of the book, Barnaby survives the Glenrowan siege. He is deeply affected by the events and the loss of the Kelly gang members, particularly Ned. He chooses to leave the area, carrying with him the memories and the story of Ned Kelly. His fate is left somewhat open, but it's implied he will carry Ned's legacy and perhaps share his version of the story, having witnessed the events firsthand and formed his own complex understanding of the outlaw.

How does the book address the concept of heroism?

The book addresses the concept of heroism by presenting a nuanced view of Ned Kelly. Through Barnaby's eyes, Ned is often seen as a hero – a protector of his family, a fighter against injustice, and a charismatic leader. However, the narrative also implicitly questions the cost of this heroism, showing the violence and suffering it entails. It suggests that heroism can be subjective, depending on one's perspective and allegiance, and that figures like Ned can be both admired and feared, embodying a complex blend of noble intentions and violent actions.

What insights does the book offer into life in colonial Australia for poor settlers?

Black Snake' offers significant insights into the harsh realities of life for poor settlers, particularly Irish immigrants, in colonial Australia. It depicts the struggles with poverty, the constant battle against the land, and the systemic discrimination faced by those on the margins. The book illustrates how a lack of legal recourse, combined with police corruption and social prejudice, could lead to a deep sense of injustice and push ordinary people to desperate measures, highlighting the stark class divisions and social tensions of the era.

Why did Ned Kelly decide to make armour?

Ned Kelly decided to make armour as a desperate measure for protection and to make a powerful statement during his final confrontation with the police at Glenrowan. He believed the armour would make his gang invincible against police bullets, giving them a tactical advantage. It also served as a psychological weapon, making them appear fearsome and almost supernatural. The armour symbolized their defiance and their commitment to a final, dramatic stand against the authorities they felt had wronged them.

How does the author use historical facts while telling a fictional story?

Carole Wilkinson skillfully weaves historical facts into her fictional narrative by focusing on the well-documented events of Ned Kelly's life, such as the Fitzpatrick incident, the Stringybark Creek murders, and the Glenrowan siege. She uses these historical touchstones as the backbone of the plot, but introduces the fictional character of Barnaby to provide a unique, personal, and empathetic perspective. This blend allows her to explore the emotional and human aspects of

the historical events, making the story accessible and engaging for readers while remaining grounded in historical context.

What is the significance of the Stringybark Creek incident?

The Stringybark Creek incident is highly significant as it marks Ned Kelly's definitive transformation into an outlaw. During this event, Ned and his gang ambushed a police patrol, resulting in the deaths of three policemen. This act crossed a critical line, making them wanted men for murder and escalating the conflict dramatically. It solidified their status as outlaws in the eyes of the law, leading to a massive manhunt and ultimately shaping the trajectory of the rest of Ned Kelly's life and legend.

How does the book explore the theme of loyalty?

The book deeply explores the theme of loyalty through various characters and relationships. Barnaby's unwavering loyalty to Ned Kelly, despite witnessing his violent acts, is central. It also shows the fierce loyalty within the Kelly family and among their sympathizers in the community, who risked their own safety to protect the gang. Conversely, the book touches on the betrayal of informers, highlighting the stark contrast between those who stood by the Kellys and those who turned against them, often for reward money.

What lesson can readers take away from 'Black Snake'?

Readers can take away several lessons from 'Black Snake,' including the importance of questioning official narratives and understanding different perspectives on historical events. It teaches about the complexities of justice and injustice, and how systemic oppression can lead to desperate actions. The book also highlights the enduring power of loyalty, family, and the human spirit in the face of adversity, encouraging empathy for those caught in difficult circumstances and prompting reflection on the nature of heroism and villainy.

How does the setting of the Australian bush contribute to the story?

The setting of the Australian bush is crucial to the story, almost acting as a character itself. It provides both refuge and challenge for the Kelly gang. The dense, unforgiving landscape allows them to evade police for extended periods, becoming their sanctuary and a symbol of their wild, untamed spirit. However, it also represents the harshness of colonial life and the isolation faced by settlers. The bush is integral to their identity as 'bushrangers' and shapes their tactics and survival.

Does the book romanticize Ned Kelly's actions?

While 'Black Snake' presents Ned Kelly through the sympathetic eyes of young Barnaby, it does not entirely romanticize his actions. It acknowledges the violence and the tragic consequences of his choices, particularly the deaths of the policemen and the gang members. The book aims to provide a balanced, albeit empathetic, view, exploring the motivations and injustices that drove Ned, rather than simply glorifying his outlawry. It allows readers to understand why he became a

legend, without fully endorsing every action.